Between Love, Domination and Reason: Civic Education and its 'Others' in Central India

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Between Love, Domination and Reason: Civic Education and its 'Others' in Central India

Amman Madan

Abstract: This paper examines local interpretations of some key themes in a democratic education against the backdrop of a changing social structure. It sees the discourse of a rational democracy as being severely challenged by practices of domination and an ideology of love. At the same time there may also be observed concrete contradictions which would welcome a democratic education that has concepts and morals that challenge the status quo. A strategy of principled cultural dialogue is advocated rather than one of isolation.

A central, though often unrecognised, concern in recent education has been the learning of universalist social relations. These make up the wider realm into which people move, going beyond the boundaries of a life constructed around family, kinship and caste. Such a public arena has sharply expanded with the growth of markets, towns and the state in India and its character, too, has been undergoing change. While older, descent-based relations like caste and clan continue to be important, the public arena has seen a marked growth of relatively secular and non-kinship aspects in almost all social institutions. A variety of sites in Indian education now try to deal with the ideas, principles and practices at the core of
the growing and fast-changing public arena. Our contemporary vision of it is contributed to and expressed by the privileged place of science and technology in our curriculum, by the idea of merit and open competitive exams, by the importance of learning about the world rather than the local. The most explicit discussions of it in school classrooms, however, take place in the disciplines of history and civics.

This is one of the reasons why history textbooks have been at the centre of so much controversy in recent years. For most Indians the vitality of the debate is obvious, but usually only intuitively so. History as a narrative of the most important myths of our country is also the most powerful conveyor of key principles and ideas. It legitimises and elaborates certain points of view at the cost of others. The debate over whether or not school textbooks should portray Aryans as coming from outside India or as indigenous is thus not over a minor point of fact relating to the long dead past. It bears upon how the legitimacy of power is constructed, upon territoriality as a principle of political mobilisation, upon ethnicity as the basis of political morality. If the Aryans did indeed come from outside India, many other myths centred on the idea of ‘foreign-ness’ become so much weaker. Such debates are central to the meaning given to the public arena.

Our colonial heritage strongly influences the ways in which Indian education deals with such issues. This has been delineated and discussed by many scholars, including Sureshchandra Shukla (e.g., Shukla 1957) and Krishna Kumar (e.g., Kumar 1991). Krishna Kumar argues convincingly that nineteenth-century British liberalism was an important factor in the colonial educational agenda, and such an education contributed in no small way to the growth of the nationalist movement in India. Ideas of freedom and egalitarianism also drew from West European socialism and South Asian religious reform movements. The colonial and post-colonial state became by far the most powerful player in Indian education, even while being driven by diverse influences. Its changing configurations have left their marks on the portrayal of the public arena. In independent India, at the start of the 1990s for instance, state-centred socialism was the main thrust of the NCERT’s civics textbooks (Madan 1995). This was, of course, tempered by the
urban and castesociety origins of the status groups from which the textbook writers were being drawn. Manish Jain (2004) as well as Krishna Kumar, Manisha Priyam and Sadhna Saxena (Kumar 2001) argue that since then neo-liberalism has emerged as an influential paradigm in educational policy. This may be corroborated by the appearance of certain features in NCERT’s civics textbooks under the National Democratic Alliance dispensation, though a rigorous survey of these textbooks is still to come. There now appear chapters which portray a gradual withdrawal of the state, handing over increasing responsibility to local communities, glossing over the contradictions within the latter. The NGO Eklavya, even though working in close collaboration with various governments, has long sought to present a different kind of perspective. This emphasises people’s participation along with a greater pressure on the state to perform (Eklavya 2002).

The lion’s share of scholarly attention to education and the public arena understandably has been drawn by the role of the state and its linked institutions. Yet, there are other aspects and points of view too, which need to be studied. How the young, for instance, construct their ideas of the public arena is only now beginning to be examined more carefully. Alex M. George’s study (George 2004) is a rare one to examine how middle and high school children understand certain aspects of what they are taught about the government in school.

An under-recognised feature of the public arena has been the existence of multiple cultural positions in it. The Indian state is only one of the players in the field — there are several other historically constituted cultural actors here. Hotly debated positions of liberal, socialist and neo-liberal origins still have much in common — they are all products of the Enlightenment and share a broad continuity in their underlying ideas of reason, equality and freedom. I have elsewhere tried to discuss some aspects of the different cultural positions that interact in the performance of public acts (Madan 2003). While there is a degree of autonomy to the Indian state, it can hardly be seen as a cultural monolith. Both the state and the public arena see the impact of several kinds of forces and the educational implications of this interaction of cultures deserve greater attention.
I begin by presenting here some results of a study that sought to examine certain cultural dimensions of collective action in the public arena. I hope that by examining how real life people in a mofussil town and in villages come together to cooperate and work to resolve public problems, it will be possible to identify some of the cultural principles they are applying. Contrasting these with the liberal/socialist ideas underlying the Indian state would throw certain key issues into relief, which may be of importance to the development of democratic strategies for education and development.

**The Field Study**

The field study, which sought to uncover meanings and practices relating to the public arena, was conducted using the ethnographic method. There were many reasons for this choice. Learning about meanings and practices calls for an intimate familiarity with the daily lives of the people being studied. Given the huge gaps in our existing knowledge, it would have been almost impossible to design an effective questionnaire or survey. The broad strategy which then seemed best was to repeatedly place oneself in situations where public activities were happening or where they could be discussed. Over many months and then years this led to a gradual formation of an inter-subjectivity that permitted me to begin understanding how some of the people of Hoshangabad in central Madhya Pradesh looked at these affairs.

The study began with my moving to Hoshangabad to work on a full-time basis with the NGO Eklavya’s field office there in February 2000. Over the next three-and-a-half years I combined this study with various other activities that were part of the regular repertoire of a voluntary organisation working on public education. Participation in this manner yielded many insights, ranging from how different kinds of people in the region responded to the work of a group like Eklavya, to seeing how people in the *mohallas* where I lived handled the collective problem of building and maintaining the gutters in front of their houses. The definite role and identity that working with Eklavya gave me in the town helped me gain access to a variety of situations.
In the villages being studied, I ran libraries for children and for adults, an activity which Eklavya was already known for promoting. While I did not expect to ever erase the local people’s perception of me as a city-bred, middle-class, educated person, I believe I was successful in becoming a regular, familiar figure with my bag of books and eventually establishing a sympathetic, non-threatening kind of relationship with them. This created a situation where most people now felt comfortable about talking to me about even highly loaded and explosive topics like the behaviour of powerful men of the neighbourhood. A good deal of reliability was thus gradually acquired for the results emerging in the later phase of my fieldwork. Using a tape-recorder would have immediately changed (and charged) the meaning of my interactions. Most of the time, therefore, I relied on coming back to my base and hurriedly writing up the interactions of the day. Eventually this came up to over 140,000 words of synoptic, cramped notes of several hundreds of field incidents, observations, informal discussions, casual chats and formal interviews. These notes were entered into a computer, coded with keywords and interpreted with the help of boolean searches.

Since the ‘state’ plays a crucial and important role in the public arena, its dimensions were used to guide the choice of the study sample. The ‘block’ was the basic administrative unit which combined rural and urban sectors. It demarcated the outer limits within which were studied four villages, with the town as the centre which the villagers looked toward for all activities relating to the government. The villages were chosen by analysing the 1991 census data and through discussions with local people to identify certain extreme points of variations in terms of access to power and the state. The points of variation were (i) proximity to the state and the town (close-by/most remote village in the block), (ii) caste composition of the village (primarily SC/ST village/mixed-caste village), and (iii) size of the village (population about 300/population over 7,000). The presence of one or the other pole in each village helped in comparing their dynamics and understanding the differences between them, and between the villages and the town. Our focus was on three kinds of situations: (a) where collective action was being undertaken in interaction with the state, e.g.,
persuading the government to build a road; (b) where collective action was being undertaken in non-state situations, e.g., pooling resources to build a gutter in one’s mohalla; (c) where collective action was being undertaken in a market situation, e.g., traders’ associations.

**Constituting the Public Arena in Hoshangabad**

Practices and ideas of public life are best understood by placing them against the backdrop of wider society and its dynamics. Hoshangabad block is roughly rectangular in its expanse, some 40 km or so long and 15 km wide. It makes up the southern bank of the river Narmada, whose sinuous path it follows. It is the Narmada river basin which has over many centuries built up the fertile soil that makes Hoshangabad such a rich agricultural area. This land has been populated through many successive waves of migration over the centuries. Dravidic Gonds and Munda-speaking Korkus were among the early settlers here, though in recent centuries the majority of migrations have come from the directions of Bundelkhand and the Malwa. The powerful tended to occupy the rich valley while the weak were pushed into the poorer soils of the Satpura and Vindhya hills that form the northern and southern boundaries, respectively, of the Narmada valley. Caste Hindu society has gradually taken up a dominant position here and the Gond and Korku relegated to the worst lands.

The villages in the valley have caste as the major organisational form that shapes social life. It is a very important factor that structures social inequality and influences public life. Land is still a very strong source of power and its inheritance is a key factor contributing to the political dynamics of the village. Land-ownership in Hoshangabad is concentrated in relatively fewer hands. There is a handful of families, each of which owns hundreds, and, in at least two cases, thousands of acres of land. Those with little or no land find that their work and survival becomes difficult if they do not have the goodwill of bigger landowners. While it is rare to find the constellation of castes in one village being repeated in another, it is common to see domination by a family or group of families whose patriarch is called the *patel*. They are the descendants of local *satraps*.
who were granted large chunks of land by the state in pre-Independence times in return for collecting revenue and other services. The *patels* and their collaterals usually have an inordinately large amount of land under them and straddle the political and economic life of the village. In most villages the house of the *patel-sahib* is easy to spot, being a huge, sprawling affair toward the centre of the village, and in front of which the main road of the village almost always seems to lead. This dominating lineage may come from one of several castes, with there being *patels* who claimed brahmin, Rajput and even OBC descent.

**Table 1: Castes in the Studied Villages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Main Castes</th>
<th>Number of Households (app.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Dominated for long by the Thakurs, who have very large landholdings. Increasingly challenged now by the Kurmis and the Ghaunsi</td>
<td>Thakur 25, Chamar 30, Kurmi 100, Ghaunsi 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>No very large landholdings. Kurmis are the most powerful group here, but need to ally with several other castes too</td>
<td>Brahmins 10, Thakurs 12, Kurmi 350, Kir 175, Chamar 175, Dhobi 15, Lohar 5, Mehra 10, Badhai 10, Kalar 4, Teli 10, Kumhar 1, Mali 10, Kahar 50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Village | Main Castes | Number of Households (app.)
--- | --- | ---
C | One Brahmin family that is by far the largest landholder, but resides in the town. Predominantly SC/ST village with very small landholdings | 
| Chamar | 20 | 
| Gond | 15 | 
| Yadav | 3 | 
| Brahmin | 1 | 
| Kotiyar | 15 | 
D | Kurmis are the most powerful here, but no very large landholdings | 
| Kurmi | 10 | 
| Chamar | 25 | 
| Gond | 5 | 
| Brahmin | 1 | 

Given such social relations, public life is heavily particularistic. Who one is — what caste, whose nephew, whose brother-in-law, from which village and so on — is of great importance in deciding how others behave towards one. It is easy to fragment one’s practices into separate ways for separate contexts. A person can behave in a certain way with his immediate kinsfolk, another way with the extended caste, in a third way with the lower castes and a fourth way with his social superiors.

Green Revolution technologies have become well entrenched here over the last 25 to 30 years. For all the problems that they can cause, they have also been responsible for a remarkable ferment in the structure of local society. There has taken place a broad increase in the productivity and wealth of the villages. The middle castes are now rising and are in many ways forming a rump faction that the older dominating groups need to accommodate. In some villages, for instance, where castes like the Kurmis are in larger numbers and have not insubstantial landholdings, they are consolidating their networks and seeking to play larger roles at local, block and district levels. Universal suffrage has created a remarkable new space where
numbers can to some degree counter-balance the weight of land and of clan loyalties among the landed. The marketisation of labour has led to the weakening of many traditional bonds. The growth of the town and the improvement of roads have added another counterpoint to the equations of power.

The town and the market are important sources of relatively universalistic ideas and practices. A chamar in a village will take the first opportunity to stop working for his old master and seek the anonymity and relatively greater equality of the fast-growing labour market of the town. There, those lucky enough to get a job in the government, for instance, could be seen living next door to a brahmin’s house. These are separate, water-tight compartments no more.

The state has its own compulsions for leaning toward universalism. It has had to manage a broad spectrum of interests and find at least some common ground for its own stratagems. The degree to which the state was willing to implement this universalism varied greatly across history. The contemporary state, influenced diversely by liberal, socialist and, of late, neo-liberal ideas, has been making a strong interventionist thrust. In all the villages that I saw, the state was closely intertwined with almost every public action (taking a back seat perhaps only in the case of religious activities) that was not limited to this or that caste as its principal beneficiary. Of course, there were many situations where the state tilted in favour of only this group or that. But the point is that the state was still by far the most effective and visible institution acting across a broad range of boundaries. It has been instrumental in creating institutional frameworks where its own ideologies and practices engage the particularism of caste society and the universalism of the market.

The town of Hoshangabad gains a special place in this since it is an important administrative centre. People from all the villages in the block must come there for various certificates, permissions, arbitration of property disputes, etc., that the state dispenses. This makes the town, and especially that part of it which is connected with the administration of the block, an inordinately powerful place. The town is also an important commercial and trading centre, though it is overshadowed in that role by Itarsi, some 19 km to the south, by virtue of the
latter’s much better rail links with the rest of the country. Itarsi is a separate block and it is there that many villagers go to get a better price for their agricultural produce and a better bargain in their purchases. Hoshangabad has an inordinately large number of government employees and in this small town the naked power of the state has an all-pervading presence. Public life in the town is strongly influenced by the state and having access to its favours or being able to channelise them is a key aspect of power. Changing power equations are having their impact on this, too.

A patrimonial, personalised model of power is widespread across the villages and the town. Most things get done through personal contacts and rapport. If donations are being sought for Durga Puja celebrations or for virtually anything else, then a group of core members is formed. For any substantial donations to materialise, this group must have at least one member who is on good terms with every potential donor who is approached. This personalisation of relationship is talked about as the importance of maintaining sambandh, literally ‘relations’. Familiarity is created by opportunities created by caste, neighbourhood, schoolroom, workplace, etc., and the sambandh created by this familiarity becomes the warp and weft of what can and cannot be done in this highly differentiated society. Whenever someone outside one’s group of familiars needs to be contacted for getting something done, the first question is, who do I know who in turn knows that person? Contacts are cultivated, nurtured and treasured. It is rare for donations to be given only for a cause. They are given to people and to strengthen, or occasionally to weaken, relationships, not for abstract causes. Impersonal rules, the hallmark of the universalist organisation, have a very limited appeal.

In this still largely patrimonial society, individuals and families become the focal points of public life. Institutions and their rules only define the backdrop and a loose set of constraints against which the possibilities of everyday life are negotiated. Inequality of status is ubiquitous and domination and fear are an important component of sambandh. The personalities who straddle a neighbourhood rarely owe their pre-eminence to a moral bond alone. Along with that usually go the ability to benefit or cause harm in an immediate or long-
term sense. Abstract values like efficiency or neutrality pale before the appeal of *sambandh*, which can easily tweak the bureaucratic rationality of the state into a variety of shapes.

The socialist/liberal state takes a stance of a universal application of its policies to all groups in the local society. A service like, say, that of the Road Transport Officer (RTO), aims its activities in a universal manner to all and sundry. The actual operations of this office, which is meant to issue driving licences, register vehicles, etc., however, tell a different tale. People of diverse origins and backgrounds must interact with it in different ways. The RTO’s office is located in a remote corner of the town. A villager must first come to the town and then find his way to the office, only to confront a confusing and opaque variety of forms, none of which are available at the counter. The poor say that all babus in the town are habitually rude and insulting in their behaviour. I, an educated-looking, middle-class person was curtly told to go out and obtain Form 26, fill it and submit it (vaguely) ‘there’. I searched for this Form 26 amongst several Xeroxing shops at some distance from the office, but to no avail. I was advised there that the form for ‘LLD’ would do instead. After buying that I studied it and learnt that it was meant for something else altogether. Eventually, I had to go to a stationery shop 3 km away to get my form. Then, while trying to fill it up, I realised that mere literacy was not enough, one had to also know the special terms it contained.

Under these conditions, the middleman becomes a key figure. Interactions with the state require special knowledges, special skills (both social and practical) and special contacts. Not many have the confidence to walk into a government office all by themselves. Strong men flinch when you suggest to them the idea of paying a visit to the collectorate, with its bewildering and hostile spread of babudom. The intermediary, be it the RTO ‘agent’ or the elected member from a ward of the municipal committee or the MLA, spans the gap and ties together the personalised world that people live in and the remote but highly specific ‘universalism’ of the state.

The ‘agent’ is a person who is known and is familiar. The fast-expanding lines of the familiar are a remarkable feature of local society. Where, earlier, familiarity was constructed primarily through intra-caste interactions and above that
through some interactions across *jajman-kamin* relations and with the village *patel*, today several new locations have emerged. The market has gradually freed people of many older ties and created possibilities of greatly increased interactions across castes. The interventionist state, whatever be the partisan interests it is promoting, has created new opportunities to cross old boundaries. The RTO agent, thus, is usually a young man of the middle and rising castes, who frequents the town and has had the opportunity to acquire detailed knowledge of how the system functions at this particular office. He then provides his services for negotiating the system to people of several castes who know him or his family. He is usually polite to people as some of them can hit back at his family in case of a dispute. In any case, his clientèle comes to him only through their familiarity with the many people connected to him. This displays a good deal of continuity with the older ways. But the marketisation of his services has widened in a big way their potential reach. Many castes of an adjacent status to his own are also able to now participate in a reciprocal relation with him through the additional use of money as a medium of exchange. The universalist state thus expresses itself through particularist social forms, with both being transformed in the process.

The knitting together of newer and more inclusive social networks takes place at several places, of which the school is one of the foremost. The school classroom is where boys of diverse castes come of age playing together and being scolded together. While there would continue to be divisions of some kinds between them, links are forged over several years of camaraderie that become useful resources in future life. Thus, in a small village with relatively less caste-based tensions, a young man of the chamar caste who was trying to get a loan sanctioned was able to get some help from the relative of a Yadav schoolmate of his.

As these young people grow up and seek to interact in the public arena, they find themselves in a world which discriminates amongst them in complex and often vicious ways. The universalist potential of the state, the market and the town is compromised in many contingent ways. Here young people learn to be eclectic in using any and all the resources they can
command. Caste, sub-caste, gender, class, school, neighbourhood and many other social identities are brought into play and manipulated. The fluidity of these particular relations is the context within which their interpretations are created of the central ideas that organise the liberal/socialist state.

**Local Interpretations of Some Key Ideas**

Histories, communities and the structuring of daily interactions form the substratum upon which individuals build and seek to maintain their categories of social behaviour. Categories organising social behaviour can be entirely homespun only in the most insular of people and it is doubtful whether such a community can be found in recent times. It is within such dynamic settings that any social science education must seek to make itself meaningful and engage itself in transformative practices.

**Rational Democracy**

The central premise of the Enlightenment and the ideal of democracy that emerged from it was that of reason. It was believed that through the application of reason could be achieved clarity of thought and purity of action, eschewing various distortions and rising above contingent vested interests. Partisan power, especially, was rejected in its many forms that constrained thought and corrupted moral acts. The gradual and partial democratisation that emerged over the next three centuries has had an uneasy relation with this primacy given to reason. At one level, relations of power and domination have sought to contain and bind it. At another level, the very goal of universal reason has come under severe attack. Yet, the idea of a public arena where rational discourse prevails is at the core of all modern democracies. It has now become a truism that any society which does not want to fall into a spiral of escalating violence needs a way of resolving disputes and conflicts that rises above the exercise of naked power. It may also be argued that the efficiency of the market calls for the exclusion of overheads like cultural diversity and mutual incomprehensibility. The market and contemporary ideas of
justice both need a common language that has widespread legitimacy and through which conflicts can be resolved in a manner that is accepted by the involved parties. Thus, liberal and, for that matter, socialist traditions too, rely heavily on a discourse of reason. Competing points of view are expected to articulate themselves and the resolution of a dispute is to be done by reference to a higher ideal. The institutionalisation and formalisation of rationality is supposed to help overcome the conflicts inevitable in a multitude of substantive rationalities.

In public situations in Hoshangabad, I found virtually no mention of such a broader, wider framework of reason from which resolutions of problems could be worked out. The practice of a democratic and rational public debate was a rarity. In its place were at least two other kinds of public discourses, which often overlapped or even formed layers with one below the other. The first centred on the use of power and the limits imposed on it by the power of others. For instance, consider the response of the panch and sarpanch of a village when approached by an old woman for the modification of a particular practice. She wanted her old age pension account to be modified so that her daughter could go and withdraw money from the bank instead of herself.

On 8 March 2002 I was sitting chatting with M and her mother in their village. M was a teenage girl who was a regular and avid subscriber to my library. Her father G was the panch of their ward, a shrewd man, with a rather unsavoury reputation. He was said to be a habitual gambler and quite unreliable. But he was an aggressive and articulate man, so many people had thought he would be good at putting forward their demands in the panchayat. As I was sitting there in the foreyard of their little mud house, making small talk and discussing the books I had and the new books that were due to come, G came in and sat down on the floor with his back propped against the wall. He told me with a touch of pride that he had just come from a session with the sarpanch. A tall, thin old woman soon appeared outside the house, with an embarrassed and imploring look on her face. On seeing her, G immediately took out a small booklet from his pocket and handed it to her. No, it can’t be done, he said abruptly. The sarpanch says what would happen if someone else were to go in place of your daughter and withdraw your money? It would all recoil on his head and he would be held responsible for it. No, he cannot sign for this.
The old woman looked even more uncomfortable and began to recount what seemed a much retold story of how it was so difficult for her to go all the way to the bank. If only her daughter could go instead of her, things would be so much easier, there were days when she could barely stand up, and so on. But her pleading was of no avail and she soon left.

The sarpanch or panch, it may be noted, did not believe it could not be done because it was against the rules or it was somehow unethical or against some larger normative principle. It was not even that some kind of moral legitimacy of the powers of the sarpanch would be transgressed. The refusal was because agreeing to what was being asked would invite other powers to strike against them.

Such a discourse of power as the basis of public actions is ubiquitous. A bank manager would not say that he was refusing a loan because it was unsupportable; instead, he would say that what could he do, if he sanctioned it he would get into trouble. A man building the boundary fence around his house would keep to a line not because that was the furthest reach of his moral right, but because by crossing it he would get into trouble with his neighbours. Abstract ethical principles which rest upon factors other than the ability to do harm have a weak reach in Hoshangabad's public activities.

The second discourse of public action rests on an ethical principle which is not primarily based on domination. This is a discourse of fraternal affection and love, drawing upon the way these are practised within kinship and caste groups, now transposed into public situations. There was, for instance, a remarkable man in Hoshangabad who had been able to attract many boys and young men into voluntarily helping in building a ghat along the river. I was told that he could offer neither benefit nor hold out threat of any damage. Why, I asked, did these young people come to spend their nights with this government employee, carrying stones and digging the sides of the river? Why not with any other of the myriads of holy men who thronged its banks? Basically, out of love for him. I was told; he had won them over with his love.

Love is seen as a sentiment that transcends all social and rational boundaries. It wilfully ignores all kinds of problems. The cooperative construction of gutters along roads, for
instance, is one of the most contentious of matters. Disputes over who will pay to build them and who will maintain them and so on more often than not lead to the collapse of the project altogether. But when asked about those situations where these gutters do actually get built and do stay maintained, the answer almost never touches upon a shared rational calculation of mutual benefit. Instead, it is love and fraternal feelings that get the credit.

Interestingly, while the overwhelming majority of public situations actually are a clear case of domination being the decisive factor, what people on top prefer to talk about are their fraternal aspects. The emphasis placed by the disgruntled, however, is on the domинative aspects. The presentation of a fraternal consensus is a major concern. Any disagreement immediately raises the temperature of a discussion. It is seen as an opposition, rarely as a positive contribution. Love and fraternity claim a phenomenal legitimacy in existing moral beliefs, no doubt due to their roots in kinship relations. In the latter, there is an extensive spelling out of norms and roles, but in the new, open world all norms and roles are open to violent negotiation. Behind the facade of a consensus, the existence of interests in public relationships is universally accepted, but also seen as partisan and implicitly threatening. The most legitimate form of leadership here is that of the disinterested saint. Such a person is not a threat and can be conveniently paid allegiance to and made a means of resolving public problems.

It may often happen that relations with an imbalance of power are embedded within what gets to be called love. Several people who would go regularly to pay court to a powerful man in the town described their relations as those of love. That was also how a dalit labourer described his relations with the patel of his village when telling me that he was going to the patel to ask for money for the treatment of his ill daughter. The patrimonial leader was praised and the subordinate position holders declared themselves grateful to be receivers of his love and munificence. Changing times, however, were also bringing forth an increasing awareness of the interests behind such a love between unequals and its legitimacy was fading; hence the widespread disenchantment with public life and its figures. It is
proving extremely difficult for love and fraternity to transcend the growing number of conflicts emerging as new power configurations in society. More and more people from villages, for instance, were now in a position to choose to build a house in the town and new colonies were springing up. These colonies were characterised by a high degree of strife and distrust between neighbours. Rare was the new colony where residents could combine together to build a common road or drain.

While the scale and volume of public activities continue to increase, these two kinds of discourses put together lead to a widespread feeling of unease, insecurity and general disorder. This further feeds into strengthening the desire for greater power as a means of gaining some certainty in public transactions. The emergence of a hegemonic ideology that can establish legitimate and peaceful norms of public action, howsoever unjust or oppressive they may be, is often talked about as a way of casing a lot of the anxieties embedded in this situation.

Herein lie both the potential and the frustration of an education for reason and democracy. The latter themes offer at least as great a possibility as do love and fraternity for transcending partisan interests and gaining legitimacy amongst all interested parties as a basis of resolving conflicts in public situations. Yet, the institutions⁶ that could be responsible for promoting them seem quite unmindful of their historical potential. Truly, there is no inevitability in history and social structure.

Equality
Conflict and domination in a democratic society can often be restricted by the acceptance of the principle of equality. Though its actual interpretation may vary widely, it does envision a field of people who are identified by some shared universal characteristics (e.g., human beings, etc.). It implicates a commitment on the part of society and its various institutions like the state, that those who are ‘equal’ should not be held back from achieving their fullest potential by accident of birth or by any social compulsion. Equality, then, is a universalist concept which emphasises the absence of segmentation and
hierarchisation in the public arena. Importantly, in modern democracies it is sought to be guaranteed and protected, not left to the vagaries of contingent events. If all I emphasise is my equality with others and not worry about that of others with myself, then the path to social domination and oppression remains open. A universal conceptual framework that warns me when my search for equality begins to impinge upon that of others is called for in complex societies.

In Hoshangabad there is certainly a degree of acceptance of the notion of equality. Ask anyone and you get the reply that of course, all are equal. This is usually expressed as an ontological proposition, with God as the creator responsible for this basic equality of all human beings. However, this belief in equality co-exists with many kinds of beliefs and daily practices of inequality. This is a society with an elaborate differentiation of social opportunities constructed through caste, class, kinship, gender, etc. A friend of mine told me bluntly that all this talk of equality was nonsense. Society would collapse, he said. There had to be unique places for different kinds of people who did different kinds of things. If you created equality, he said, gesturing forcefully to the roadside, no one would ever come to clean these gutters. It was such a cultural position that led to the revealing replies I often got when I asked married and older people what kind of an education they wanted for their young: I was told that they wanted their children to learn to fit in into given social roles of a good son, good wife, good husband, etc. The young, however, often had a different take on this. Under pressure to mould themselves to definite roles, it was they who talked about roles in an indeterminate way, with an underlying emphasis on flexibility, freedom and equality. One of the villages studied had until very recently been in the stranglehold of a handful of Thakur families. A Kurmi friend of mine, whose caste had been at the front of the challenge being posed to the older dominant caste, put it succinctly when I asked him about how people looked at equality here — ‘chhote log maante hain samanta honi chahiye, bade nahin maante’ (the ‘small’ people agree that there should be equality here; the ‘big’ do not).

In this highly differentiated society, like other practices, equality too is usually to be applied only within certain social boundaries and not beyond them. Thus within, say, the Kurmis
of a particular village, any man of a certain age group can comment freely on the moral behaviour of another man of his own age group. But this runs the risk of being taken amiss if he aimed outside his unspoken but well-understood limits, for instance at the Thakurs of his village, or at the wife of another Kurmi or at a much older Kurmi man. Equality is boxed by a variety of social boundaries. Within the village these boundaries also have the effect of restraining aggression and maintaining an ideology that defines what is permissible and what is not. Outside the village, when confronted by the challenge of the town and the market, this ideology loses many of its reference points.

This is hardly to say that the town and the market are an unmitigated realm of atomised equality. There are many contours of inequality and domination there as well, even though not quite as restrictive as in the village. A shopkeeper, for instance, who would be rude to a poor man standing at his counter, would usually be very ingratiating and obsequious to a stranger dressed in middle-class clothes — he might quite possibly be a recently transferred government official. Within middle-class circles it is considered wise in this small little town to be polite to all other ‘well-dressed’ people. You never knew when you would need the help of that person! Yet, in the town and in the market there is also taking place a widespread learning of the practices of equality. In one village there had recently been some caste violence over the practice of tea being served in different glasses to men of lower castes. Young men from the village had been going to work in the town in increasing numbers. When they saw that they were served in the same cup as anyone else in the town, they came back to their village and expected the same treatment there, too.

There were also emerging situations like the one in Garage Line, a street of automobile repair shops, where the mechanics are a mixture of Muslims and middle-/low-caste Hindus. Unusually for this region, they celebrate many festivals together and, quite significantly, eat together. However, as they told me, this is all restricted to their workplace. Once we go back home, they laughed, then things go back to as they were.7

Equality is clearly being learnt, but is definitely not being formulated in a consistent and universal manner. Young men
belonging to the scheduled castes complained bitterly that the same middle castes, which were so vociferous in demanding equality with the upper castes, were quite unwilling to concede their own mutual equality. In the village where there had been violence over the serving of tea in separate cups, I was told by a scheduled-caste man that equality was not formulated as a theoretical principle. It was just a simple expectation of getting the same treatment here as elsewhere. The assertion of equality occurs without a concern for ensuring the equality of all. In public situations it is only the equality of one’s own group that is worth pursuing: there is little application of equality as a general principle."

Conclusions

Applying the cultural perspective to some key concepts dealing with the public arena thus helps to clarify the challenges faced by a democratic education. The challenge lies on at least two levels. The first is that of deep-rooted social opposition to teaching a discourse of reason, democracy and equality. In a society which still bears such a strong stamp of hierarchy, with segmented and particularistic social relations, the universalistic discourse of a rational democracy finds much resistance. At the same time, there are emerging a large and growing number of situations where a dissolution and fusion of segments is taking place. A broadening of the bases of power relations seems to be occurring, especially around the relations connected to the town, the market and the state. It is in the context of these concrete relations that one must build a case for the moral and practical validity of many democratic ideas and practices.

Most of contemporary social science education, however, finds itself in difficulty when asked to take up such a focused propagation of democracy. An important factor behind this is the nature of the power equations which control the setting of educational agendas in this country. The education bureaucracies which set curricula and write textbooks are very reluctant to engage in any kind of controversy. Whenever faced with the possibility of a question in Parliament or in the regional legislative assembly, textbook writers simply prefer to take the
easy way out by striking out the offending reference. Such a situation is hardly conducive to building an education that engages with what, by their very nature, are deeply contested issues. Teaching democracy, for instance, implies that the forces which constrain freedom would have to be named — domination by so and so caste, the class biases in the market, and so on. Hardly any government is likely to have the stomach for the furore to which this would lead. Even a relatively independent and bold effort like that of Eklavya's social science teaching programme had to fight with one hand tied behind its back because of the compulsion of trying to work in close collaboration with the government. A big factor in the turning of a section of the local elite against Eklavya was the presence in its textbooks, even though in a diplomatic and cloaked fashion, of references to brahminical domination and to manipulation of the state by the powerful.

Even if the Indian state as an umbrella coalition of the powerful sections of national society were to somehow realise that the teaching of democracy strengthened it, problems would not end. The school-teacher, as a person from the local milieu and sharply aware of the problems that could emerge if s/he opened up a Pandora's box, would prefer to smoothly gloss over things. The existence of a sphere for rational discourse requires protection and security. In its absence it is doubtful whether much progress could be made in trying to promote a civic education that is radical and emancipatory. The present trend of placing the teacher under the control of village politics is hardly likely to encourage her to take a non-partisan or a just stand. It is by reference to these processes, incidentally, that one can at least partially explain why that most relevant and timely of school subjects — civics — is also rendered the most boring. Anything other than a bland listing of government rules and the procedures for elections to various bodies would be politically explosive. Among other things, this also tells us that grassroots structures of inequality can lead to major inversions in what an educator may set out to say.

The desire to teach reason, freedom and democracy must, therefore, ask itself what its own social roots are, what political constellations are likely to support it and who is likely to oppose it. This reflexivity may also lead to an even deeper praxis of
democracy — not taking any of the starting principles mentioned above for granted and continuing to ask whether there may be other ways possible. This is the second level of challenges which this study may help to clarify.

If, for instance, love is also widely accepted as a basis for legitimate public action, even though uncommonly practised, an important cultural question gets posed. While it is true that the practice of love in a hierarchical society may often embed hierarchical relations, that is not where the possibilities of love end. With the rise of challenges to hierarchy, love may seem to be declining and being increasingly replaced by relations of open domination or of rational contracts. But we can also see at least a few situations where love is the matrix of more equal relationships. If reason claimed to offer a basis of transcending particular interests and building consensual solutions independent of domination, then perhaps a similar claim could be offered by the latter kind of love, too. Too often the democratic response to this is one of dismissal and a simple assertion of the necessity of rational analysis and a calculus of power relations. No engagement takes place, only a rejection occurs. With Gadamer one may argue that democracy is premised not on isolation, but on dialogue. The hermeneutic transformation that ensues transforms both parties in the dialogue. Of the various local interpretations of the key concepts of a democratic education, it is love that poses the greatest intellectual challenge. Hence, its examination may also have the greatest potential in developing further the possibilities of reason. The practice of democracy may be best done by not by rejecting its ‘others’ but by engaging with them and through dialogic methods seeking to develop fresh educational agendas as well as practices.

Notes

1 The initial formulation and fieldwork of this study was done with Eklavya. The support and guidance received from colleagues at Eklavya was invaluable and left a deep imprint on this study. Later analyses were carried out at the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education and at the IIT, Kanpur. An initiation grant at the last helped me in my work and is gratefully acknowledged.
3 The ‘block’ here is the equivalent of the *tehsil* or *taluka* in other parts of the country.
6 Viz., the state and its school system.
7 In the schools, too, such bivalent practices could be seen. Friends who played together in school were a little reluctant to visit each other’s homes. They might go to the town and drink or eat together there, but the dalits bitterly recalled how their high-caste friends would never drink tea with them in the their homes.
8 Similar patterns may be seen in the local practices and beliefs regarding freedom and rights.

References


