

Addressing Caste Discrimination Through Non-formal Education: Experiences of Navsarjan Trust

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NAVSARJAN is a grassroots organization in India dedicated to ensuring human rights for all by eliminating discrimination based on caste and the untouchability practices. It also campaigns for equality of status and opportunities for all regardless of caste, class or gender, and for the rule of law to prevail.

It is currently one of the largest grassroots organizations in Gujarat state, actively doing work in more than three thousand villages as well as major cities. A field staff of about forty women and men — most of whom come from the communities in which they work — keep Navsarjan in tune with the needs of the people.

The Golana Tragedy

The Dalit community in Golana village (Anand district, Gujarat state) called Vankars (traditionally, weavers) established an agricultural cooperative society that supported their livelihood. In 1973, the government granted thirty-three acres of agricultural land to the cooperative under one of the land reform laws called the “Agricultural Land Ceiling Act.” But the members of the cooperative were too afraid to claim the land knowing how the previous landowner, an upper caste family, would violently oppose it. In 1985, the cooperative finally decided to claim the land and proceeded to take the possession of the same.

Later, Dalit members of the community demanded land from the government for their housing needs. The government granted this demand and allocated a piece of land. The land was illegally occupied by feudal community members. However, the Dalits took possession of the land and built huts on it.

On 25 January 1986, upon the instigation of the previous landowner, feudal caste members, a group of much lower caste (Valmikis) started to

destroy the huts. The cooperative members tried to stop them and fighting ensued. The Valmikis called for help from the previous land owner, and a big group of the upper caste attacked them at a bus station while they were boarding a hired truck to go to the police station to lodge a complaint on the attack. The group of upper caste seriously wounded several Vankars. A little later, an armed group of the upper caste attacked the Dalit locality once more.¹ Four activists working for the Dalits were gunned down on the spot, eighteen others were badly wounded, and many houses were set on fire or damaged.

Thirteen long years of legal battle ensued, and finally resulted in life imprisonment of eleven of the murderers.

Though the loss of the community leaders was unbearable, the knowledge gained during this phase in securing social and legal justice was immense. It reinforced the resolve of the Dalit community to pursue the struggle and strengthen the movement, and helped define all future programs for the oppressed, leading to the establishment of Navsarjan.

Three basic lessons were learned from the Golana tragedy:

- Violence against Dalits is a systemic phenomenon. It can only be countered through a broad-based organization and movement;
- The most crucial requirement in a movement is leadership, which must be stable as well as sensitive to its community. Such leadership best arises when it grows from within the community;
- The war against injustice is more psychological than physical. There is therefore a need for mass awareness programs on a continuous basis, side-by-side with action-oriented programs;
- The struggle for justice to be effective must follow a constitutional approach, as the injustice against the Dalits is against the law.

Establishing Navsarjan

Navsarjan was established in December 1988 in Gujarat. Its primary focus was the Dalits—which largely includes people previously known as “untouchables”—the most exploited class in the Indian society. As time passed, Navsarjan gained respect that caused other communities and castes to approach it for legal assistance.

It has roots in the 1970s when a group of professors, dissatisfied with the fact that there was disconnect between the realities in society and what was

taught in educational institutions, resigned to set up a Behavioral Science Center to initiate well thought-out pedagogical work on rural development. They laid emphasis on educating the masses through non-formal education. The Center decided to match the educational programs with community owned income-generating programs. This was how the agricultural cooperatives were set up in the villages, one of them being in village Golana. I joined one of these educational institutions as a student in 1977 and later as faculty member on completion of my university course in 1980. These cooperatives made a powerful impact in the region because they were able to empower Dalits. They were the masters of their own employment in these cooperatives who could negotiate with the local landlords and dominant caste farmers on their wage. At that time when the law mandated farmers to pay Rs. 7 per day as minimum wage, the farmers were actually paid only 1 Rs. The cooperatives were able to force the payment of minimum wage.

After the Golana incident, based on learnings as mentioned earlier, I decided to set up Navsarjan Trust which could focus on systemic caste violence. Starting from five villages in 1989, within the next eight years it had spread to nearly two thousand villages of Gujarat.

Navsarjan, now solidly established in Gujarat, has built upon its foundation of fieldwork. It plays an active part in the overall Dalit movement of India and abroad. It is recognized as one of the most successful and ground-breaking Dalit organizations of India.

Navsarjan works to help Dalits and other persecuted communities to escape the net of ideological deceptions through which the system has oppressed them for centuries. Promoting self-respect and dignity in all of its activities, Navsarjan dedicates itself to a variety of programs.

It promotes the use of non-violent action to protest the Dalit situation. With this aim in view, it provides services to both Dalits and non-Dalits.

Programs

Navsarjan's work is mainly focused on the following themes:

- Human rights value education;
- Women's rights;
- Eradication of manual scavenging;
- Minimum wage implementation;
- Land rights;

- Digitization of data;
- Local governance and political rights;
- Youth awareness and motivation.

Navsarjan's core work is to create awareness among the marginalized and oppressed communities in such a way that people are able to develop independent thinking about the world around them, and enable them to fight oppression and inequality without the organization's support. To this end, Navsarjan's fieldworkers are incessantly involved in mobilizing and organizing meetings and training programs. Women's rights groups, land rights groups, youth groups, village paralegals, agricultural workers' groups, etc. are formed and trained to exist independently of Navsarjan, though its support to the groups remains intact.

Navsarjan works to strengthen the movement for equality, and believes that the energy for all such movements must come from within the oppressed marginalized communities.

Navsarjan produced one of the largest census reports measuring the untouchability practices in Gujarat. The report entitled *Understanding Untouchability - A Comprehensive Study of Practices and Conditions in 1589 Villages* came out in 2010.² In 2016, the Indian government revoked the license of Navsarjan under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (2010), terming its activities as "detrimental to National interest." The crisis, causing non-availability of funds and the locking of bank accounts, affected many of



Navsarjan gathering to protest the continuing untouchability practices.

its programs and reduced the number of staff to half. The village communities have kept Navsarjan alive with community contributions.

In its more than three decades of work, which include setbacks and successes, Navsarjan has grown to be widely recognized locally, state-wide, nationally, and internationally.

Human Rights Value Education

Education is a human right denied to many Dalit children. Navsarjan works to restore this right.

As an agent of social mobility, education can lead to the emancipation of the Dalit masses. Today, however, the education system perpetuates caste discrimination, reproducing discriminatory practices and effectively denying many Dalit children their basic right to education. As a result, the chance to break out of the cycle of caste-based occupations and menial labor is lost.

At school, Dalit children are frequently forbidden from sitting with non-Dalit students during mid-day meal, and from participating in school cultural programs. They are insulted with caste-based slurs by both teachers and students. Many are forced to clean the school's toilets while non-Dalit children are free to play. The government teachers themselves enforce this discrimination, often refusing to pass Dalit students and giving them less attention in class. As a result, the drop-out rate of Dalit children (especially girls) from primary school is alarmingly high.

Navsarjan's Human Rights Value Education strives to:

1. Completely eradicate discrimination in public schools;
2. Achieve a zero drop-out rate of Dalit children from primary schools;
3. Create educational opportunities for Dalit children to counter the challenges posed by the privatization of education;
4. Ensure that there is no child labor in Dalit communities;
5. Ensure that Dalit children get access to the government education scholarships to which they are entitled;
6. Sensitize teachers on issues of discrimination suffered by Dalit children;
7. Encourage personal growth;
8. Allow children to develop scientific skills and rational beliefs;

9. Empower through the values of equality and non-discrimination, both in terms of gender and otherwise;
10. Ensure that the most disadvantaged Dalit communities, such as the scavengers (Valmiki community), receive priority-based opportunities;
11. Reduce sub-caste discrimination among the Dalit communities;
12. Focus on female students, and give them priority-based opportunities; and
13. Create a replicable model of social empowerment.

Navsarjan realized the importance of education and knowledge as the most effective tools for social reengineering. Realizing that the knowledge would end systems based on caste, the caste system prohibited learning for the Dalits, the women and all marginalized sectors except for the people upheld as “pure” castes.

Hence, Navsarjan did the following:

1. It set up three primary schools, which are closed now due to lack of funds. There were more than 2,500 students graduating out of these schools;
2. It produced more than eighteen books for children around the values of equality and non-discrimination;
3. It produced articles to point out the number of caste and gender-based prejudices interweaved in the textbooks and the books available in the market for children on moral education;
4. It produced and continues to produce educational toys and learning tools for children to learn history which often the school curriculum does not cover;
5. Recently, it has produced “Constitution house,” available in almost all Indian languages. This small hand-held wooden house explains the basic provisions of the Indian Constitution, especially the fundamental rights and liberties. This material is used by many organizations across the country for spreading awareness and education in local areas.



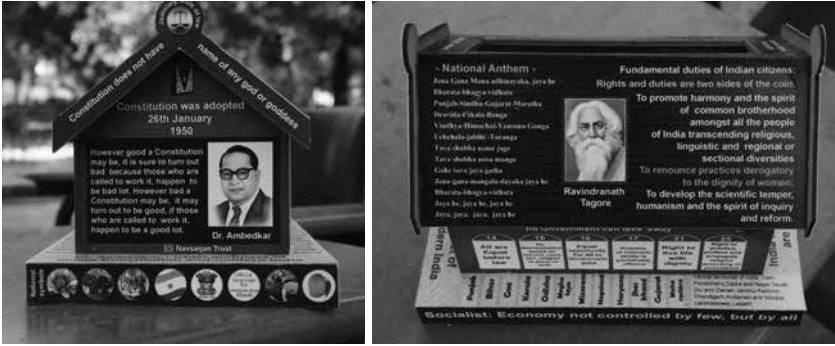
Children do experiments in the science lab in Navsarjan school.



Educational toys designed by Navsarjan.



“Constitution House”



“Constitution House”

Bhimshalas

Bhimshalas (“Bhim” from Bhimrao Ambedkar, and “shala” is the Gujarati word for school) are a key part of Navsarjan’s grassroots education strategy. A Bhimshala is an extra-curricular education center run by a Navsarjan-trained volunteer from the local community usually out of her or his home.

The *Bhimshala* volunteer plays a key role in eliminating discrimination at school, by lodging protests with the school administration, and — with the help of Navsarjan — by taking legal action when necessary.

Activities done with children in *Bhimshalas* include:

- educational games;
- cultural programs;
- programs in which the students can share their experiences of discrimination at school;
- picnic and exposure to public places such as the police station, post office, railway station, Primary Health Center (PHC), milk cooperative, and games and sports centers.

Nearly all Bhimshalas function with Navsarjan libraries, which have a collection of about one hundred books designed to encourage literacy and maintain interest in education. These books are centered around the values of equality and non-discrimination. These libraries include educational children’s books that I have written and designed to encourage Dalit and non-Dalit youth to question caste and gender discrimination.



One of the *Bhimshala* villages receives the library.



The ceremony to launch the book, *Experiencing the Truth with Dr. Ambedkar*. Other books published by Navsarjan for children are on display

Due to the *Bhimshala* program, discrimination has been drastically reduced in dozens of village schools, and Dalit children are getting extra help with their studies, receiving further encouragement to stay in school.

One of the important works done in this area by Navsarjan is the collection of data on children who were forced to clean toilets in the public schools on the basis of caste alone. A march, organized later in the city,

ended with a public hearing chaired by a retired judge of a state high court where the children gave testimonies as victims of this systemic abuse. The hearing was held at the Gandhi Ashram, the epicenter of Indian freedom movement.



Martin Macwan with teachers and children at Navsarjan school.

Children's Programs and Camps

As the twin evils of caste- and gender-based discrimination are forced upon children at a young age, Navsarjan strives to establish a counter-consciousness and sense of unity within the minds of children to combat such discrimination.

Children's programs and camps run by Navsarjan's fieldworkers bring together all the Dalit children of one village, across sub-caste lines. In many villages, Dalits of different sub-castes do not interact frequently, and untouchability between sub-castes is often practiced. These children's programs emphasize unity and equality through cultural programs, book readings, and group discussions.



Sports competition held at Navsarjan schools.



School renovation and the plantation of the tree.



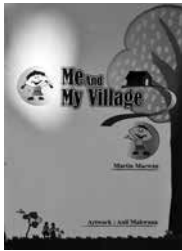
Children on the newly-constructed dome in Navsarjan school.

Educational kits have been distributed to children along with the books mentioned below and other books. The central idea of the educational program was to go beyond promoting literacy and empower children enough to be able to ask questions, something which the traditional school system discourages.

Navsarjan realized that it was important to produce books for children which focused on the challenges they face. The books, available in the market, for children do have caste and gender prejudices interweaved. Hence, apart from collecting good books published by the National Book Trust of India, I wrote a number of books. The following is the brief introduction of these books, produced by Navsarjan.



Whose Hand is This? is a picture book without text of various hands doing different jobs, the hands of an electrician, the carpenter, the cook, the floor cleaner, etc. Children look at the hands and guess whether the hands are those of boys or girls. The right answer is written on the last page, which is sealed. The last page has the one-line answer, “all works can be done by all, whether the boy or the girl, man or the woman.”



Me and My Village is a book which asks children to paint the areas of their own village in red that they have not been able to visit and those areas that they have been able to visit as green. The caste inhibitions and restrictions do emerge in the book. The book is a child’s mapping of untouchability practices in a village.



Me and My Mother is a book about the journey of a child along with the mother, and the irreplaceable role of a mother in the life of a person.

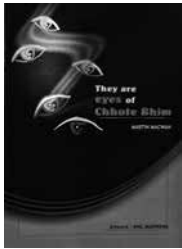
The Butterflies is a book about the story of racial prejudice and the destruction it brings about.

I am Asking: Why? is a book of a girl-child raising a question “WHY?” to the parents on the number of roles that she alone is expected to perform. Why can my brother play and I need to work? Why the difference between me and my brother when it comes to quality of food? Why am I taught to cook, clean the floor, do domestic chores and not my brother?



What is PROPER; What is not PROPER? is the picture book of mother and father, brother and sister or man and woman doing different work in the house show-

ing them done traditionally (gender-based) and shown in reverse (non-traditional) situation that raise the questions: What is proper? What is not proper?



Experiencing the Truth with Dr Ambedkar is a complete biographical sketch of Dr. Ambedkar weaving in ninety-two events in his life in a simple narration with “Godna” paintings³ and art form, created by Dalit women from Bihar. Navsarjan produced three books on Ambedkar, namely, *They are Ears of*

Chhote Bhim, *Hands of Chhote Bhim* and *They are Eyes of Chhote Bhim*. They comprise a series of books on *chhote* (young, child) *bhim* (Ambedkar), which through his hands explains what the hands of a young Ambedkar do or will never do. Similarly, the books discuss what the ears of young Ambedkar hear and not hear, and what the eyes of the young *bhim* watch all the time (poverty, labor conditions, and newspapers).



What will my hands DO and what my hands will NOT DO? is a book on collections of life stories of people who have changed the world through their hands: Gandhi’s hands picking up a pinch of salt to challenge the British administration, Ambedkar’s hands writing the Constitution of India, Rosa Park’s hands which refuse to vacate the bus seat for the white man; Mother Teresa holding the homeless, the sick and the neglected people in her hands, etc.



What will my feet do? What my feet will not do? is collection of stories of people who have changed the world through their feet and the feet who were engaged in slave practices: the feet of Nelson Mandela confined in prison for thirty six years; the feet in the “million man march” of the civil rights movement; the soiled feet of the manual scavengers and the corroded feet of the salt workers in salt pan, etc.

There is a powerful story regarding the impact that Navsarjan books created in the villages that occupies my mind. A Dalit child was seen reading a book together with a non-Dalit child, sitting close and touching one another. This was reported to the father of the non-Dalit child who rushed to the school to separate his son from the Dalit boy and expressed his utter dislike for what happened. A little later, when the classes resumed, the two boys were found missing in the class. They were found in the washroom where they had locked themselves in, reading the book together!

Chhote BHIM theater competition: As a way to promote reading of the books, theater competitions were organized each year where children would



Preparation of the chhote bhim theater competition training for children organized at Dalit Shakti Kendra.

form theater groups from their village and compete. Known theater personalities came forward to voluntarily train children in theater skills. The positive impact of this program was the participation of the non-Dalit children along with Dalit children, in common theater groups. These groups would have non-Dalits act out Dalit characters while the Dalit children act out non-Dalit characters in the plays. The same was done in the case of the Hindu and the Muslim children and the boys and the girls.

Impact on Dalit Children

In addition to ending discriminatory practices in many schools around Gujarat and encouraging Dalit communities to value education through donations to Navsarjan's primary education work, Navsarjan's Human Rights Value Education Program has led to important changes to the children themselves:

1. Children express the fact of their discrimination: For the first time, children have begun to stand up and raise their voices in protest against the discrimination they face. They are given the opportunity for this crucial expression in *Bhimshala* activities;
2. Children question sub-caste practices: Because of caste-based socialization, the children were under the effect of a system of differential relationships based on sub-caste, even among Dalits. After being exposed to awareness programs, they interact with other children as equals, regardless of sub-caste;
3. Children combat discrimination: Dalit children are upset about caste-based discrimination, and they oppose such practices whenever they see them;
4. Children have come closer to Navsarjan's fieldworkers: Children who have been restricted by both teachers and parents—who often urge their children (especially girls) to drop out early and begin daily labor—interact with Navsarjan's activists and express their right to continue their education;
5. Children spread their awareness to their peers and siblings: Inspired by the awareness process, these children are mobilizing other children to get in touch with activists. For them, "activism" has become a buzzword;
6. Children's aspirations have risen: Children have begun to express their dreams and aspirations openly, and have raised expectations on their future.

Youth Awareness and Motivation

Navsarjan organizes the youth to enable them to tackle some of their own issues.

The youth in Gujarat are facing a serious crisis. Those who have managed to obtain some education have found few employment opportunities in the organized sector, and are forced to work as daily wage laborers in fields or factories. They are frustrated with the lack of opportunities available to them, and with their social status in relation to the perceived glamor of the city. A powerful cynicism has resulted, leading to addiction to drugs and alcohol, and a stark increase in the suicide rate. Those who suffer most from this situation are the youth from the socially marginalized communities: the scheduled castes (Dalits), the scheduled tribes (adivasis) and the other backward castes (OBCs), to be specific. Today, the historic legacy of social exclusion based on caste has a strong influence on economic status, as well.

Navsarjan's Youth Awareness activities educate the youth on village government schemes, land laws, the *panchayat* (village council) system, addictions (to combat alcohol and tobacco) and gender issues, all of which help to lessen feelings of powerlessness and cynicism. Village Youth Forums are established and meet once or twice a month to discuss local issues, such as village infrastructure, atrocities against Dalits, and how to solve their own issues. If unemployed, students are encouraged to come to Dalit Shakti Kendra (DSK or Dalit Empowerment Center) established by Navsarjan in 1999 for vocational training and social empowerment. The result is that youth feel more engaged and empowered to take control of their lives.



Vocational training programs conducted at Dalit Shakti Kendra. Photo of participants in the training program on tailoring.



Vocational training: electrician course and its first female student.

In 1996, Navsarjan raised the question of manual scavenging practices which continued to engage several hundred thousand people to manually handle the human waste, a caste-based occupation banned under the law. To raise the national attention on the issue, Navsarjan filed a public interest litigation suit (class action suit) in the Gujarat High Court and made a film in collaboration with a media group. The film, *Lesser Human*, can be seen on the Youtube.³

The judicial intervention ensured that states adopt the law that allocates financial resources for both the relief and rehabilitation of the manual scavengers. States adopted this law one after another. However, Navsarjan felt the need to go beyond the law and allocation of state-sponsored programs for rehabilitation, though this had become a nationwide agitation. It thought important to motivate youth and create alternative vocational avenues through DSK to ensure that Dalit youth do not fall dependent on caste-based occupations.

DSK has trained more than 10,700 youth in different vocational courses, 58 percent of them being young women. The labor success rate (students' ability to engage in income earning activities both in terms of self-employ-

ment as well as being employed in work places) has been over 82.5 percent. DSK is now an independent organization from Navsarjan.

Challenges

The implementation of the programs of Navsarjan faces a number of challenges.

There are certain sub-castes among the Dalits that are not ready to have their girls educated. Hence, continuous education in these sub-castes is still required.

The privatization of education has reduced the quality of the public education. And while the quality of education in private schools remains a question mark, private schools have been able to take away a great deal of income from the poor families. The law providing for free enrollment of poor children in private schools has remained poorly implemented and not without many obstacles.

Due to non-availability of employment in one's own village, both in Dalit and Tribal communities, migration in search of work is a reality today. School going children often travel along with parents and could not attend school.

Rising unemployment and cultural changes have made it difficult for volunteers to sustain their spirit.

Endnotes

1 For more information on the Golana tragedy, read Martin Macwan, "Tales From An Autography: The Violent Cost of Struggle for Equality," *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, available at www.dalitstudies.org.in/uploads/article/Journal%2001/Tales%20From%20an%20Autography.pdf.

2 Co-authored with Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights. For the full report visit: www.researchgate.net/publication/46476924_Understanding_Untouchability_A_Comprehensive_Study_of_Practices_and_conditions_in_1589_villages.

3 *Lesser Humans* is available on this YouTube link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyHWBCadTQc.