

What are Our Children Learning? Role of Parents / Teachers in Fostering Religious Harmony

- Sameera Khan

It is an honour to be here amongst you all today, especially talking about how to spread the love at a time when it seems only the hate is winning or at least, spreading at a horrifying pace.

Let me start off by sharing a personal story that I feel outlines all that we are up against even as we discuss and debate how best we can foster religious harmony. It is an appropriate story to share with you today as we observe the 70th anniversary of Gandhiji's death.

A few years ago, when my elder daughter was in Class 6, her teacher announced an impromptu class debate on Gandhiji. She divided the class into two sections – this side would argue in favour of Gandhiji and his ideas and that side would argue against Gandhiji and his ideas. When my daughter came home and recounted this incident to me, I was taken slightly aback. I grew up in Bombay in the 1980s and went to school here on Hill Road – it was a time when one could never even think of having a debate in school that argued against Gandhiji in any way. Still, I thought what's wrong if young people today want to interrogate Gandhi, why should we protect our national icons like holy cows, perhaps this will help them understand his ideas better or in a more nuanced way.

So, the girls on this side of the classroom which favoured Gandhi talked about how he used his revolutionary ideas of ahimsa or non-violence and satyagraha as tools to bring the Indian masses together to demand freedom from the British. My daughter, then piped up to tell me that she was secretly hoping to be on the other side, the side that opposed Gandhi. But why, I queried. How would you have argued against him? On caste, she said, particularly how his 'unreasonable' (her words) fast-unto-death in 1932 in Yerwada virtually forced Babasaheb Ambedkar to relinquish his demand for separate electorates for Dalits and sign the Poona Pact that agreed to joint electorates with certain safeguards for the lower castes.

But, unfortunately, that was not the able point that the other side of the classroom raised in their arguments against Gandhiji. For them, Gandhiji was ‘a misguided old man’ who ‘appeased Muslims’, ‘favoured Pakistan at the time of partition’ and worse still, “actually believed in Hindu-Muslim unity”. That was a laughable idea, said the students on that side. No wonder he was killed. “Everyone hates Muslims. Who wants to stay with Muslims, even now?” some of them shouted. “No one in our buildings, not in our community!”

Before I could even raise my voice in astonishment at this argument, my daughter expressed her anger. “I had to then tell them Mamma, I had to tell them it was not true.” So, she raised her hand and passionately told her worthy opponents that Gandhiji’s idea of Hindu-Muslim unity was not such a ridiculous idea. It was a worthy idea for India. And Hindus and Muslims could live together, in fact they did live together in her own house. Her mother was a Muslim married to her father who was a Hindu and their families were fully supportive of this.

That was the day my daughter fully came to terms with us as a Hindu-Muslim family and also came home with the realisation that in her class she was the only one of that kind.

Who won the debate, I later asked her. “Of course, we did. No one had such a solid personal point to make. My opponents crumbled!” I would like to believe that that day Gandhiji was having the final chuckle.

But my overwhelming thought that day was did the teacher who unleashed this debate topic in her classroom have any idea how to handle it when all the facts went for a toss – as they often do these days - and it went all hateful in the classroom. How was she planning to ensure that those 11-year-olds did not go home with a flawed concept of Gandhiji’s ideas and more importantly, that tolerance of the ‘other’, in this case the Muslim ‘other’, was not such a laughable or ridiculous idea.

Increasingly, it is all going to be hateful, both out there in the ‘real’ world and inside our classrooms, in our schools, colleges, and on our playgrounds. As parents and teachers, we need to pay attention to the long-term damage this is doing to our young people, to the minority groups in our midst, and to our idea of India as a secular, pluralistic nation as defined in its fine Constitution.

When our children go to school or our young people go to college they do not leave the world outside at the gates of the school or college. They bring it in with them – the ideas they picked up from that last movie they saw (hopefully, it was not Padmavaat), that youtube video they downloaded, that shouting match they witnessed on TV, most importantly that dining table conversation in their homes. They walk in with the stereotypes, the hatred, the intolerance, the misinformation.

I believe our schools and colleges can choose either to reinforce the negative ideas they walk in with or choose to get them to reject them, or at least heartily question them by offering alternate facts and perspectives and by attempting to demystify ideas, people and communities.

There is an urgent need for this today in India as people seem to be hardening in their attitudes towards the ‘other’, the ‘other’ being anyone different from them. It’s not always religion, it is also language, class, caste, gender, sexuality and even food habits.

Recently, my 10-year-old came home upset after a good friend told her all people who eat meat are bad people. “But we eat meat, we are not bad, are we?” she asked me. “In any case, I told her we only eat chicken.”

Another friend recently mentioned how tense lunchroom conversations are in her 7-year old’s school which has a ‘bring only vegetarian food to school’ policy. Even though her child only carries vegetarian food in her tiffin-box, she is constantly taunted for eating meat at home. It has reached a point that her child almost dreads lunch-time at school. And this is a Hindu friend.

I think a big part of the problem is that we don’t know this ‘other’.

Let me ask you – yes, you sitting out here: How many of your friends are from religious backgrounds different from yours? Is your closest friend a person who follows another religion? Or speaks another language at home? If you are Hindu, do you have close Muslim friends? Do you have a close Christian friend? If you are Muslim, do you have a Hindu close friend? If you are a non-vegetarian, do you have a close friend who is vegetarian? Do you regularly eat only vegetarian meals with this friend? Similarly,

if you are vegetarian, is there a close friend you have who is non-vegetarian? Can this non-vegetarian friend eat meat in your presence? If you are upper caste, do you share meals and time with friends who are of other castes? Of castes much lower than yours?

When we don't know the 'other', everything about them terrifies us, makes us fear them and their practices. But if you grew up with someone from a different religious faith and ate lunch with them in school each day, it is possible you could see that religious faith differently, a little less stereotypically and a little more positively, perhaps.

We need our children and young adults to experience diversity while growing up and this has immense consequences for them as adults. A senior journalist friend of mine, a Hindu, once confided that the only reason she doesn't fall prey for all the negative right-wing rhetoric about Muslims especially when she is covering a riot or bomb is because she shared a close warm relationship with a Muslim neighbour while growing up. Everytime, she was stuck hearing negative things about Muslims, she thought about how warmly that neighbour had looked after her and fed her as a child. "I keep saying, they cannot all be bad. I have known some of them," she whispered in confidence.

For most of us, growing up before the Year 2000, it was a neighbour or a school friend who broke that stereotype for us. But increasingly that is becoming more difficult. A 2017 survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) revealed that only 33 per cent Hindus count a Muslim among their close friends, whereas 74 per cent Muslims have a close friend from the Hindu community.

The rift between communities is gradually widening – because our schools, our buildings and neighbourhoods are increasingly being homogenised and populated only by 'people just like us'. Across the country, increasingly Muslim children don't get into secular mixed schools easily, or when they do in a few numbers, they report regularly facing verbal slurs like 'Paki' or 'terrorist' or 'jihadi'.

This is pushing many Muslim children away from mainstream institutions to parochial schools which create an insularity among Muslim youth and alienates them from non-Muslim communities amidst whom they have to stay and later work.

Clearly then, what we need is to train teachers and schools to minimise the damage of this hate of the 'other'. But how do we hold schools/colleges and teachers accountable when really they are just a part of our larger society which is becoming increasingly parochial and intolerant, most loudly and explicitly.

Parents and families are also responsible – for what we are saying in our living rooms and over our dining tables is absorbed by our children and regurgitated as hatred for each other in classrooms and playgrounds, on lunch tables and school benches.

What can we do?

There are some things schools and colleges can do to better this picture:

Encourage diversity of all kinds in your institutions and classrooms – diversity in the student body but also diversity among teachers.

Follow a zero tolerance policy towards hate speech or action. If students face hate or harassment or bullying due to their religious, ethnic, caste background or food choices, please address it as an institution and make it a learning moment for the class.

Make your school/college/classroom a safe space for students to raise uncomfortable questions about religion, extremism, misogyny, stereotypes. Teachers need to be trained to find innovative ways to address these with positive examples and support.

Encourage more interfaith interactions between students. But don't force the Christian child only to talk about Easter or the Muslim child to make a chart on Eid or Sikh child to talk about Guru Nanak or Parsi child to speak on Navroze, or Hindu child on Diwali - instead mix it up and encourage them all to know each other's faiths more intimately and let them research/learn the other's festival or prophet or God/s.

Hopefully, this can help break our stereotypes and demonization of the other. Our formative years are critical and thus, the role of our parents, teachers, schools and colleges is critical in keeping our country wonderfully diverse and pluralistic.

Let us get to work now!