

These kids told: you are Dalit, go eat elsewhere

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Teachers who protested this inequality are shunted out

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CHOTILA, DECEMBER 15: At least seven Dalit teachers have been transferred in Gujarat's Surendranagar district for objecting to segregation of upper- and lower-caste students during mid-day meals in some schools.

Now upper-caste parents in other villages are using the threat of transfer to keep Dalit teachers from opposing the practice.

"During training, we are taught to treat every student the same irrespective of caste or religion, but here it is not so," said Girishbhai Wadher, a Dalit headmaster who was transferred from the primary school in Bhojpari village to one in Mehindad, and then to one in Kabran. Wadher, who joined service three years ago, said the discrimination was not so rampant or visible when he joined three years ago.

"In August some upper-caste parents in Bhojpari and Bhojpara villages asked the mid-day meals in-charge to make Dalit students sit separately," he said. "When two other teachers and I protested, the villagers came and told us they would socially boycott the entire Dalit community in the village."

Some teachers are too scared to talk, fearing that Dalits in their villages may be attacked. The fears are not unfounded: Dalits in Bhojpari village were beaten up on September 29. Said Inspector N. Ninama of the Chotila Police Station, "An FIR was lodged on October 2 and we arrested 41 people, including sarpanch Karansinh Uttedhiya, for the attack. A day later, they were released on bail and held a dharna outside the district primary education officer's (DPEO) office, demanding that the teachers be transferred or they wouldn't send children to school."

Wadher and two others— Laljibhai Anjaria and Chaturbhai Chauhan— were transferred on December 3. Before that, four Dalit teachers had been transferred in September.

DPEO P.F. Pargi, who acknowledged that Wadher had complained to him, said that this was only a temporary arrangement "till things cooled down." He said: "We cannot afford to have 200 students not attending school because of such a problem." "Therefore, the only solution was to shift the teachers temporarily," he said. "I think the issue has been solved for now."

Asked what he was doing about the segregation of Dalits and non-Dalits, Pargi had no answer.

The social justice & empowerment department hasn't even taken the matter with the seriousness it deserves.

In a letter dated December 3, social justice secretary Ravi Saxena wrote to MLA Manharlal Makwana that two teachers of Bhojpari had been transferred after a "compromise" was worked out and peace returned to the villages. When contacted on Monday, he, however, said: "I think it wasn't right to punish the teachers. I'll take a decision on this soon."

Minister of State For Social Justice & Empowerment Ramanlal Vora pleaded ignorance of the matter. "If you give me the details, I'll see what needs to be done," he said.

The Mehindad primary school, to which some of the teachers were transferred, refused to accept them, saying it already has enough staff. So within two days, the teachers were transferred to Kabran. Now, they have gone on indefinite leave.

"We feel threatened," said one teacher. "In most villages here, upper caste parents want segregation. We are seen as troublemakers. How can we work in this atmosphere?" said P.G. Parmar, a Dalit leader and president of Gujarat Backward Class Communities Association, "While feudalism is strongly prevalent in Surendranagar, sadly it has reaped into the classrooms. The children don't even know why they are asked to keep away from school. We've written to the National Human Rights Commission."

For the Dalit teachers, it was also galling to see that none of their upper-caste colleagues stood by them or raised a voice of protest when they were transferred. But then, many of them stood to benefit from the transfers.