

How should RE represent issues about caste in the classroom?

Professor Eleanor Nesbitt of the University of Warwick and Lat Blaylock, *REtoday* Editor, have some research-based suggestions for teaching about caste. The challenge is for teachers to recognise the place of caste in identity in ways that are open to questions of justice and fairness. Avoiding simplistic, prejudicial representations of religious tradition and community is vital in RE. Teachers have a pastoral responsibility to listen intelligently to what is going on in their schools.



Eleanor Nesbitt

Teachers of RE who address issues of prejudice when they teach about South Asian religion – including Indian communities of Hindus and Sikhs, and their Western diasporas – must think carefully about concepts of caste both in the traditions of these religions and in relation to contemporary UK communities.

Caste, and awareness of it, are persistent, though changing, features of South Asian communities' experience in the UK. In twenty-first-century Britain issues of caste are hotly contested, in relation to both equality legislation and to the school curriculum: should caste be listed alongside gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation as a protected characteristic? Should caste be studied as an RE topic? If so, how? How can the contemporary identities and needs of, for example, Dalit communities be justly and fairly represented?

Caste is a topic in RE syllabuses – it is often badly handled. One example is the summary of caste in the scheme of work for AQA's 'Paper 1 Option 4, Study of Religions (Hinduism)' (AQA 2016). This includes consideration of 'the dharma that corresponds to each caste' and 'what determines the caste one is born into'. Suggestions for 'differentiation and extension' include students researching 'the influence of Gandhi's teachings' on 'the treatment of the Untouchables'. This language is outdated and prejudicial.

Birmingham's Drum Theatre premiered and toured *The Fifth Cup* in 2007/08. An RE lesson is at the heart of the tragedy. The playwrights, British women Rena Dipti Annobil and Reena Jaisiah, tell us this is based in reality. Picture this exchange, after some argument in the classroom:

Teacher: That's enough! The caste system is not applicable in this day and age anymore, but there was a time where some castes were considered higher than others and there was no escape from it ... However, the caste system has since been abolished in India. (*Pritpal raises his hand*) Yes, Pritpal?

Pritpal: That's not what my family believe. We're Sikhs – we're the highest caste in the world innit!

To respond, the teacher needs a deep understanding of several dimensions of caste (it does not go well in the play!). We teachers of RE might need to think more carefully about these kinds of questions: if the concept of caste originated in Hindu tradition,

in what ways is it used beyond the Hindu community today? Second, is RE in danger of 'sanitising' and misrepresenting the tangled history of caste; for example, relying on hundred-year-old Gandhian language ('not Untouchables but Harijans' – meaning 'children of God')? Third, why do GCSE syllabuses over-simplify ideas about the abolition of caste? Fourth, what is the recent history of the Dalit peoples of India (they number around 300 million among the world's roughly 1 billion Hindus)? Fifth, whose voices and perspectives are privileged and whose are marginalised in RE's portrayals of issues of justice in relation to caste? Sixth, why does RE give little attention to the injustice of caste prejudice in British life?

Teachers need considerable expertise, insight and sensitivity to present this material fairly. Some RE publications present Hinduism misleadingly, through their text and illustrations, or they essentialise caste. Some publications fail to distinguish between past and present situations (each idealised or actual).

Misleadingly, too, Sikhi curriculum materials imply that the Gurus once and for all abolished the caste system. What the Gurus incontrovertibly did was insist on the irrelevance of hereditary status to spiritual progress, and the institutions of *langar* (vegetarian hospitality for all, regardless of rank) demonstrate practical equality. Sikhs were not *required* to marry across caste boundaries, however – hence the continuation of distinct communities.

The dangers are that (1) the very mention of 'caste' can lead to pupils being hurt by their own and other pupils' discovery of their 'low' caste, and (2) there is a risk of teachers being unaware of the way name-calling or the breaking-off of friendships may result from caste stigma. Without some measure of 'caste literacy' (an understanding of caste that includes an awareness of caste's present-day repercussions) teachers of RE are ill-equipped to select and present material appropriately to learners. Such 'literacy' would be an element in the 'religious literacy' that so many RE teachers aim and claim to teach. Religious literacy needs, in our view, to entail an informed understanding of the social dynamics and implications of religious identification. This necessarily involves understanding the significance of caste in the self-identity of hundreds of thousands of individuals in twenty-first-century Britain.

A challenge for educators from infants' classes to university is to raise levels of awareness of caste's continuing impact on some South Asians' lives while also seeking to reduce stigma and hurt. It is now unlikely, following the most recent consultation, that caste will be included in equalities legislation as a protected characteristic, but cases of caste discrimination are nonetheless expected to arise, and case law will be invoked. Similarly, vigilance about both representation and possible bullying is still required in schools.

Teachers need to be alert to language: they may need to attend to words, with which they are unfamiliar, that are being directed tauntingly at a particular South Asian student. One twenty-first-century case involved a South Asian student teaching other students to use a word that would hurt a classmate from a Dalit background. Attention to language also means, in the course of one's teaching about caste, only using with extreme care such words as 'Harijan' or 'Untouchable' for members of Dalit communities, explaining their historical uses and why they are unacceptable in many situations. This requires the same sensitivities that teachers of RE apply in anti-racist education to hurtful, unacceptable language about black people, or insulting words directed at pupils identifying as LGBTQ+.

Teachers must realise that caste is a contemporary issue and one that can still affect South Asian families in the UK from a range of religious backgrounds. This means recognising that some young people from non-Hindu backgrounds have experienced caste prejudice whereas, at the same time, many young Hindus may be unaware of caste or at least of its negative aspects.

At all stages it is helpful for students to know that they can speak to a teacher privately about caste and for teachers to listen to some South Asian students' denial or dismissal of caste as well as to other students' instances of their own or their family's recent or historic experience of caste-based exclusion and hurt.

Due vigilance involves scrutiny of RE material for pupils of primary or secondary age for its approach to caste, and also attention to media reporting of caste-related incidents – most often in the Indian sub-continent (for example, both discrimination against Dalits and affirmative action). Vigilance requires of us careful reflection on how syllabus content on caste may empower or disempower any of our students.

Many classes in schools include no students of South Asian background, but non-South Asian students are likely to meet people of South Asian background and need to learn how caste has contemporary implications – some of them toxic – for some South Asians (not only Hindus) in the UK. This is not merely of academic interest: it can be an emotive subject for those affected by it. Teachers might advise learners to be cautious about asking 'What caste are you?'

This very short article cannot deal with these huge questions in the full necessary depth – we merely suggest pointers towards more balanced, informed and nuanced descriptions of caste to reflect realities better. Here are six suggestions to consider in planning your own ways forward.

1 Do not use resources that are misleading or simplistic. Choose those where nuance and accuracy are valued. Statements like these are bad RE, simplistic and misleading:

- 'Hindu society is divided into four castes, based on the jobs people are born into.'
- 'Sikhism abolished the caste prejudices of Hinduism.'
- 'Brahmins are the highest priestly caste. Shudras are the lowest rank and they exist to serve the three higher castes.'
- 'Caste prejudice used to be a problem in India but has been abolished.'

2 Where syllabuses require the study of concepts like *varnasrama dharma* (this is in all GCSE Hindu specifications), it is important to set the study in a social context of modernity, and to reference ancient texts. Do not be satisfied with simplistic readings of these texts.

3 Consider questions of justice and equality in relation to caste today. Some Hindu voices may wish to assert that current practice does not lead to injustice. This claim needs careful exploration, including in relation to the marginalisation and exploitation of Dalit peoples.

4 Do not teach about caste as if it is a 'Hindu problem' alone. Many Dalit people have become Christians, Sikhs or Buddhists over several centuries, but have not thereby escaped from prejudice and injustice, which is perpetuated in some Christian, Sikh and Buddhist communities.

5 Teach about those within the Hindu community who have challenged caste-based injustice. Use more contemporary and wide-ranging examples than Gandhi:

- Dr B. R. Ambedkar's movement to annihilate caste
- The impact of Pandurang Shastri Athavale's movement to break down caste injustices
- K. R. Narayanan, Dalit President of India, 1997–2002
- Asha Kowtal, who works for Dalit women's rights

6 Good RE does not duck the issue. Our subject often needs to engage with controversy and explore different perspectives, asking what justice might mean to different groups and how it can be established. Make space in your teaching to explore the experiences of caste-based bullying in the UK of some young people in our schools and society, asking questions about prejudice-reduction and fairness.

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This article will be complemented by reading the detailed analysis in Professor Nesbitt's article in the BJRE, 42 (2), 141–151 (April 2020). We also recommend 'Caste: A Personal Perspective' by A. Shukra (pseudonym) in Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Ursula Sharma (eds), *Contextualising Caste* (Sociological Review supplement, 1993), journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1993.tb03405.x