Corporal Punishment in Schools

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The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 prohibits physical punishment and mental harassment. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights has called for elimination of corporal punishment in schools by detailing its varied expressions. However, this tends to address the problem from a legal-constitutional framework but is unlikely to address the tensions which spring from a debilitating and difficult work environment for teachers. It also does not make school managements accountable, choosing to focus only on teachers.

Making Headlines

Children getting beaten up or abused in schools understandably makes for “sensational” news, arousing disgust against teachers. The more violent the nature of the abuse, the more intense is the outrage. An attempt was made to look at cases of CP reported over the past four years (2009-13) in national dailies like, The Hindu, The Times of India, Hindustan Times and The Indian Express. The exercise was not aimed at an exhaustive analysis but simply to understand basic patterns emerging from such reports. The study revealed that children were physically punished, often quite brutally, mentally tortured, humiliated and even sexually abused in schools. CP is rampant in both low cost private, private elite and government schools, both English and vernacular medium. The difference being that the number of private schools where such cases are reported far outnumber the government schools and the similarity being that majority of these schools, irrespective of type appear to cater to disadvantaged sections of the society.

Reports show that news on CP come in from small towns to big cities – places as varied as Bawana, Shahpur, Betul, Mohali, Bargarh, Ahmedabad, Jhunjhunu, Karnal, Madurai, Madanpeta, Prodattur, Coimbatore, 24 Pargana, Dindigul, Jaipur, Alwar, Bhubaneswar, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Calcutta, Delhi and even Mumbai. The nature of punishments ranged from making children squat in the sun, slapping, caning, twisting of arms/ears, punching, forcing them to eat unpalatable items like neem leaves, hitting with a wooden stick, flinging of steel rulers (injuring the eye), locking them up inside toilets, forcing them to do sit-ups for a long time, kneeling for several hours, licking soiled bed sheets, smashing the face against the ground, tying of hands with chains, cutting of hair and even removing leggings and forcing students to walk home in a semi-clad state. Most of these were punishments meted out to children individually but there have also been a few instances reported of the entire class being caned or punished for an apparent misdemeanour. The perpetrators are usually male teachers but female ones too are guilty as are the principals in a few cases.

The reasons for students being punished have been reported to be equally varied – being inattentive in class, non-completion of homework, non-participation in a school event, inability to answer questions, bad handwriting, missing a class without permission, bringing food not recommended by school authorities, playing pranks or singing in class, posting messages against corporal punishment on facebook, non-payment of fees, quarrelling

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with another student, inappropriate hair styles, copying during exams, using a mobile phone in class, bedwetting and even frequent trips to the toilet. The reports show that there is no definite behaviour on the student’s part which provokes the teacher into taking such extreme punitive actions. Gender, religion and age are no major discriminators in children being punished or spared. The ages of the children punished range from four (though fewer in number) to 15 years. It is possible that there is a pattern between the nature of punishment and caste and economic backgrounds of students but it is difficult to establish anything on the basis of merely these newspaper reports. There have been a few such instances, like the case in Madurai where a seven-year-old dalit boy was punched by a classmate as ordered by the teacher because he refused to sweep the floor and a dalit girl was forced to clean the toilets.

Studies conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2007) and National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR 2009-10) corroborate the high prevalence of physical and verbal abuse of children in schools. Some people argue that the actual situation in schools is more grim and such instances convey only the tip of the iceberg. However, it is also true that such cases get media coverage because of their violent nature and also because they are brought to the notice of either the police or the school authorities. It also cannot be denied that such media reports influence not just popular perception but public policies to address such issues.

**Banning Corporal Punishment**

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RtE) Act, 2009, prohibits physical punishment and mental harassment under Section 17(1) and makes it a punishable offence under Section 17(2). The NCPCR in its guidelines for eliminating CP in schools systematically details out varied expressions of physical punishment, mental harassment and discrimination and suggests workshops, sessions by experts and alternative positive measures and therapeutic strategies for teachers. While there is no denying the value of these provisions and guidelines, they both address the problem from a legal-constitutional framework and look for solutions in either deterring the teacher from resorting to CP or changing their attitudes and equipping them with additional skills for addressing difficult situations in schools. The RtE unequivocally holds the errant teacher responsible for punishing children.

The NCPCR recognises the unrealistic pupil teacher ratio (PTR) as one of the problems, leading to overcrowding and unmanageable classes and thereby places the problem within the actual context of a classroom and the real challenges that the teachers face. It recognises the need to coordinate between student, teacher, family, school administration and student council, inclusion of life skills in the curriculum, workshops for both teachers and children and constitution of the CP monitoring committee in schools. It empowers the teachers by actually providing them with some practical tips to use with children in class. However, in its suggestions, it assumes the presence of qualified counsellors, adequate resources within schools to seek professional support, and an enabling and positive environment for teachers as well. Suggestions like, using “I need you to” rather than “you need to”, giving clear commands on what is expected, example, “stay quiet” instead of “be good”, avoiding don’t commands, if behaviour continues, taking away privileges in consultation with children, not giving stars/points/marks, may possibly work when there are fewer students in class and not when one is dealing with 50 or 60 students at once.

Most of these strategies are presented as “corrective measures” that a teacher needs to adopt to modify her attitude, approach and behaviour with children. While the attitudes of teachers punishing children certainly need to be addressed, these attitudes are also socially conditioned and structurally determined and unless these constraints from the school/classroom environment are removed with an equally firm hand, it is difficult to imagine how a democratic environment can be created in schools, where both teachers and students are heard and feel respected.

The guidelines also suggest that all school teachers should provide a written undertaking to the management of the school and to the concerned district authorities that they would not engage in any action that could be construed as amounting to physical punishment, mental harassment and discrimination. This also seems to suggest that there is an inherent tendency on the part of teachers to abuse their power over the children and the fear of legal consequences for their actions, will serve as effective deterrents. While several diktats are being issued to teachers, the school management is simply advised to ensure a fear-free teaching-learning environment in schools but not held accountable in any way.

**Wrong Disciplining**

It is a well-established fact that use of threats, sarcasm and physical abuse of children to either teach or discipline has long-term deleterious consequences for their overall growth. Yet it is justified by those who use it. An attempt is made here to contextualise the problem of “teachers and child abuse” within the immediate context of school and the larger social context in which they are placed.

**Culture of Violence**

The teacher-student relationship is a reflection in so many ways of the parent-child relationship at home, of societal attitudes towards children and the ways considered suitable for disciplining them. The NCPCR study mentioned earlier also indicated continuity between home and school in the ways by which adults controlled children. The image of the teacher as it emerged from the study was that s/he reacts as instinctively towards children as any other adult in society.

Through the ages, there have been various ways in which childhood has been constructed, which in turn has determined the kind of education and more importantly the nature of disciplining considered appropriate for them. Scolding, hitting and using sarcasm to teach children to fall in line, recognise the difference between right and wrong and identify what is good for them is fairly common in Indian homes. Children are used to
being told what to do and use of aggression on part of parents to enforce discipline enjoys social and cultural sanction as there is an underlying assumption that adults know what is good for children by virtue of their age and experience.

Most government schoolteachers across states pointed out that when they called parents to school to discuss their children’s lack of interest in studies or other discipline issues, some of them started hitting their children mercilessly there and then in front of the teacher. In fact some parents even approached the teachers requesting them to be firm with children and if need be, hit them as well. The violence that children witnessed at home often got reflected in their own behaviour with other children both inside and outside the classroom. However, violence was not a feature of disadvantaged homes alone but also middle and upper middle class homes. Some of the online posts commenting on newspaper items read, “If this happened to my kid, I would use a knife and carve up the teacher and then break his bones”. This is an expression of an educated parent who has access to internet and is aware of the way in which such social media/spaces are to be used to express personal views.

Poor Societal Perception of Teachers and Teaching: G B Shaw’s famous quote “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach” still holds true at least in the Indian context. The status of a teacher is directly proportional to the grade which she teaches – the smaller the students, the lesser the status. The fact that teaching is not just considered to be a soft profession but ridiculed as well is evident from some of the online posts on teachers in newspapers, “those who do not have the capacity, capability and intelligence to become doctors, engineers or defense personnel or enter any other profession become teachers. These are people who sat in the last rows during their own school days and perhaps passed with the help of chits or copying from others.”

Another popular perception about teaching is that it is less about professionally acquired skills and more about soft skills, like mothering, caring and good-naturedness. This is evident from another post,

It must always be borne in mind that teaching is one of the noblest professions where one imparts knowledge to others. The teacher must consider his students as his own children and treat them as lovingly and caringly as possible. While teaching students, it must always be kept in mind that they are like flowers. They have to be nurtured with great care to help them blossom and spread their fragrance.

The evident contradiction is quite interesting, to say the least. On one hand, teachers have a poor social image and on the other there are high expectations from them.

A few teachers also pointed out that some parents do not hesitate to ridicule teachers in the presence of their children and even abuse them. Programmes like Bajaate Raho on radio FM where the jockey besides sharing names that he as a student had kept for his own teachers, like Dober (Doberman), Sleeping Beauty, etc, invites the audience to share the nicknames that they had for their teachers, often providing for public entertainment (programme aired on 4 April 2013).

While everyone acknowledges that teachers need to be trained, it is also well known that there is an acute shortage of trained teachers and a large number of states have inadequate professionally trained teachers. Under the circumstances, some states have not only asked for relaxation from the minimum qualifications required for appointment of teachers, as per the National Council of Teacher Education (ncte) norms, but states like Andhra Pradesh have gone a step further in finding alternative training sites. Recently, the Commissioner and Director of School Education in Andhra Pradesh suggested that besides making stringent laws to prevent cp, the police will be roped in to lecture teachers on it and a strict background check will be done on them. A teacher will be recruited by schools only after she/he produces a “conduct certificate” from the police based on previous school record (TNN, 19 February 2013).

A distinction needs to be made between the process of recruiting and that of training teachers. Both are different but interrelated and care needs to be taken to not just revamp existing teacher education curriculum and increase the duration of such training, but also exercise utmost caution in selecting candidates for this profession. Instead of looking for shortcuts, by employing untrained, underqualified and underpaid people on short-term contracts, the training and selection procedures need to be made much more stringent and rigorous.

Debilitating Work Environment for Teachers: Though the RTE mandates several features to improve the quality of elementary education, the situation in schools is far from desirable. It is not difficult to comprehend the implications of teacher shortage on the workload and stress levels of those few around with the most obvious manifestation being the unfavourable pupil teacher ratio (PTR). Teachers are known to handle classes with as many as 70 to 80 children. Contrary to popular perception, teaching small children requires a specialised set of skills and abilities. The problem gets compounded where a single teacher is managing a large class and the immediate challenge is as basic as making children sit in their places.

The school management’s perception of an “ideal classroom environment” is often linked to ways in which they view effective teaching. Teachers are expected to maintain pin-drop silence in class and this is often considered the single criteria of evaluating their competence. “If a teacher tries to practise democratic principles in class and as a result, there is noise and confusion, then he is projected as being weak”, said a teacher in a Sarvodaya school.

The lack of basic infrastructural facilities such as drinking water, toilets, playgrounds, even classrooms and libraries and laboratories, also add to the stress levels of both students and teachers. A mere attitudinal change on the part of teachers and employing positive strategies with children are unlikely to address the tensions which spring from such a debilitating and difficult work environment.

Does RTE Empower Teachers?

The RTE recognises the long overdue rights of children – the need to provide them with free, uniform and good quality
education and a positive, safe and robust teaching-learning environment where children are treated with dignity.

However, a few provisions in the RTE like the no detention policy, continuous and comprehensive evaluation and the ban against any form of punishment has caused some concern for teachers. While continuously and comprehensively evaluating children around a huge range of parameters and not detaining them has ensured that the school environment has become less stressful and that children seamlessly climb the educational ladder, there seems to be no one accountable in ensuring that children learn and learn well.

Following the ban on punishment, almost all teachers expressed that it was a positive step and that instances of blatantly hitting children in schools had reduced. They also felt that the term “mental harassment” was vague and open to interpretation since this clause treated all teachers like potential criminals and also regarded all children as being alike. Teachers were empathetic in their assertion that not all teachers abused their authority with children nor used punitive measures indiscriminately. The NCPCR study also suggests that the majority of children were penalised for academic reasons.

Teachers also expressed that polices such as these were essentially formulated on the basis of a few exceptional cases and media reports had an important role to play in this. They said that there were a few rowdy students in each class who were destructive and disturbed not just other students but also abused and assaulted teachers. A teacher teaching in West Bengal pointed out that in his school, in the past one year, he had seen at least three instances of teachers being beaten up by big male students because they were reprimanded for their bad behaviour.

A blanket ban on any form of punishment also made the teachers a bit apprehensive about dealing firmly with even the rowdy children fearing that any firm cajoling on their part may result in a complaint against them. In this context, an old senior government schoolteacher expressed his anguish thus, “now when the class becomes unmanageable and I know that scolding children may put me in difficulty, I simply leave the class and sit in the staffroom. I know that this is wrong and sincere students have to pay the price of indiscipline on part of a few others but then I am left with no choice.”

Most of his colleagues had adopted the attitude of complete indifference towards such students. However, they also lamented that children coming from weak backgrounds who need more support are the ones who ultimately suffer most both academically and otherwise since their parents are not in a position to support them and teachers are now more concerned about their own safety.

There is no denying the fact that the RTE somewhere tries to curtail the absolute authority of teachers in the classroom and attempts to end violence perpetrated by them on children. This is also in tandem with the constructivist understanding of the child and teaching-learning processes to be employed according to the National Curriculum Framework 2005. However, taken to the other extreme, if it is interpreted as “inability to say anything to the child” that may cause discomfort or be viewed as harassment, then the teachers by adopting a safe route may end up harming students who actually need more help.

**Combating the Menace**

Media reports and studies such as those conducted by the NCPCR highlight the urgency with which the problem of CP needs to be addressed. While banning it is certainly a welcome measure, the real challenge lies in the creation of an environment in schools where children are not disrespected and abused and teachers do not feel threatened and helpless and where teachers teach and children learn. By blaming the teachers’ attitudes alone, placing drop boxes for complaints against them, making them sign undertakings, policing them and equipping them with additional behavioural strategies to deal with difficult situations, we may succeed in deterring them from abusing children or helping them cope with a few difficult circumstances in school. However, taken to the other extreme, if teachers are forced to view any conflicting situation in school as being potentially detrimental to their welfare and avoid confronting students under all circumstances, children may suffer, although differently! In fact, those children who need maximum support and guidance perhaps suffer more because teachers become indifferent towards both their academic and overall growth.

Child abuse happens in multiple social contexts and the school is one such site and teachers are one among the many perpetrators of violence against them. A mere attitudinal change on the part of teachers shifts the blame on the personal make-up of the teacher and takes away the responsibility of correcting several wrongs in schools and the larger society.

Taking cognisance of the actual situation in most Indian schools, the approach for addressing the problem of CP needs to be more holistic, with greater involvement of parents, students, school management and teachers as well, rather than viewing it as a situation, where teachers are placed under constant vigil and penalised for any slip-up. In addition, schools need adequate number of educated and trained teaching staff along with qualified counsellors, proper infrastructural facilities and reasonable PTR. An enabling and empowering environment needs to be created for both students and teachers where teachers apart from being held accountable are also involved in important decisions related to school, children and teaching-learning and not merely viewed as managers of learning.

**NOTES**

1 Objectives of the study were to study the scale and magnitude of CP in the everyday school experiences of India’s children. A total of 6,632 children were interviewed across seven states of AP, Delhi, MP, Orissa, Rajasthan, TN and West Bengal, out of which 6,623, i.e., 99.86% children reported experiencing some form of punishment.

2 Detailed interviews were conducted with a few teachers teaching in both private and government schools in Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Delhi, Haryana and Punjab.

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