

Ponga!

“Ponga! Veleya par!” That is Tamil for “Go! Do your walk!” I first learned these words within a week of arriving in India, when I was taught to shout them at stray dogs that bothered me. I am scared of dogs so I never forgot that phrase. Five months later I heard it for the first time directed at another person. I was teaching a children’s English class in the small fishing village of Pudupattinam Kuppam, at the request of an enthusiastic 12-year-old named Mahindra. Mahindra had become my trusted friend because of his kind personality and his readiness to help me navigate my way in the village. I was struggling to lead a lively game of bingo when a gypsy girl I recognized stopped by the open door of our modest thatched roof classroom. I smiled and motioned for her to join us, and as she eagerly approached, Mahindra walked towards her and said something that instantly cloaked her sweet face with sadness. I stood there puzzled as they quarreled, wishing I could understand their language. And then I heard “Ponga!” and the girl ran away as a tear dripped down her cheek, and Mahindra nonchalantly returned to his bingo card.

I was confused and asked Mahindra what happened, why did she leave? He dismissively remarked that the girl could not come to class. I was skeptical and continued to question him until he mumbled that the girl’s mother did not allow her to attend. I trusted Mahindra but not his story. There was something unsettling about the situation, but I was unsure of what to do. I was confident that Mahindra had sent the girl away because she was a gypsy, which is wrong. However I knew that Mahindra was a

genuinely good kid, and not at all mean spirited. I realized he was simply trying to protect what he believed himself to be entitled and the gypsies to be unworthy—an education. His place in the caste system was defined by his level of education, and if a gypsy were allowed the same access to education, it would threaten his social superiority.

Education and power are directly correlated, as is illustrated in India as well as in the United States. The relationship was particularly acute in 19th century America, as Frederick Douglass exposes in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave*. Slaves were denied an education and forcefully kept illiterate so that they could not challenge their social standing. The division between slaves and slaveholders was therefore not only a distinction between the blacks and the whites, but between the uneducated and the educated. As racism has evolved in the United States it is increasingly defined by a person's level of education as much as his physical attributes. If race is a social construct then its roots are educational disparities, and decreasing racism will stem from increasing education.

Frederick Douglass explains that it was illegal to teach a slave to read and write. When his Master Auld discovered that his wife had been showing Douglass the alphabet, he scolded her because “learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world...it would forever unfit him to be a slave”(45). This implies that being a “nigger” mandates being uneducated. It was practical to keep slaves illiterate because their lack of education justified the menial nature of their work. If slaves had been allowed greater intellectual pursuits, it would be wasteful to use them simply for labor. Furthermore, if slaves were educated they would more easily challenge the slaveholders and the slave system. They already knew that slavery was wrong on a human level, but if given the tools of education

they would be mentally empowered and be less likely to accept that their calling in life was to obey their masters and nothing more. Denying education was necessary for maintaining slavery, and what kept the slaves in bondage was not their African descent but their lack of schooling; whites could have enslaved other whites in the same manner and created two races as distinct as black and white.

People in power restrict the learning of others for fear of losing their privilege. Those who are educated have a significant advantage over those who are not. The educated may fear that they will lose their advantage if others are equally qualified; the more educated persons there are, the less valuable each educated person becomes. In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass is working as a carpenter in a shipyard alongside both white and black carpenters. He explains that there never used to be any conflict among the workers, until white workers began to grow anxious that “if free colored carpenters were encouraged, they would soon take the trade into their own hands, and poor white men would be thrown out of employment”(95). This illustrates the sentiment that it is in the best interest of those with a skill to protect themselves by preventing others from obtaining that skill, even if it may be detrimental to society as a whole.

The social hierarchy found in Frederick Douglass’ work can be compared to that in India. In India, racism exists in the form of the caste system. A person’s caste assignment dictates the level of education he will obtain as well as the professions for which he is eligible. However, limited education is not only the result of the caste system in India, but also a cause. Mahindra did not command the gypsy girl to leave because he is a bully, but because it is engrained in him that it is not her place to be in class with

him. It is irrefutably accepted that he is superior to her. To be perfectly honest, the primary reason Mahindra and I grew so close is because he spoke English. I knew and cared for the gypsy girl and the other children, but we could not understand each other in the same capacity simply because we could not communicate verbally. Mahindra's linguistic skills not only enabled him to know foreigners, but also afforded him leadership roles within his village because we depended on him as an interpreter. That gave him power, and even as a child he was compelled to protect it. He felt that as someone of a relatively higher caste he was entitled to learn English, but the gypsy girl was not; Mahindra's social role was to learn, and hers was to clean. If she were able to speak English, his value as an English speaker would decrease and he would lose his advantage, blurring the line of distinction between him and the gypsy.

Although racism is clearly supported through educational injustice, it may be more complicated to neutralize educational disparities than to maintain them. As much as the societies of India and the United States may develop, the presence of a lowest class remains static. It is not only difficult to open the minds of the privileged, but also daunting for the uneducated to make a comfortable transition to becoming educated. Frederick Douglass said "to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one"(98). The idea is repeatedly presented that slaves are only happy if they do not know better. If a person begins the learning process but is unable, due to personal or societal forces, to achieve a greater social status, is he better off for it? In India, there is a debate surrounding the introduction of modern cinema into slums and rural villages. Some argue that these movies are a positive influence because they enable the impoverished individual to see a world more that is more luxurious than his own and allow him to

imagine a more fruitful life. Others argue that this is dangerous because a poor person could never realistically afford such a lifestyle, and being exposed to it only makes him more painfully aware of the injustice of his own circumstances. As Frederick Douglass began reading more and more, he became increasingly upset with slavery, but he was still trapped as a slave. He proclaimed that “learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing” (51) because his heightened awareness made him feel more vulnerable and violated. Ultimately, learning to read was the greatest tool Douglass could have been given, and his literacy was the reason he gained freedom.

The interplay between racism and education is not a distant concept that only takes place in India and 19th century America, but one that is visible in modern America. There are no longer explicit laws preventing groups of people from becoming literate, but there are subtle ones. For example, most public schools only teach in English, making it much more difficult for immigrant children to become educated. There are various justifications for this and it is not innately an oppressive tactic; however it can put immigrants at a significant disadvantage. The reality is that the way our society and our economy are set up, we are dependent upon having an uneducated class to do the work that the privileged and educated will not. In slave times, someone had to pick the cotton; in India, someone has to clean the latrines; in modern America, someone has to work at McDonald’s. It is the way the world functions, but it need not be. It is a myth that for everything a person has another person must be deprived. Education is not a limited resource. Knowledge will not run out, and one individual’s intelligence will not decrease another’s.

After the gypsy girl fled the classroom, I felt frozen. As a teacher, I had the right to allow any student into the classroom. But as a foreigner and a guest to the culture, it was not my place to challenge the social structure. I was torn. I was a witness to injustice but felt too insecure to take action; a 12 year old can be more intimidating than one might think. I resumed the game of bingo, but the gypsy girl would not leave my mind. I pulled Mahindra to the side and told him to find her and bring her back to class. He was hesitant at first and did not respond to my words, until he looked into my eyes and saw that I meant it. I looked back into his and saw a sliver of shame. He realized on some level that what he had done was wrong. I felt a small pinch of self-conscious gratification, because maybe I had achieved the romantic cliché of changing the mind of a child. The gypsy girl would continue to come to class and play with the other children when I was there, but eventually I left and the cruel playground dynamic returned—the gypsy would only come to the classroom after dusk, to sweep.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Ed.

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