

Dalit and Unequal: Child's book corrects misperceptions

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NEW DELHI -- It has been called essential reading for every Indian child, a lively illustrated storybook aimed at raising youthful awareness of the injustices of the country's caste system, much as "Uncle Tom's Cabin" exposed the indignities of slavery to white America.

Kancha Ilaiah hopes his book, "Turning the Pot, Tilling the Land: Dignity of Labour in Our Times," will change the way young people see farmhands, barbers, leather workers and others whose jobs are viewed with disgust by upper castes. The social activists who have lauded the book hope so, too.

"Turning the Pot" is the first Indian children's book to openly challenge the 3,000-year-old caste system, which ranks professions from scholars to shoemakers in a rigid hierarchy and is reinforced by some interpretations of Hindu theology.

"This book is a weapon for India's millions of low-caste children who are fighting for respect, just as African Americans did and do in the U.S.," said Ilaiah, who also wrote the best-selling anti-caste book "Why I Am Not a Hindu." "How do you change ancient prejudices in any society? You do it through repositioning caste at childhood. If young children are taught respect over a bedtime story or in class, that could help enormously."

In the book, Ilaiah tries to highlight the achievements of low-caste workers.

"Weavers discovered how cotton is spun into cloth. Laundry men discovered the country's first cleaning detergent and saved us from diseases," he writes. "Farmers nurtured us with cereals, pulses, fruits and vegetables. Why not respect those who produce our food?"

India's school textbooks were revised in 2005 to include a history of discrimination against lower castes, but Ilaiah and others say the books must go further and also teach children respect for lower castes. The Indian government, led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has called the caste system "a blot on humanity," is considering buying Ilaiah's book for some public schools.

"It's a hugely important book," said Samphe D. Lhalungpa, chief of education for UNICEF in India, which has bought 3,000 copies to distribute in schools. "The school system has a critical role to play. Every Indian child should read it."

Books about caste come at a critical juncture for this developing country, analysts say. Instead of dissolving caste, India's rising prosperity is driving an economic wedge between the higher castes, who work in gleaming skyscrapers, and the lower castes, who build them.

"There has actually never been a more important time to teach to the next generation that dignity for all labor is a human right," Ilaiah said.

Upper- and middle-caste children in India often grow up with domestic servants, including maids, personal chefs, door openers and dog walkers. In many such families, Indian children are never asked to clean their rooms, wash the dishes or empty trash, because such tasks are seen as beneath them.

Ilaiah hopes that children will learn to see that's not the case. "Today, Manolo Blahnik, Jimmy Choo and Christian Louboutin are famous cobblers known for designer footwear at over \$750 a pair," he said. "In India, because of the caste system, people who did this work were labeled 'untouchables' and forced to live away from the main village. They were not allowed to prosper."

So far, the response to Ilaiah's book from some upper-caste parents has been uneasy.

"There is no need to grill our kids on caste," said Rattan Lal, 45, a member of the Brahmin caste who was shopping for books with his 13-year-old daughter. "Any kind of education about caste would only be dividing the country. It's drawing too much attention to the issue in the first place."

Shopping nearby, Anahita Singh, 33, who also hails from a higher caste, said she felt that the issues might be painful but

that they had to be discussed. "I want my child to grow up as a balanced human being who should never pass judgment based on caste," she said.

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