

# A Muslim student, a bigoted teacher, a snickering audience: As a teacher, I've seen the heavy burden of casual Islamophobia

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A student in Manipal University was called 'Kasab' by a professor. A screengrab of the incident. (Twitter)

***Written by Nupur Samuel***

The recent incident of an **MIT student in Karnataka calling out his teacher for Islamophobia** in front of the entire class brought back some disturbing memories. More than a decade ago, I was teaching in one of South Delhi's elite schools, which prided itself on being an inclusive space for children. One day, as I stepped into a classroom full of teenagers, amidst a cacophony of sounds, I heard a group of boys call another a "terrorist". I froze, stunned by what I had heard. I looked around me but it seemed no one else seemed disturbed. I was new to teaching and dithered about my next step. I did not want to reprimand the students as that was not my style, and I never saw merit in power or force bringing about any meaningful change. Neither did I want to embarrass the one at the receiving end of such an unthinking, unreasonable allegation. I decided to engage them head-on: "Why did you call him a terrorist?" I asked. The students blinked, not expecting a direct line of questioning. Like all people who blindly endorse stereotypes, they found that any reasonable response would expose their own pettiness about this Muslim boy from Old Delhi.

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Instead, they countered it exactly like the teacher in the video does — by passing it off as a joke, by claiming kinship with the boy. Lightly shrugging his shoulders, one said, “Ma’am, he is our friend. We are just joking.”

“He doesn’t mind,” said another, and to support him, another chimed in, “See, he is smiling.”

For the first time, I turned my attention to their classmate, unwittingly the centre of attention, and like any teenager, hoping he was not. His lips were turned upward in a lopsided way but the humour (if he saw it in their joke) did not reach his eyes. He seemed rather embarrassed by my determination to address it; but I could not let something like this slide on my watch. For those thirty-five minutes every day, these youngsters were my responsibility, and I was accountable for what they learnt, not only through textbooks but through what transpired between us, amongst us. I also knew enough about teenagers to realise that this kid was playing along with his friends because he did not want to be ostracised from their company, nor did he want to be labelled as not “cool” enough.

Coming from Old [Delhi](#) to a posh South Delhi school, trying to fit in with the majority, the elite, he simply wanted approval, camaraderie, and everything else that belonging to such a group afforded. And here I was – disrupting any hard-wrought semblance of harmony, or privilege. With sudden clarity, I saw more than those casual shrugs, or the half-smile. The invisible yet heavy burden of prejudice that lay on these young shoulders was all but clear. It was not funny being labelled a terrorist by your friends or classmates any less than it was being called a terrorist by your own teacher.

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Has anything changed in the last decade? What is striking in the viral video is that the student who confronts the teacher is alone. He is surrounded by a bunch of silent spectators or worse — snickering and giggling classmates. It is remarkable that during the long exchange between the student and the teacher, no one thought they should stand by their friend. Would it be too hasty to blame it on the education system that reduces the world to snippets that can be put out in MCQ tests? This way, an entire cohort learns no critical thinking, no debate, no nuance, no standing up for what’s right, but just acquiescence for grades, and later, for salary.

It is not funny; in fact, it is long overdue that we call out the bully, and call out the sick humour as a malady, and not accept it as the norm. By calling out the bully — in this case, a teacher with more power and more influence than a group of apparently innocuous teenagers — the MIT (Udupi) student did what many of us have not been able to do with dignity or reason. In the video, the student can be seen gesticulating with his hands to emphasise each point he makes, countering the teacher’s feeble attempts with a sincere demand for respect.

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When called out for his inappropriate remarks, the teacher has no plausible reasons to offer. Instead, like all bullies and bigots, he invokes the idea of family to find an escape route: “You are just like my son,” he reasons. The student takes a hard stand: “No, if my father says it, I will disown him.” In the last few years, haven’t we had to let go of friends and, in some cases, kin, for similar reasons? Someone laughs in the background, and taking a cue from that, the teacher claims, “But it is a funny thing.” What the student says with emphasis must become the motto, against injustice, of every school, college, and institution: “No, it’s not. It is not funny, Sir.”

More than suspension of the teacher, or other knee-jerk measures that address the immediate rather than the pervasive, we need sensitisation, so that the normalisation of the “othering” of minorities is checked. We have done this with some success by removing derogatory or disconcerting terms such as “disabled”, “chamar” or “hijra” from our everyday public spaces and discourses, at least in educational institutions and professional spaces. Both the MIT teacher and the Karnataka education minister, who dismissed the incident as nothing serious, failed to lead the more impressionable, gullible, and less powerful entrusted in their care towards creating spaces of inclusivity, respect, and peaceful coexistence. They have failed. We must not.

The writer is an associate professor at OP Jindal Global University. Views expressed are personal.

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