

THE BACKWARD CLASS



Lead Sponsor



Exclusive Education Partner



Supported by



Additional support is provided by the Andy and Beth Burgess Family Foundation, Charles H. Ivey Foundation, the Hal Jackman Foundation, CineSend and through contributions by individual donors.

THE BACKWARD CLASS

Directed by Madeleine Grant

2014 | Canada | 91 min

TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of *The Backward Class* by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussions with their class, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some weblinks that provide starting points for further research or discussion.

The Film

The students of Shanti Bhavan residential school in Bangalore, India, imagine a future that defies their "untouchable" caste. Ostracized and oppressed by virtue of birth alone, the young men and women of Shanti Bhavan's Grade 12 class intend to break a cycle entrenched for generations by becoming the first Dalit students in India's history to undertake the national Indian School Certificate exams. After 13 years of preparation, the students nervously focus on exam day. As pressure mounts, confidence wavers. Inflation has made it difficult to attract good teachers and questions arise as to whether or not the class is ready for the exam challenge. Some students crack under the weight of parental expectations, while others fear bad luck will forever seal their fate. With their futures hanging in the balance, the students look to one another for support in this powerful testimonial from those who refuse to be silenced. **Michelle Latimer**

Source: <http://www.hotdocs.ca/>

The Filmmaker

Madeleine Grant is a graduate of the University of British Columbia's Film Production program. Her previous work has played at numerous international film festivals, including the Vancouver International Film Festival and the Montreal World Film Festival. In 2014 Madeleine's first feature documentary *The Backward Class* had its world premiere at the Hot Docs International Film Festival, where it won the Audience Choice Award. Grant was also the recipient of the Hot Docs Lindalee Tracey Award, in honour of an emerging Canadian filmmaker whose work displays a passionate point of view, a strong sense of social justice, and a certain joie de vivre. After five years of dividing her time between rural India and Canada, Grant is currently predominantly based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Source: <http://www.thebackwardclass.com/index.php/filmmakers/>

Educational package written and compiled by Riisa Walden
riisa.walden@gmail.com

VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

The following three subsections are intended to provide you with a range of Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes and a page of weblinks for further investigation.

Pre-Viewing Activities

Show students the movie poster for *The Backward Class* (<http://www.imdb.com/> Search "The Backward Class"). Have students work in pairs or small groups to compile all of the information about the setting, topic and themes for the film they can gain from the poster. Then ask them to make predictions about what the film will be about. Discuss with students the various meanings of the word "class." Now watch the movie trailer (<http://www.thebackwardclass.com/> Click on Trailer). As a class, discuss how effective/affective the trailer and poster are as media texts. Ask students to discuss which meaning of the word "class" is most important for this film.

Discuss and clarify the concepts of "caste systems" and "untouchables" as a class. As a class, read about the history of the caste system in India (<http://www.ushistory.org/> Type "caste system" into the search function of the website).

Ask students whether they perceive class divisions within Canadian society. How are these divisions similar or different from the way castes have functioned in India?

Have students consider the word "untouchable." What ideas come to mind in association with this word?

In pairs, ask students to discuss this question: Do people define themselves as individuals or are we defined more by factors like where we live, our family background, our sex (male or female), or our ethnic, national or racial heritage? Share responses to this question as a class.

Viewing Activities

Have students complete the PBS viewing guide on documentaries (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/docs/Copies%20of%20Viewing%20Guide.pdf>). Students can revisit their completed documents as a Post-Viewing Activity.

Have students jot down three to five ideas for discussion, or questions that the film raises in their minds. As an Extension and/or Post-Viewing Activity, students can enter their questions into an online response or polling system and can vote on the questions or issues they would like to explore in further detail. Encourage students to use multiple levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Have students make notes on one or more of the individuals from the film. How do they view the way people from the untouchable caste are treated? Do you sympathize with their concerns and why? How has the Shanti Bhavan school benefitted them?

Post-Viewing Activities

Discuss with students their initial reactions to the film, the featured individuals, their experience at Shanti Bhavan, their life beyond the school and the caste system in India. Did the students' feelings evolve over the course of the film?

What were students' initial perceptions of the caste system in India, and how does this compare and contrast with their perceptions of the caste system, the school, the students, teachers and administrators after viewing the film? Using this as a prompt, have students write a two-paragraph response.

Have students participate in a Socratic discussion on the film. Guidelines for Socratic discussions can be found here: <http://www.authenticeducation.org/documents/WhatSeminar04.pdf>

If prior to the film students discussed the question, "Do people define themselves as individuals or are we defined more by factors like where we live, our family background, our sex (male or female) or our ethnic, national or racial heritage?" return to this question to see if their opinions have been changed by the film.

Have students choose one of the events or stories from the film and write a diary entry as if they were part of the event.

Have students complete an exit note. The exit note should contain one idea that demonstrates what they learned from the film, as well as one question that they still have about the topic.

Have students create a list of similar and different characteristics between their school and experience as students in comparison to what they have seen in the film.

The students in the film are preparing to take the ISC (Indian School Certificate) exam. The exam results will determine whether they can apply to universities and to which universities and programs. Have a class debate about the value of standardized entrance exams in any country. Would this be a good system to implement in Canada? Are there groups of Canadians who would be unfairly disadvantaged by this kind of standardized exam?

At one point in the film, the teacher Lalita Law tells students, "Even if you're grazing cows, nothing you learn in life is ever wasted." Have students write a journal entry about a lesson they have learned from a life experience outside of school.

Introduce students to the word "Dalit" as the term more prevalently being used to talk about the untouchable caste. "The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit root dal- and means 'broken, ground-down, downtrodden, or oppressed.' Those previously known as Untouchables, Depressed Classes and Harijans are today increasingly adopting the term "Dalit" as a name for themselves." (Source: <http://www.ncdhr.org.in/dalits-untouchability/>). Have students discuss or write about why changing this terminology may be important for the group formerly known as "untouchable."

WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

About the Film

<http://www.thebackwardclass.com>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/BackwardClass>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/thebackwardclass>

Additional Resources

BBC News: The article "India's Dalits Still Fighting Untouchability" from June 27, 2012, offers clear modern examples of caste discrimination despite the practice being banned by India's constitution.

<http://www.bbc.com/> Type the name of the article into the search function of the website.

CBC: Jason D'Souza's article "Indian Caste System in Canada Called 'a Disease' Worse Than Racism" from May 28, 2015, explores the legacy of India's caste system within Canadian society for Canadians of Indian descent.

<https://www.cbc.ca/> Type the name of the article into the search function of the website.

Encyclopaedia Britannica: The entries on "caste" and "untouchable" offer detailed explanations of the origination of the caste system in India, as well as the particularities of the untouchable caste within that system.

<http://www.britannica.com/> Type in the search words "caste" and "untouchable" into the search function of the website.

How Stuff Works: "Discovery Atlas: Indian Caste System" is a very brief video introducing the Indian caste system and the place of untouchables within it.

<http://www.howstuffworks.com/> Type the title of the video into the search function of the website.

International Dalit Solidarity Network: This organization's website offers detailed information and resources on caste discrimination in India and other countries where caste-based discrimination exists.

<http://idsn.org>

Quart.us: A brief resource, helpful for younger learners, to teach about the Indian caste system with an accompanying activity to support learning.

<http://quatr.us/> Type "Indian Castes" into the search function of the website and "Caste Project" to access the activity.

Shanti Bhavan Children's Project: This website offers extensive details about the mission and work of the Shanti Bhavan school for further investigation into the institution and the students.

<http://www.shantibhavanonline.org>

The Globe and Mail: In a feature investigation called "Breaking Caste," journalist Stephanie Nolan offers a detailed look into the Prerna school in India, another educational initiative that is helping to educate Dalit girls.

www.theglobeandmail.com/ Type "Breaking Caste" into the search function of the website.

The New York Times: Lydia Polgreen's article "Scaling Caste Walls with Capitalism's Ladders in India" from December 21, 2011, reveals how India's changing economy is providing some people from the untouchable caste opportunities that were previously unimaginable.

<https://www.nytimes.com/> Type the title of the article into the search function of the website.

The Toronto Star: The article "Director Lived Like Student to Make *The Backward Class*" from February 5, 2015, explores how Madeline Grant's volunteer experience at Shanti Bhavan led to the making of the documentary.

<http://www.thestar.com> Type the title of the article into the search function of the website.

United Nations: The video "The Untouchables—India," created by the United Nations, explores the historical and ongoing plight of untouchable communities in India as well as attempts to achieve greater equality.

<http://www.youtube.com/> Type the title of the video into the search function of the website.

Various Links for Lesson Plan Ideas, Media Awareness, Critical Literacy and Documentary Films

Center for Media Literacy: A US website which provides resources for making, understanding and criticizing media.

<http://www.medialit.org>

Media Awareness: A Canadian non-profit media education and Internet literacy resource library.

<http://www.media-awareness.ca>

NFB: Valuable education resources for the classroom.

<http://www.nfb.ca>

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Questions for Pre-Viewing or Post-Viewing Activities

Before viewing the film: What do you already know about India? What issues do you expect to find in a film about a school in India? After viewing the film: How did the film fit with or differ from your expectations?

What are the different issues and themes that surface in this film?

Which student in the film stood out to you the most? What about him or her had an impact on you and why?

What are the differences in the experience of poverty for girls, as opposed to boys, in the film?

What are some of the challenges that Dr. Abraham George has experienced in starting and supporting the Shanti Bhavan school?

How do the education system and the students in the film compare to your school?

What is the significance of the title of this film? Why is the class described as "backward"?

At points in the film, we have the opportunity to see what conditions are like in the students' homes. What are some of the conditions that you see in the film?

Commentators in this film talk about our responsibility to help children who are disadvantaged have opportunities to succeed. Do you agree with this responsibility? What are some of the challenges expressed when it comes to helping others in this way?

The Shanti Bhavan school offers an educational opportunity to only one member of untouchable families so that they can offer assistance to as many families as possible. Is this a good decision?

Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Abraham George's statement that "it's not a shortage of money that keeps people poor, poverty is a result of lack of opportunity"?

Do you think that a school like Shanti Bhavan can make a real change in Indian society?

QUOTATIONS FROM THE FILM TO EXPLORE

1. *"I was in fourth grade when I returned home to find no father to carry me. It was worse than the pangs of hunger I felt when I was three."* Sindhu Manimala (Mala) Muniswamy
2. *"My father does not view child labour as evil, because, in addition to being uneducated, he began earning for his family at the age of 10."* Vijay Kumar Veerapan
3. *"Not everyone fits easily into one neat box, including myself."* Mahalakshmi Keshavan
4. *"If I can create an institution, Shanti Bhavan, that would take a few children and give them the best care and the best education and they become leaders of tomorrow, they will carry with them hundreds of others, their own families and elsewhere."* Abraham George
5. *"When we talk about the poor, so often it is talk about getting them off the streets or getting them a job so that they don't starve. But we never talk about getting excellence for the poor."* Abraham George
6. *"It occurred to me that it's not a shortage of money that keeps people poor, poverty is a result of lack of opportunity."* Abraham George
7. *"Even if you're grazing cows, nothing you learn in life is ever wasted."* Lalita Law
8. *"My father hasn't gone to school one day of his life. From the age of 10, he started earning for his family. My mother—see, generally when a daughter gets married, she goes to her husband's house. So then, even if she earns money, it goes to somebody else. But if the son earns money, he looks after the parents. So the parents feel that it's no use educating their daughters."* Vijay Kumar Veerapan
9. *"What gives us the right to pluck these children out of their families, and their homes, and their villages or slums and say that we have something better in store for them? If we can be so boastful and conceited, then we better live up to our promises or we shouldn't touch them. Then I think they'll be happier where they are."* Lalita Law
10. *"Being born a boy of the slums, society demands that I see myself as a loser, a person to remain poor all of his life. No. I see a different picture."* Anith Kumar Jeeva
11. *"Before I was very confused, 'What do I do?' 'What do I think about myself?'... I'm a mixture of both the standards of education and the virtues that [Shanti Bhavan] has given me and what background I belong to, so sometimes I have this shattered identity problem."* Sindhu Manimala (Mala) Muniswamy
12. *"The Shanti Bhavan children have taught me something invaluable, a lesson that must be engraved on the minds of everyone. It's an idea that given the right opportunities, all children, regardless of their background, can indeed realize their full potential. It is up to the rest of us to make this happen."* Abraham George

CULMINATING ACTIVITY: MAKING CONNECTIONS

Students watching *The Backward Class* have the opportunity to observe the challenges, aspirations and fears of students from a disadvantaged class in Indian society. Despite differences in context, there are likely shared experiences and feelings as students between the viewer and the students featured in the film.

Have students write a letter to one of the students in the film. The letter should ask questions about the Indian student's school life as well as sharing experiences of school in Canada.

Students should also include at least three pictures of aspects of their school life in the letter with clear explanations about why they wanted to share these images.

ACTIVITY RUBRIC: MAKING CONNECTIONS

Knowledge and Understanding

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Understanding of the similarities and differences between two different school environments	Student demonstrates a limited understanding of the similarities and differences between his/her school and the school in the film	Student demonstrates a moderate understanding of the similarities and differences between his/her school and the school in the film	Student demonstrates a considerable understanding of the similarities and differences between his/her school and the school in the film	Student demonstrates a high level of understanding of the similarities and differences between his/her school and the school in the film	/5

Thinking and Inquiry

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Ability to ask informed and thoughtful questions and to think about connections	Student demonstrates a limited ability to ask informed and thoughtful questions	Student demonstrates a satisfactory ability to ask informed and thoughtful questions	Student demonstrates a good ability to ask informed and thoughtful questions	Student demonstrates an outstanding ability to ask informed and thoughtful questions	/5
Thinks critically about what information to share about school life in Canada	Student applies limited thought in selecting information to share about school life in Canada; includes fewer than three photographs	Student applies some thought in selecting information to share about school life in Canada, but may have difficulty including three relevant photographs	Student applies considerable thought in selecting information to share about school life in Canada, and has included three photographs	Student applies a high degree of thought in selecting information to share about school life in Canada, and has included three highly relevant photographs	/5

Application

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Applying the conventions of letter writing	Student applies the conventions of letter writing with a limited degree of effectiveness	Student applies the conventions of letter writing with some degree of effectiveness	Student applies the conventions of letter writing with a considerable degree of effectiveness	Student applies the conventions of letter writing with a high degree of effectiveness	/5

Communication

	2.5 2.9	3.0 3.4	3.5 3.9	4.0 5	
Quality of communication	The letter contains numerous grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors, and communicates ideas with limited clarity	The letter contains some grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors, and communicates ideas with some clarity	The letter is largely free of grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors, and communicates ideas with considerable clarity	The letter is free of grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors, and communicates ideas with exceptional clarity	/5

Comments:

Total: _____ /25

EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

COURSE	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Grade 7 & 8 Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes. • generate, gather and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience. • draft and revise their writing, using a variety of informational, literary and graphic forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience. • use editing, proofreading and publishing skills and strategies, and knowledge of language conventions, to correct errors, refine expression and present their work effectively. • demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts. • identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.
Grades 9–12 English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes. • generate, gather and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience. • draft and revise their writing, using a variety of literary, informational, and graphic forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience. • use editing, proofreading and publishing skills and strategies, and knowledge of language conventions, to correct errors, refine expression and present their work effectively. • demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts. • identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.
Grade 10–12 Media Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate an understanding of the critical analysis process by examining, interpreting, assessing and reflecting on media art works. • demonstrate an understanding of how media art works reflect personal and cultural identity, and affect personal, cultural and community values and their awareness of those values. • demonstrate an understanding of the sociocultural and historical contexts of media arts. • demonstrate an understanding of responsible practices associated with producing, presenting and experiencing media art works.
Grade 11 World History Since 1900: Global and Regional Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze the relationship between the individual and those in authority in various societies since 1900. • demonstrate an understanding of the variety of cultural expressions throughout the world since the beginning of the 20th century. • describe major features of economic life since 1900.
Grade 12 World History: The West and the World	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze a variety of types of communities that have evolved since the 16th century. • assess various types of interactions that have occurred among diverse peoples and cultures, and the impact of these interactions, since the 16th century. • assess the range and diversity of concepts of citizenship and human rights that have developed since the 16th century. • describe diverse social structures and principles that have guided social organization in Western and non-Western societies since the 16th century. • analyze changing aspects of women's economic, social and political lives in Western and non-Western societies since the 16th century.
Grade 12 Adventures in World History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compare forms of spiritual expression in different societies. • describe types of group membership and their influence on both individuals and society. • compare the roles and functions of individuals and groups in different societies and at different times. • compare political systems and processes that have been involved in the exercise of power and authority throughout history.

Grade 11 Gender Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze sexism and the dynamics of power relations with respect to sex and gender in a variety of contexts. • analyze representations of women and men in media, popular culture and the arts, and assess the effects of these representations. • analyze a range of social, political, economic and environmental issues relating to gender in Canadian and global contexts. • describe strategies, initiatives and accomplishments of individuals and organizations, including both Canadian and international organizations, with respect to gender equity.
Grade 11 Equity, Diversity and Social Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to equity, diversity and/or social justice, and formulate questions to guide their research. • assess, record, analyze and synthesize information gathered through research and inquiry. • demonstrate an understanding of how identity is socially constructed and internalized, and of the impact of social norms and stereotypes. • demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of power relations in various social contexts. • demonstrate an understanding of the impact individual action can have on equity, social justice and environmental issues, and of how the media can create awareness of these issues. • demonstrate an understanding of how social activism can be used to support equity and social justice objectives.
Grade 12 Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to equity and social justice, and formulate questions to guide their research. • assess, record, analyze and synthesize information gathered through research and inquiry. • demonstrate an understanding of a range of perspectives on and approaches to equity and social justice issues, and of factors that affect inequity and social injustice. • analyze, in historical and contemporary contexts, the dynamics of power relations and privilege as well as various factors that contribute to power or marginalization. • assess the impact of media and popular culture on equity and social justice issues. • analyze a range of historical and contemporary equity and social justice issues and the impact of economic and environmental factors on these issues. • evaluate the contributions of individuals and groups and/or movements identified with specific aspects of the struggle for equity and social justice. • demonstrate an understanding of how personal values, knowledge, and actions can contribute to equity and social justice, and assess strategies that people use to address equity and social justice concerns. • describe a variety of careers and volunteer opportunities in fields related to equity and social justice, and demonstrate an understanding of the skills and knowledge they require.
Grade 12 World Cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to world cultures and/or cultural groups, and formulate questions to guide their research. • assess, record, analyze and synthesize information gathered through research and inquiry. • communicate the results of their research and inquiry clearly and effectively, and reflect on and evaluate their research, inquiry and communication skills. • demonstrate an understanding of the elements and functions of culture and of the nature of cultural influence. • analyze how cultural identities are socially constructed, preserved, transmitted and transformed. • demonstrate an understanding of artistic expressions, philosophies and religious/spiritual beliefs found within specific cultures, and of how these expressions relate to various aspects of those cultures. • analyze specific cultural expressions and a range of factors that can affect them. • assess the contributions to and influence on various cultures/societies, including Canada, of a diverse range of ethnocultural groups and individuals from those groups. • demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of power relations within specific cultural groups and between minority and majority cultures.

Grade 11 Dynamics of Human Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain how self-concept and self-esteem influence personal well-being. • demonstrate an understanding of how self-concept influences an individual's interactions with others. • demonstrate an understanding of the range of relationships people experience over a lifetime and of the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships. • demonstrate an understanding of various social and cultural influences on relationships. • demonstrate an understanding of various dynamics and challenges that can affect relationships. • demonstrate an understanding of the nature of individual rights and responsibilities in human interactions. • demonstrate an understanding of the extent of individual rights and responsibilities within the wider community. • analyze and assess social-action initiatives that support or contribute to healthy relationships and/or healthy communities, and design and implement an initiative of their own.
Grade 11 Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to anthropology, psychology and sociology, and formulate questions appropriate to each discipline to guide their research. • assess, record, analyze and synthesize information gathered through research and inquiry. • use an anthropological perspective to explain how diverse factors influence and shape human behaviour and culture. • use a sociological perspective to explain how diverse factors influence and shape individual and group social behaviour. • use a sociological perspective to explain patterns of socialization.
Grade 12 Challenge and Change in Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to the analysis of social change, and formulate questions to guide their research. • assess, record, analyze and synthesize information gathered through research and inquiry. • demonstrate an understanding of the causes and effects of social change. • demonstrate an understanding of how forces influence and shape social patterns and trends. • demonstrate an understanding of how various social structures and conditions support or limit global inequalities. • analyze the impact of unfair or unjust exploitation of people or resources, locally and globally.
Grade 12 Philosophy: Questions and Theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate an understanding of connections between ethics and other areas of philosophy, other subject areas, and various aspects of society, including everyday life. • use philosophical reasoning skills to develop, communicate and defend their own responses to philosophical questions in ethics. • demonstrate an understanding of connections between social and political philosophy and other areas of philosophy, other subject areas, and various aspects of society, including everyday life. • use philosophical reasoning skills to develop, communicate and defend their own responses to questions in social and political philosophy.
Grade 11 & 12 World Religions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explore topics related to world religions and belief traditions, and formulate questions to guide their research. • assess, record, analyze and synthesize information gathered through research and inquiry. • outline the central tenets, practices and teachings of various religions and belief traditions. • demonstrate an understanding of the type of daily observances associated with various religions and belief traditions and of the role of these observances in the lives of adherents. • identify and analyze ways in which various religions and belief traditions are embodied in cultural forms. • analyze the interaction between society and various religions and belief traditions. • demonstrate an understanding of the challenges that adherents of various religions and belief systems experience in society. • describe and analyze ways in which various religions and belief traditions are interpreted and adapted within civil society and popular culture. • demonstrate an understanding of global and local contexts in which world religions and belief traditions function. • demonstrate an understanding of various ways in which adherents of particular world religions and belief traditions relate to their own and other communities.

The Overall Expectations listed above are from *the Ontario Curriculum*. Complete course descriptions, including all Overall and Specific Expectations, can be found at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/curriculum.html>