

Educate the Children of India

From time immemorial teachers in this country have always been held in high esteem. But, of late in our society, all areas of work have suffered erosion of credibility and respectability. Insincerity, apathy for anything without dividends for self, and expediency for personal or political gain are accepted as the order of the day. The teaching profession is no exception. It augurs ill for the future of the country. We cannot afford to miss the opportunities that have opened up as never before for reaching education to every child.

It is now a cliché to say that rebuilding society as a real democracy must start with mass education. *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, the public scheme for universalization of elementary education in India, which is free and compulsory, has so far been successful in enrolling more and more children in schools (officially 96%), but miserably failed to provide quality education. Attendance is on the decline and a large number of children are still at work. Close to half the standard-V students have not mastered the 3R's of standard-II level. Lack of physical infrastructure is not the main impediment. The will and dedication of teachers, coupled with their ability to impart education, can make all the difference. Without a missionary zeal on the part of teachers we cannot really spread education worth the name. Teachers have to go from door to door, if necessary, to bring students to schools and lovingly, caringly, help them grow into worthy citizens of India. The task is of gigantic proportions, no doubt. We have an ocean of first generation learners. Yet, we must face the challenge or remain one of the most backward nations of the world.

A solution is very unlikely to come through more and more privatization of education, a process already in progress even in rural areas. Barring a handful of non-profit social service organizations and other good institutions, the motive behind private initiatives is not much beyond money. Who will reach the millions who do not have money to spend on education?

More importantly, even elementary education is not merely about the 3R's, though that is the primary focus in most schools. Secondary and higher education are also reduced to swallowing information, vomiting them undigested in exam halls, and scoring handsomely by any means, honest or dishonest. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, 'The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle of life, which does not bring out the strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion – is it worth the name?'

Such a vision is hardly expected to come from the governments in the present political scenario. Teachers must grasp the idea. They can do a lot more than they do now even in the present system. The first thing a teacher must do is to envision his role as a nation builder. He must have a lofty moral character to live up to such a vision. He should be a role model not only before his pupils, but also before society as a whole. We are direly in need of such teachers.

The next thing is the basic approach to education. One has to put immense faith in the illimitable possibilities of every child and in his ability to learn and grow. Let us not judge and brand children as good or bad, smart or dull, but evaluate their strengths and problems with deep empathy. Ideally, love for children should be unconditional and equal. Let us not love, only when he or she fulfils *our criteria* of success. Each individual is unique and has his own natural way of growth. We must shun the 'one size fits all' notion of education. The teacher has to come down to his level, see through his eyes, as it were, understand the obstacles on his way, and try to remove them.

A child needs selfless love and a great amount of freedom to grow. We have to allow him freedom of choice and of thoughts. Help him develop self-respect, self-dependence, and self-discipline. Always tell him, 'You are not a non-entity. You have great power and goodness in you. You are the maker of your own destiny.' That is the main work of a teacher: to call upon the sleeping giant in every child.

Help the child improve health and develop his own faculties. Encourage him to use his own brain and senses. Let children learn as much as possible by themselves through games and experiments. Encourage inquisitiveness, rationality, and creativity. Explain the importance of good habits, of right words and deeds, and of concern for others. As to right or wrong, imposition of parental or social notions must have their limits. The child must be able to judge for himself what is good and why. As a child grows up and begins to grasp more abstract ideas, he must be taught the basic science of the mind and improve the power of concentrate. And all this must come in a joyful, playful environment.

This is what Swami Vivekananda would advise. And this is what makes for the core of education, which must be coupled with studies and skill development. The focus must shift from mere syllabus and exams and pay cheques to this holistic vision. The motherland is calling its teachers to accomplish the mighty task of educating the nation in the making.