

On Teachers and Teaching

Reflections on existing Pedagogical Practices

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Like any reflexive writing this article too is autobiographical. I am a teacher and one question ask myself continually is what it means to be a teacher in the kind of society we are living in. While writing this article I am talking to myself, trying to explore the meaning of this vocation, its possibilities or the constraints it confronts. Yet, despite this autobiographical linkage and despite the fact that I teach social science and teach in an elitist university, my observations, hope, can be shared by many who too want this act—the act of teaching—to be conscious of itself.

Why this enquiry into the mode of teaching as a participation, as an intervention into the world? Perhaps the simplest and obvious answer is that no society can do away with teaching because it is so closely linked with the reproduction of society—the learning of culture, tradition, knowledge and skill. As a result, it is important to know how teachers are seen and how they find themselves in a rapidly changing society.

It goes without saying that our society does not perceive teaching as a very prestigious/meaningful vocation. Two reasons can be put forward for this. First, ours is a society getting increasingly inclined to "practical" pursuits—hard, economic pursuits. As a result, in the hierarchy of priorities cultural/symbolic sphere begins to occupy a secondary status. So long as economy is progressing or growth rate is increasing, one can safely conclude that the country is developing! Because of the dominance of these economic pursuits, other questions—how children learn culture in schools or whether teachers are capable of sensitizing the minds of the young—are not always asked with equal sincerity and urgency. To put it otherwise, everyday society makes it obvious that for its "development" it needs more and more engineers, economists, managers and the practitioners of applied science, but not necessarily those who are engaged in the sphere of culture/symbol/learning-teachers. It is, therefore, not impossible to find a society in which an incompatibility can be seen between its economic progress and cultural sensitivity. A society may prosper; yet its cultural sphere—morals, ideals and higher values—may decline.

This takes us to the second point. Because of the steady decline of the educational sphere it loses its confidence, it remains ignorant of its mission. Moreover, in the kind of society we are living in—because of the

increasing irrelevance of degrees, the growing incompatibility between the class room and the larger world and a faulty education system leading to the culture of mass copying and note books—there is, in fact, nothing substantial to enhance the prestige of teaching as a vocation.

No teacher can escape this social construction. In his everyday interaction with his students a teacher can feel how he is being perceived by the larger society. Although exceptions do exist even today, it would not be wrong to say that for students who internalize the dominant societal ethos their teachers symbolize failure. Because society tells them to believe that their teachers are engaged in an activity that has got nothing; neither money nor power. Again, for many, nobody chooses teaching voluntarily; one is forced into it because one has not been able to manage a better job! Not surprisingly, seldom does one find a student willing to become a teacher. Well, it is not at all desirable that every student should want to become a teacher. There are many paths and society cannot exist without the plurality of choices. But the point to reflect on is that it is not very common to see students having a positive respectable attitude towards teaching as a vocation. This is particularly damaging to the self-confidence of the teaching community. A teacher's most important zone of activity is the world of his students. If everyday he feels that his work is no longer an ideal for those before whom he is speaking continually, it becomes exceedingly difficult for him not to see the absurdity/meaninglessness of his vocation.

There is another aspect to this relationship. This may not be universal; yet its contextuality speaks quite a lot. Here we are talking about the conflict of classes. Imagine the encounter between the teachers and the students in an elite college/university. The upper class composition of the students may make it difficult for them to appreciate their teachers who, broadly speaking, come from and constitute lower/middle class groups. This conflict can be seen in the incompatibility between their respective traditions, beliefs and worldviews. For instance, at times, I realize how difficult it is to understand the language of my students—the music they listen to, the films they see, the jokes they crack or the style in which they speak English. Likewise, I can feel how difficult it is for them to appreciate my middle class fixations—my Bengali-style English, my semi-urban background, my love for Bengali/Hindi films etc. This perpetual conflict or the cultivation of class prejudices is damaging. In the absence of a meaningful/reciprocal relationship between the teachers and the taught, teaching as a vocation suffers further.

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Yet, as we have said, no society can survive without education. Because even those who would be engaged in the sphere of material production—engineers, managers, administrators—have to be taught some basic skill—the knowledge of economics, management and applied science. In other words, education is meaningful to the extent that it is linked with the material production! It is seen not as an end, but primarily as a means; its importance lies in its ability to take one to the road to success. This attitude has got two consequences which ought to be re-examined in order to understand the fate of teachers.

First, it hierarchizes—and hierarchizes ruthlessly—the educational sphere. It is believed that only those institutions which, because of their close affinity with the material sphere, promise "success" are important. A link is, therefore, established say, from Delhi Public School, Modern School to St. Stephens/IIT to Cambridge/MIT. And, of course, after passing through this chain one earns money, more and more money. In other words, the "centres of excellence"—be it DPS or IIT—are not necessarily seen as those stimulating zones in which educationists, poets, philosophers, scientists and young minds meet, construct ideas and try to create a humane/culturally sensitive world. Instead, these are considered as mere sites of elitism and its perpetually reproduced success stories. The choice, one knows, is clear. Ask a smart mother why she sends her child to any of the 'prestigious' schools in Delhi. It is quite likely that she would reply—provided she is not pretending—that her primary expectation is the success of her child. It is generally not the case that she wants the school to tell her child how to learn and practise the madness of Einstein, the innocence of Ramkrishna or the patience of Gandhi.

Second, this leads to another disastrous consequence. Teachers are increasingly seen as functionaries, as technicians capable of giving the student what he/she needs for success—be it the skill of the mathematics or spoken English or horse-riding! An 'efficient' teacher is one who completes the course in time, gives the student the basic skill and assures success. The broader meaning of a teacher—his life-practice, his relationship with students, his commitment to humanity—is gradually forgotten.

There is another important reason behind this limited role-expectation from the teaching community. The reason is the altered character of knowledge in our times—its speedy division into narrowly specialized/fragmented disciplines. As a result, a physicist need not feel disturbed even if he remains ignorant of the sociological implications of modern science. Likewise, a professor of sociology—because of the training he gets—may remain absolutely indifferent to music, poetry or literature as modes of knowing the world. In other words, a teacher can remain contented if he speaks before his students what has been defined—clearly and unambiguously—in the discipline he is specialized in.

The question is: How do teachers react to this changing scenario? Perhaps there are many who would like to justify the situation in the name of the growing professionalization of this job. Professionalization has indeed got many positive benefits—for instance, the growing awareness on the part of the teachers about their rights, their defined roles, their service conditions, etc. But excessive professionalization, it has to be realized, limits the human possibility. It cannot expect more than an 'efficient' role-performance from a person. An example would suffice. Suppose a professor teaching Marxism but leading a life-style not particularly conducive to the growth of a socialist culture. Now the professor can, however, argue that he is good 'professional' because he knows Marxism pretty well, teaches it very efficiently and his students perform well in the paper he teaches! Everything else—the kind of life he leads—is merely a 'private' affair which has got nothing to judge his professional efficiency. In other words, when professionalism triumphs, a teacher can say that he is just a professional, he need not be a saint, a revolutionary or even a good human being. With excessive professionalization 'efficiency' can be gained at the cost of other qualities.

Perhaps students too begin to expect this limited role from their teachers. They too are constrained. Like everyone else they too are eager to enter the market. And hence they need—and need very quickly—the basic skill. They don't have much time to learn anything else from the teacher. For instance, the assumption is that one does not go to mathematics teacher to hear, say, how cultural imperialism is demoralizing the world or any other 'non-mathematical' nonsense. Second, it is difficult to resist the dominant way of seeing; these days one does not expect anything great or any surplus from oneself. As a result, they too only expect professional efficiency from the teacher, nothing else.

An example would suffice. Once I wanted to tell my students J.Krishnamuti's notion of freedom. A student of mine—a smart girl—rose up and asked; "Why this nonsense?" The assumption is that I teach sociology and hence there is only one thing I am supposed to do. Once I come to the class room I must tell my students: 'This is what Emile Durkheim has said. This is what Max Weber has said'. Nothing more. Nothing less. All these things are perhaps creating a situation in which a teacher is seldom encouraged to expect anything great from himself. At best 'efficiency' is gained but unboundedness is lost. Certainly not a very nice thing to celebrate.

As we have already said, the world which is really significant for a teacher is the world of his students. Perhaps a major crisis is that not many teachers can enter into this world and understand the minds of the young. This distorted communication is perhaps another reason why teaching is fast losing its potency. Meaningful communication demands reasonable amount of equality and mutual respect. Not many teachers, it seems, would

like the idea of equality while thinking of their relationship with students.

Equality does not, however, mean that differences cease to exist between the teacher and the taught. A teacher, because of his age, experience and relatively more exposure to ideas, is likely to be in a better position to advise and guide his students. So equality means respect and openness. It is, therefore, necessary for a teacher to see his student as a possibility, to respect the freshness of his mind. It requires the teacher's willingness to move with the minds of the young.

Yet, one knows how difficult it is to make this sort of communication possible. It is not always possible for a teacher to know each of his students as an autonomous person. Imagine a college teacher addressing before 200 students in the lecture hall! As a result, for the teacher, his student is merely an abstraction, a faceless entity! Likewise, for the students, the teacher is not a person, but a "talking machine" dictating notes in the class room.

Again, the very politics of the class room is not very conducive to communication. There is nothing in the prevalent system of education that makes learning an activist, participatory, creative exercise. Instead, there is a tendency to bombard the minds of the young with all sorts of data, information, facts and theories. This bombardment, needless to add, induces the passivity of students. They are seen as passive receivers of knowledge, not as active participants in the process of learning.

Moreover, the very logic of examination, it seems, goes against any reciprocal relationship between the teacher and the taught. This is really a problem. Because, as far as formal education goes, one does not know whether there is a practical alternative to examination. Examination is a process that gives the teacher the power to objectify his students. This is the power of surveillance—the power to hierarchize the students on the basis of a 'universal' standard that denies their autonomy, individuality and subjectivity. Examination, evaluation and grading are real obstacles to the process of a dialogic relationship between the teacher and the taught.

Imagine the paradox of this power. The power many teachers enjoy is, however, responsible for their diminishing status. A teacher is being perpetually seen by his students as someone who would hierarchize them and thereby determine their life-projects. This fear or hatred, at its peak moment, may reduce a teacher to the level of a police man. He is feared/hated precisely because of the power that enables him to objectify his students. He is no longer seen as a friend or a guide who, together with his students, are exploring the frontiers of knowledge and in the process coming closer. How sad it is, for instance, when I hear that I have been regarded by some of my students as a 'strict/tough' teacher. They call me "strict" because, they think, I give them bad grades and hierarchize them so ruthlessly. I know I hierarchize them and the students are not wrong when they fear this particular role of mine. But this does

not make me happy. I do not want to be feared. In fact, each time they call me "strict" they isolate me from their world. This is an ethical dilemma every teacher engaged in the process of examination/evaluation experiences.

Yet, not many teachers would be very sympathetic to this sort of ethical dilemma. It is merely sentimental, they might argue. Because, as the argument goes, there is no escape from examination; formal education cannot be imagined without it. And if teachers do not evaluate and hierarchize their students, who else would do it? Perhaps even not many students are willing to see beyond this paradigm of asymmetrical power relations. There is certainly a historical inertia. They have been told again and again that their passivity is a virtue; self-expression does not count in formal education and inequality is so all-pervasive that there is no harm even if the class room retains it. To put it simply, the democratization of the pedagogical exercise is by no means an easy proposition.

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There are two other factors particularly, in the context of higher education, which have to be examined. To begin with, the question is; What is the primary function of a faculty member in a university? It is true that a university is a university precisely because it is always exploring new ideas and entering into the ever-expanding frontiers of knowledge. As a result, research is very important activity in a university. And it goes without saying that a university teacher ought to be a researcher; his familiarity with new frontiers of knowledge is likely to help him in his teaching endeavour.

Yet, this meaningful relation between research and teaching is often forgotten. Because in many "centres of excellence" research has acquired a distinctively 'pragmatic' meaning. Research is considered more prestigious than teaching; it is given more weightage while judging the career potential of a faculty member. The "bigness" of a professor is often measured in terms of the number of costly research projects he is undertaking. This sort of meaning attached to research is damaging to the cause of teaching. A junior teacher in a good university often sees that his senior colleagues are not so much interested in the class room, but in other "research" works having their direct visibility in terms of published papers, books and seminars. One gets the message. Even if one is an irresponsible teacher, but somehow manages to project oneself as a 'good researcher', none can prevent one's upward mobility. This demoralizes one who wants to be a teacher, who loves teaching, who does not see any necessary contradiction between teaching and research. That is why, the question; what about those silent teachers who teach well, work sincerely but have nothing visible (published papers/books) to demonstrate their intelligence? Are they unimportant in a university?

The second aspect is related to the creativity of a teacher, particularly in the context of cultural sciences. Unlike mathematical/natural sciences, cultural sciences, one knows, are subject to innumerable debates and

schools of thought. As a result, books occupy a very important place in cultural sciences. Imagine a teacher teaching Marxism. There is no dearth of books and ideas. From Marx and Engels to Lenin and Mao to Gramsci and Luckas, to Marcuse and Habermas. The ocean of ideas creates a special problem for a teacher. He can lose his creativity in two ways. First, he can rely on a standard text book or a bazar note book and thereby discourage himself and his students to read better books or original thinkers. Much has been written and talked about this pathetic state of teaching in our country. But what is equally damaging-and herein lies the importance of the second point we are making-is the sickness emerging out of excessive dependence on books. For instance, in many good universities one sees students and teachers always dropping names, talking about every new book they have read.

This is sickness because this bombards one's mind continually, cripples one's vision, kills one's own language and makes it impossible for one to see the world with one's own eyes. Yet, many teachers fail to resist this temptation. Perhaps they think that if they talk of more names, more books, students would get gradually silenced and thereby they would become allpowerful.

But, paradoxically, this power diminishes the importance of a teacher. Because if a teacher only speaks what has been written in books or what others have said, he becomes unimportant. If there is a good library students can always read these books. In other words, the library becomes more important than the class room. But a teacher is a teacher precisely because of his ability to retain the autonomy of the class room, to transform it into a sufficiently creative space.

I have often asked myself; Who am I before my students? Am I someone who just produce a huge reading list? Am I someone who has read more books and thereby remember more names? Or, should I exist before my students only evolve a way of seeing, only to arouse their imagination, only to act like a catalyst? Should not I exist to speak even of those things not written in books, not spoken by any great academician, but equally important to understand life, culture and society? But, then, how tempting it is, particularly in the sub-culture of higher learning, to demonstrate one's scholarship by talking about books and books and books. It is not easy to resist this temptation: equating knowledge with a series of quiz contests—who said what, who wrote what!

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All that I have said so far reveals the nature of possible obstacles to be path of meaningful teaching. But it would be utterly pessimistic to think that there is no resistance. If obstacles are real, resistances too are equally real. There are teachers who are sensitive to the ethical dilemmas I have outlined, who through their everyday practice want to make teaching a refreshingly meaningful exercise. It is this hope-it is a minimal hope without which life tends to become fatalistic, loses all

possibilities—that leads me to identify some of the urgent tasks any sensitive/sincere teaching ought to undertake.

(a) *Creation of Objective Conditions*

A teacher has to resist—through his teaching and life-practice—the dominant social currents, the way the educational sphere gets neglected. He has to fight for real objective conditions conducive to good teaching—more funds, better service conditions, better libraries and laboratories, appointment of more and more teachers. Because society has got no right to expect anything great from its teachers if it refuses to give anything to them.

(b) *Wider Meaning of Education*

A teacher has to state very boldly that the meaning of education cannot be measured in terms of its immediate, practical gains. This is important because in this technologized world we are seeing a close link between education and industry and these days universities are asked to manage their own resources by establishing effective links with industries. This is damaging because this reduces the scope of education. This denies its deeper implications for culture and humanity. This cannot see beyond 'Practical/Technical' education. What about history, literature, philosophy—the disciplines which have got no necessary link with industries? That's why, the teaching community has to fight collectively this artificial hierarchy of knowledge, this violently reductionist approach towards education. Every teacher has to assert boldly. There are limits to privatization. The state cannot escape its responsibility.

(c) *Beyond Mere Professionalism*

While fighting against the 'system' is important for the teacher, he, however, cannot escape his own inner transformation. Because it is the profundness of his work that alone can restore the dignity he has lost in contemporary society. Herein lies the importance of the twin functions he has to fulfil. As a professional, he must prove his credential and efficiency. But at the same time he has to go beyond mere professionalism realize his deeper humanity and bring his life nearer to his teaching.

Suppose I teach Gandhi and tell my students that Gandhi is not altogether irrelevant. Now two things are expected from me. First, like a true professional I must know my subject pretty well; I must be in a position to communicate effectively, to suggest the required readings to my students, Second, I should not forget that life is a great book and hence I should at least try, despite the possibility of failures, to make my life somewhat nearer to what I teach and preach. The teacher's own life is very important in the pedagogical agenda. Because, after the parents and the peer groups, it is the teacher whose impact on the younger minds has got an enduring value. Even in this age of cynicism, a good teacher does succeed in humanizing the minds of the younger

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generation.

This, however, does not mean that a teacher who is teaching Marxism has to be a revolutionary or a teacher who is teaching religious philosophy has to be a saint. Teaching has got an autonomy of its own; a teacher is a teacher. The only point I am adding is that ideas, if potent enough, can alter one's everyday life-practice. Moreover, teaching, to be frank, is not a business engagement between a professional and his client. Teaching is primarily a *human relationship* and this means that life is no less important than the printed word.

(d) Democratization of Pedagogical Activities

It is this realization that teaching is primarily a relationship which, one hopes, should lead a teacher to try to alter the existing pedagogical practices that deny the autonomy and subjectivity of students. This requires, as has already been said, dialogue. This enjoins a teacher's willingness to learn from his students. In other words, a good teacher must celebrate the idea of a relatively democratic, participatory class-room environment. This means new thinking on the examination/evaluation system. Although in formal education, as it

appears, there seems no escape from examination, it *is*, however, not impossible to make it more humane, to give relatively more autonomy to students (to give due recognition to what they want to learn or how they want to be taught and evaluated) and to make the process of evaluation more accountable. This means lot of hard work on the part of the teacher. But if he is unwilling to do that, he has got no right to expect social prestige from the wider community.

(e) Primacy of Creativity

Finally, it ought to be realized by every teacher that he is not a technician, a quiz master, a data bank. He is nothing if he loses his creativity. Because it is his creativity along that can retain the autonomy of the class room. That is why, in the class room a teacher has to come out from the world of books/research papers. With his creativity he has to understand the wavelength of his students, communicate great ideas in a way that learning becomes pleasant and meaningful. His creativity in the class room, he must assert, is no less important than his other achievements—his position in the academic bureaucracy or his fame as a researcher. His message ought to be clear: a university cannot function solely by a handful of international celebrities; it cannot survive without honest, dedicated, sincere teachers. •