

Teachers' Day Marked in the Modi Way

Hidden Curriculum of the Master Class

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Narendra Modi's Teachers' Day speech did little to address the institutional problems plaguing public education. It ended up making a case for implementation of neo-liberal policies in public education, both through its representation of students as well as teachers.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi performed an exceptional act on Teachers' Day. He planned to simultaneously address all the school going children across the country - their number running into more than 250 million, through electronic media. All states received orders issued by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and allied institutions. Within less than a week, orders from the South Block reached many of the remotest schools in the country. The arrangement was such that a few hundred children at Manekshaw Centre in New Delhi, with a few groups in Leh (North), Imphal Tinsukia (East), Bhuj (West) and Thiruvananthapuram (South), Port Blair (Andaman-Nicobar Islands) would interact with Modi and the rest would watch it live. In a world where opinions are driven and crafted by a visually flooded media, the event was quite a spectacle. The spectacle of a prime minister addressing groups of nicely draped docile students for more than 110 minutes is certainly unprecedented. It turned out to be an extraordinarily grand event given that most of the dissenting voices were silenced. What message did the country get at the cost of approximately 500-700 million human hours?

Identity of Modi's Audience

The obvious but incomplete answer to the question of identity of Modi's addressees is what media has been hammering on us for a last few days: millions of school going children across the country. India is one of those countries which historically have multi-layered, multi-tier system of schooling. Considering that the system is validated and cemented further in the case of India by the Right to Education Act, 2009 (RTE), one needs to consider the implication of the term - school going children.

The Teachers' Day telecast involved mainly a group of students from India's most elite publicly funded schools, namely the *Kendriya Vidyalay* (KV) which caters to the urbanised class working with the central government and the *Jawahar Navoday Vidyalay* (JNV), meant

for the “talented” children from the countryside. The fact that the total number of schools under both these categories is 1697 among the near about 1.4 million schools across India marks the unrepresentative status of their students. Thus excluding millions of children attending schools (many of which are in dismal state across the country) of representation made the arrangement look like “accidental on purpose”. The confidence and obviously rehearsed mannerisms of the participating children of the KVs and JNVs, and their access to English and Hindi languages add to their unrepresentative status. There were a few students from non-KV government schools of Delhi, but their presence was like an aberration to the rule.

The prime minister’s address was primarily focused at privileged schoolchildren. This was the group of students who perhaps never have to sweat because of work. They have fondness for reading books and have fixed places for keeping school bags and shoes in their houses. Their social conscience can be conditioned, as the prime minister thinks, by ideas of illuminating the house of a *garib* (poor) by cutting down a bit on electricity consumption, of conserving environment by planting a tree, irrespective of government policies of environmental clearance designed with the purpose of inviting global capital and investments.

The children living in extreme conditions of poverty, who dream of a sweat-free life, whose hands may long to touch and feel new story-books, whose conceptualisation of play inevitably cannot be different from miniaturised adult activities, were missing from the prime minister’s address. With the absence of the labouring child who contributes to the growth of agricultural, industrial and other produce, albeit for the survival of the self and the family, it sounded as if the new government defined the child through the prime minister’s telecast as belonging to the urban rich, mostly comprising of the upper castes. This is the group of students *who would be attaining 18 years of age by 2019*.

Ignoring reality of public schools

Recalling an incident from his recent Japan visit, the prime minister mentioned that Japanese teachers and students together clean their schools. He expressed a concern over maintaining cleanliness in schools and wished to make it a national trait. In reality, hundreds of thousands of Indian schools managed by local governments do not have any official arrangement for a peon or a sweeper. As such, for years they have been cleaned and swept by students and teachers themselves. Ignoring this fact, if the prime minister is talking of making cleanliness a national trait, it is clear who his audiences are.

The prime minister delivered his address in Manakikrit (standard) Hindi and answered questions in Hindi, even if asked in English from Thiruvananthapuram. After all, the new government set Hindi as the only language of its official communication. There was no attempt from the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) to address the multi-lingual reality of India. Instead the government endorsed communication in Hindi as the de-facto norm, knowing

fully well that children from several parts of India may not be adept in Hindi. What image of learners does the new, vibrant, does Modi's India carry as per the projection of this event? Should we expect the school goer to be so passive a listener that she should sit through two hours of silent and attentive reception without a sign of restlessness, especially when the speaker unwinds his childhood memories of naughtiness?

The idea that we can hammer anything on children forcefully, however unintelligible it may be for them, is a precept of regimentation through education which appears to have been implemented in the compulsion nudged in through the event. Interestingly, the National Curriculum Framework-2005, a document enjoying legal status after notification under the RTE, advocates for critical thought and critical pedagogy. It imagines a child as constructor of knowledge from her experiences, interactions and engagement with the world around her. Given Sangh Parivar's penchant for and capacity of devising long lasting programmes that seep in into the social psyche at the level of ideological acceptance, events of this kind cannot be perceived as a neutral act.

De-professionalising Teaching

Ever since the date 5 September 2014 attained the status of Teachers' Day, it is marked for expressing gratitude and respect towards teachers for their services, previously conceptualised as an act of nation building. Characterised to a certain extent by ritualism and tokenism, the day popularly belongs to the teachers, though attempts to expose cultural politics of caste and patriarchy in celebrating Dr Radhakrishnan's birthday as Teachers' Day have been made in Maharashtra and elsewhere.^[1] Though we would not go into the rightful legacy of teachers at this point, the Modi spectacle can be read as robbing teachers of their importance and identity.

The teachers, called as meek dictators by Krishna Kumar (Kumar 2005), could not be spared even for a day from following government orders. They were expected to arrange for TV sets, projectors, generators in case of power failure, and radio sets, etc. Many state headquarters wanted schools to submit electronically a list of attendance immediately after the event and warned them of dire consequences in case of failing to abide by the orders. In recent past, possibly it was for the first time a daunting and glaring exposition of teachers' low status and position in the bureaucratic system. Ironically, the official address expressed lament over loss of teacher's dignity and showed concern about talented people not choosing the profession. The execution of the telecast simultaneously created a reason for "talent" to turn its back on teaching.

The profession was degraded also by Modi's appeal to doctors, lawyers, IAS officers or IPS officers of taking up responsibility of turning nation-building activity into a movement by teaching for an hour once a week. The appeal is a perfect example of de-professionalising teaching, with an attempt to convey that no special education and training is needed for becoming a school teacher. If you wish to become a teacher, what you simply need to have

is a free hour soaked in fondness or love for teaching. Special skills required for teachers can simply be substituted by motivation and pedagogies and theories of teaching can be altogether done away with. Sadly, prime minister's understanding of prospective teachers is contrary to the norms set by National Council for Teacher Education, an academic authority notified for the purpose under the RTE.

Redeeming neo-rich guilt

Yet, from another perspective it can be understood why the media has welcomed the proposition. It is an impressive appeal for the post 1990 neo-rich class that is partly guilt-stricken for doing nothing for the poor, the other. For this class, the prime minister's appeal is a great way ahead, almost a silver lining of social service in a dark cloud of self-centric wealth accumulation. Thus the prime minister's appeal, however ostentatious or insensitive towards requirements of skills and competencies for the profession is welcomed by the Indian media as it caters mainly to this class.

It may sound clichéd to reiterate that the service sector economy has widened the gap between the haves and have-nots to an unprecedented level leading to newer dimensions of social inequality. It is a fact that the rich and elite schools don't even let parents of their own students (read their customers) enter the schools, leave alone strangers. In these circumstances, children learning in poor government schools will be the "beneficiaries" of the suggestion. With the experience of the corporate borne activities like Teach for India and similar programmes, one can easily guess what the site of work could be for these prime minister inspired volunteer-teachers.

Poor economics of teaching

Teacher educators across the world have been expressing concerns over many issues that distance teaching duties from the teachers. Issues like deskilling of teachers through compulsory textbooks and prescribed curricula, standardised and mass-scale testing, burdening teachers with non-academic and non-teaching activities (the RTE turns three such activities into legal imperatives for teachers), hiring teachers as contractual workers with remunerations less than those of daily-wage labourers, appointing untrained teachers in schools, converting educational discourse into set of discrete deliverables, and so on; have found concern all over the world.

In the times of market oriented neo-liberal economies, teachers are attacked on one hand by denying academic autonomy and authority, and on the other by providing absolutely scanty salaries. Their status degrades further when measures of coercion like compulsory dress-code, etc. are enforced. Teacher unions across the globe are agitating against this assault on teacher's agency. It would have been a welcome situation had the prime minister taken any cognizance of the dying cadre of teachers, the miserable state of majority of our teacher education colleges or if he had connected contract teachers' payments to realistic cost of living indices. In many states, one can be working as a contractual teacher and still be

economically osculating the poverty line.

I wish the prime minister had also raised his voice for this ironical situation of keeping the nation builders underfed, demoralised, impoverished and resource-less. While millions of teachers were fishing for compliments on their day, the prime minister turned the event into a mockery of teachers. It is paradoxical that the prime minister is calling for nation-building through education while his government's economic policies are revving up the agenda of the liberal economy that is detrimental to the very idea of public education.

Hidden Curriculum of the “master class”

Sociologists of education have analysed the indoctrination or unintended education occurring through inclusion or exclusion of certain norms, practices, habits, languages, etc. in the school as hidden curriculum. The concept reveals that what is omitted is as important as or at times, more important than what is included. By bringing students from only certain elite government schools to the event and projecting them as the normative students of Indian public schools, the organisers of the event succeeded in staging a feel-good, glorious, captivating spectacle. It helped in creating a compulsory social amnesia about the state of education, now a fundamental right of children, the reality of which is millions of students going to poorly equipped schools and other millions outside the purview of any school. Similarly by glorifying the role of teacher but neglecting realities of the profession, and by preferring to address students rather than teachers, the broadcast spectacle threw teachers on the periphery of both the system and the discourse.

If systemic forces dumb teachers down through compulsory programmes that are dismissive of their agency, and if they are treated as dispensable lot by the system, we are certainly burning our bridges. The grand event of 5 September 2014 seems to be a step towards that. The hidden curriculum in Modi's master class is his attempt to glorify the profession of teaching but deny importance of professional skills in it, to show a fake ignorance of realities of teachers across the country, and to establish elite students as the brand of Indian students.

Notes

[i] Some student unions and teacher unions have strongly argued that the Teachers' Day should be celebrated on 28th November in honour of the father of Indian Modernity – Jotirao Phule. A recent publication in Marathi, *Shikshak Din - Paryayee Sanskrutik Raajkaaran* (Teachers' Day – Counter Cultural Politics), explains some of the arguments in details.

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