Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party government’s emphasis on Indianising, nationalising and spiritualising education calls for examining the role of teachers as imagined by the Hindu right.

Be it the long standing agitation by para-teachers demanding a change in the “permanent-contractual” nature of their work or a series of protests by anganwadi workers drawing attention to their working conditions, teaching and teachers’ work has for long been part of a range of struggles. To be a school teacher is to be resigned to having extremely regimented work days. In addition to teaching, mentoring and grading examinations, teachers’ work also includes several non-teaching components such as early care work, arranging school trips, and helping the state in its elections, census and vaccination programmes.

For decades together, teachers’ work in India evoked a “symbolic respect syndrome”. On the surface there has hardly been a disagreement about the importance of teaching, yet we have not been able to create conditions that would enable our teachers to thrive. Not only does the pay leave out a lot to be desired, there are a number of systemic inadequacies that pose serious challenges to teaching. An absence of autonomy, restrictions on short-term mobility between teaching and allied professions, and privileging order over creativity are some of the factors that have locked teaching into being an immobilised, passive profession.

Enormous expansion of schooling and a greater segregation therein has also affected teachers’ work in recent years. As diverse as the range of schools – government, aided, unaided, and international among others – are the teachers’ profiles and experiences. In the context of a rather sober state of affairs, the focus on teaching by the Narendra Modi regime calls for attention.

In the overall context, it is important to remember the place of formal and informal
education in the agenda and expansion of the Hindu right. Vidya Bharati along with its several connecting schools such as Shishu Mandirs, Vidya Mandirs, Saraswati Mandirs, Ekal Vidyalayas and Sanskar Kendras prioritise education with a strong cultural and patriotic fervour. It is useful to remember Vidya Bharati’s call to “Indianise, nationalise and spiritualise” education during the time of the previous National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government.

As a wide range of reports indicate, teachers occupy a central place in the imagination of education with Hindu nationalist overtones. It is the teacher who is expected to instill discipline, obedience, motivation, physical and mental strength, and a peculiar worldview. The project of revivalism, underway in many schooling spaces, is usually at work in redrafting teaching content (history and science have become most susceptible) as well as teaching and reinforcing a set of values. Implicit in this picture is the figure of an authority, a strong teacher who commands reverence.

Modi’s Teachers’ Day Address

It was hardly a surprise when Prime Minister Modi decided to assume the role of a strong teaching authority and addressed Indian school children and teachers on the occasion of Teachers’ Day in September 2014. A number of relevant critiques of this conversation-staged-as-spectacle have highlighted the overt and subtle messages of the address. While the entire address deserves to be systematically analysed in minute detail, it is useful to turn to a handful of issues that allow us a peek into the ways in which teaching is understood.

First, even when he was being respectful to teachers, the prime minister’s views on teaching are archaic, simplistic, self-contradicting and of a feel-good variety. For instance, he goes on to state that teaching is not a “career” in the traditional sense of the term; instead it is a life-long engagement on the part of the teacher. “How many marriages [of your students] have you attended?”, he asked the teachers, emphasising the need to cultivate student-teacher relationship beyond formal contexts. This extension of teaching into informal realms is expected without discussing financial security and working conditions of teachers. The grand proclamation of “teaching is more than just a career” is met with a curiously contradictory observation that teaching is no longer an attractive profession or a career worth fighting for.

Referring to the sorry state of teaching, the prime minister went on to call upon the professionals such as lawyers, bureaucrats and doctors to spend an hour a week teaching young children. While this may indeed turn out to be a great weekend hobby for many successful professionals, the feel-good gesture would surely have been lost on the government teachers buried under the weight of numerous responsibilities.

Girls’ education found considerable space and numerous mentions in the address on Teachers’ day. The repeated concerns about girls’ education, however, were framed in strict
patriarchal terms. Ignoring the long history of women's participation in institutions of learning, and the complexities and challenges involved therein, the prime minister chose to offer a television-serial-style explanation--girls' education is important because it helps both, the natal and marital families! The anecdotes, parables, prank-stories and motivational quotes were all good enough snippets that show the mirror to what the current regime thinks of teaching, learning and education.

Order, discipline and authority have for long been part of the work-lives of teachers. It is instructive to turn to Professor Krishna Kumar’s book, “Political Agenda of Education”, which opens with capturing the double-bind of authority that marks teachers’ work. School children, on a formal excursion to a zoo, hurl stones at the animals and some teachers accompanying them choose to ignore this behavior.[iii] As long as the students do not “break the lines”, the violence is condoned, but the teachers swing into action if students disrupt the codes of order. Our teachers are expected to maintain order even if it comes at the cost of ignoring violence and compromising curiosity.

Why Worry about Teaching? Why Now?

A quick look at the developments in the past few months indicates several shifts that are underway. From changes in the duration of teacher education courses to the talks of “exporting” teachers, and from an increased blurring of boundaries between history and mythology to that of cultural (non) explanations of science, the spheres of teaching and learning are being re-drawn in service of different agendas. The dual approach of heavy-handed cultural prescription of content on the one hand and greater privatisation, contractualisation of teachers’ work on the other, will continue to affect teaching.

If the developments over the last six months are any indication, the burden of authority is not likely to get lighter on teachers. However, the current conditions are sure to bring teachable moments and raise several crucial questions: What constitutes science and scientific outlook? What is the pedagogic relevance of myths? What kind of culture should our educational institutions aspire to create? How do the new entrants to the formal systems of education see these spaces?

Engaging with these and similar questions and translating them in the classroom contexts can perhaps be part of the re-articulation of the purpose of teaching in contemporary times. Moving away from the glossy, clichéd conception of teaching, such a re-articulation will be based on a recognition that teaching is an intellectual and cultural work.

Notes

[iii] Hindu nationalist educational networks, curricula and the education project at large have received attention over the last few decades. The interventions in education during the NDA rule have also been well documented. See: The Campaign to Stop Funding Hate
