

Democratic values and the role of educational institutions

THINK What is the point of democracy is a question that should not be ignored by teachers

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The great Banyan was shielding them from the sun. It wasn't yet blazing in late March, but it was hot out in the open. Two little girls were swinging and slipping from its dangling roots.

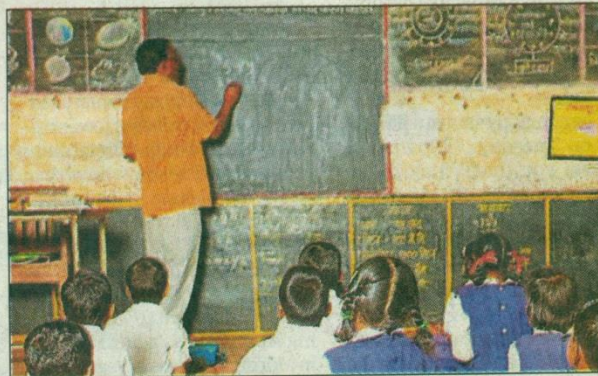
Too young to be alone at home while their parents were out earning their daily wage, they had accompanied their siblings to school. They were also too young to be in class 1 and so, had a free run of the premises. When I encountered them, they had decided to occupy the chabutra (dais) over which the Banyan grew. There was a mazaar (grave) on one corner of the chabutra which itself was near the entrance at the western edge of the school quadrangle.

Lakshmi and Mary accosted me without interrupting their swinging, interrogating me in tandem. Clinging to the roots, they were at my eye level. Once they were satisfied that I was not a teacher, they challenged me to beat them at their game.

As I was climbing up the chabutra, they shouted together, "Babaka ghar hai, joote utaar ke aao" (It's a holy man's home, take off your shoes and come). I slipped off my shoes, climbed up and played with them for a few minutes, and then wanted to leave. They asked me whether I was leaving because I was thirsty. I said the head-teacher was waiting for me, and in unison they said he was a good "sir".

At another school I had visited earlier, students of class 6 sized me up within 20 minutes.

No child was left out of the banter. When they asked me my name, I said, "Mohandas Gandhi". Many started shrieking that the Mahatma was dead. Then I said, "Narendra Modi" and they rolled over with laughter. I challenged them, "Why do



■ Schools must be temples of democracy

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EDUCATION AND ITS INSTITUTIONS CANNOT BEAR THE ENTIRE BURDEN OF DEVELOPING A VIBRANT DEMOCRACY, BUT THEIR ROLE IS SIGNIFICANT.

you think I am not the Prime Minister?" And so, it went. "Aap Mussalman hain?" one of the kids asked. Others repeated the question, asking me if I was Muslim. Why did they think I was, I asked, and they pointed at my chin, "Aapki daadhi hai (You have a beard)". My reply that I was indeed one paused the banter, puzzlement visible on their faces. Then one of them shouted, "Nahin aap Mussalman nahin ho!" (no, you're not), the assertion echoing around the class. How did they make that conclusion? The response was instantaneous, "Kyunki aap achche aadmi ho" (because you're a good man).

In the school with the great Banyan, I sat at the back of class 8. They were discussing elections, not the politics, but the electoral process. There was disagreement on the reason for

some constituencies being reserved; the teacher intervened and then stepped back, letting the conversation flow. After a while, the teacher turned to me, and asked me to have a chat with the students.

What, I asked, is the point of democracy? It is the best way to live and govern. Why? Because we are all equal. Are we really equal? Yes, we are; we are all human beings and equally so. Socially and economically, we are not equal today, but democracy will get us there. For example, reserved constituencies are a way to achieve such equality. In fact, democracy is not the best way but the only way.

I pressed them, but why are we equal? That question led to a five-minute conference among the children. Once they concluded, they faced me and declared, "Kyunki sab insaan andar se achche hote hain" (because all humans are good from within).

Even Muslims? I asked. And they laughed loudly. Why? Because it was a ridiculous question, "Mazaar waale baba sabse achche the; sab insaan achche hote hain" (The holy man of the grave was the best; all humans are good). They spoke with pride about the school's parliament,

animatedly about caste and gender equity, and thoughtfully about superstitions. I then left for the next school.

Last fortnight when I wrote about schools being temples of democracy, I received two kinds of criticism.

First, that many of those who embodied anti-constitutional values were highly educated. Second, that the metaphor of the temple was dangerous, since the word of the school could become gospel, undermining all critical faculties. Temples are among our most potent institutions and cannot be held hostage, neither as a metaphor by fears, nor in reality; but this deserves a detailed response.

The first criticism is a misreading of that piece (or perhaps it lacked clarity). Schools must be temples of democracy, but only a relatively small proportion today are effectively that. Many are the antithesis. No wonder that some of the most educated are the most bigoted. Many are also comically unaware of their own state, wallowing in material success with smug self-belief in their being paragon citizens. The contrast between the two schools is representative of our education system. We need to make all our schools like the one with the chabutra.

Education and its institutions cannot bear the entire burden of developing a vibrant democracy, but their role is significant.

The two little girls lay flat on the chabutra as I was leaving. "Baba ko namaste kar ke jao" (say goodbye to Baba), they commanded, and I obeyed.

And then I left. With Lakshmi, Mary and the mazaar under the great Banyan—the national tree of the republic of India—it was a real temple of democracy.

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