

# Teachers as Activists For Rural Indian Classrooms

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## Abstract

*The 21st century is the century of excellence and achievement. A nation has to make the best use of all its resources and overcome all the global challenges to reach at the destination. The Indian classrooms have tremendous resources and the children have enormous potential to achieve anything and everything. They also have innumerable dreams for a glowing tomorrow. But our classrooms are full of heterogeneity, diversity, variety etc, which are the main obstacles for all such achievements. The dreams fail to sprout and the goal lies distant due to these obstacles. To overcome all such problems and to get the best out of the available resources the Indian teacher will have to play a vital role in this process. Even being a professional is not enough, to bring the best out of our children and our classrooms. The teacher will have to move a step forward and have to be an activist, especially for the classrooms of rural India.*

## Keywords

*Professional, Activist, Heterogeneity, Under-privileged, Inclusive change*

## I. Introduction

When the whole world was sleeping, a country named India woke up to its destiny. It started searching for light in thick darkness and it can be said for sure that after a half century it has established an identity for itself. But there are instances where some other countries have made better progress in less time than India. The fact is that India has not been able to bring its whole human resources to the mainstream of development and to move them forward. A big mass were left outside for a long time and very often the focus of governance was fixed on the quantity, not the quality. Today we have had the realization that we need inclusive development for maintaining sustainability in our growth process and for that education is the only key. India is a vast country with all the diverse features in it. Its geography, language, culture, social structure, custom, tradition etc are all full of diversity. There also exists a huge socio-economic gap between the people too. In such a context one policy does not work for the whole nation. Since 1948 the country has set up many commissions, committees and has adopted many policies in the field of education, but no policy has the best implication for the whole population spread across this vast country. It has tried to frame the destiny of the nation inside its classrooms, but all its classrooms have not yielded in equal amounts. Instead the gap between the urban classrooms and the rural classrooms has increased vastly. In some occasions there has been worst deterioration in the quality of teaching in rural schools. But in 21<sup>st</sup> century, the age of globalization, it has become quite necessary to explore and exploit the whole human resource and that to the process has to begin from the very young age, which compels to trigger it with the hands of the teacher in schools.

To achieve these goals emphasis has been on the teacher development and the teacher training in the country for last few decades. To reach the millions of teachers in a very short period of time many skill development programmes have been organized in the cascading model, which has yielded something, though not up to the level of expectation of the planning. The main reason for such failure is the inappropriate assignment of role for the teacher who is the key engineer of the classroom. It has not been realized that not all the classrooms in this vast country are equal, not all the learners in all those classrooms are same and not the expectation of all those learners is one and alike. Today even there are first generation school goers in our classrooms, who move without a goal for tomorrow and whose school-bags are packed with numerous economic, social and psychological hazards. The

whole skill and the whole professional maturity of the teacher is never enough to overcome these obstructions for the education of these learners. It demands for a new role for the teacher, that is, not the role of a professional teacher, rather it is the role of an activist. And that role is not to be confined to the classroom only; it needs to be extended far beyond the classroom, in the remote corners of the country, deep in the society.

One of the main reasons that restructuring has failed so far is that there is no underlying conception that grounds what would happen within new structures. Restructuring has caused changes in participation, in governance, and in other formal aspects of the organization, but in the majority of cases, it has not affected the teaching-learning core and professional culture (Berends 1992, Fullan 1993). *To restructure is not to reculture.* The professional teacher, to be effective, must become a career-long learner of more sophisticated pedagogies and technologies and be able to form and reform productive collaborations with colleagues, parents, community agencies, businesses, and others. The teacher of the future, in other words, must be equally at home in the classroom and in working with others to bring about continuous improvements.

## II. Classrooms in Rural India

A classroom is ordinarily defined as a 'room' where classes are held for the learners from pre-primary to universities. Unfortunately, such definitions did not include the learners; rather the focus is on the room. Even when the learners gathered inside the room are included in the definition, the classroom can never be complete, because there are still millions of out-of-school children who deserve and demand a space in these classrooms. (*According to the All India School Education Survey, 2009-10 there were 22 million out-of-school children in the age group of 6-14 years out of which 70% never attended a school*) An analysis of the existing classroom would give a very complex picture and the classrooms in rural India are even more complex. There are a huge proportion of students who belong to below poverty line (BPL) families and out of the rest another big proportion of students belong to families under non-creamy layer. So there is a big mass of students who come to school unfed or underfed and they eagerly wait for the lunch bell to ring up. Such economic imbalance leads to many other problems, which make the classroom situation too difficult to handle. There is a huge sociological diversity in these classrooms. It can be due to religion, caste, tribe etc. These factors

lead to differences in the beliefs, customs traditions etc and in some occasions they are detrimental to each other. Usually most of the students in Indian classrooms (both rural and urban) are multilingual, but they do not come with the same languages. In some cases scarcely do the students and teachers share a language among them all. There is also heterogeneity in the classroom in the intelligence, academic performance, learning strategy etc. In India attempts have never been made to make the classes homogeneous, nor had there been any experiment to study the feasibility of homogeneous classes in our context.

Unlike the developed countries the Indian classrooms are always very large. Sometimes it is four to five times bigger in size than the classrooms of the developed countries. The learner-teacher ratio in Sweden in elementary classes is 9:1, in USA it is 15:1 and in India it is 40:1 at primary level and 35:1 at upper primary level. The ratio in India mentioned here is the set target by the Right To Education (RTE), the existing ratio is much worse than the target (A sample study conducted in 2014 reports that only 49% schools maintain this set ratio).

According to the Tenth Annual Status of Education Report of India- 2014, out of all children enrolled in Standard V, about half cannot read at Standard II level and 76% enrolled in Standard VIII can read Standard II level. Only 44% enrolled in Standard VIII can do simple arithmetic operation, which they should have learnt by Standard IV. It is a clear indication that the minimum level of learning (MLL) set for each standard has been a blank concept. It has remained a concept of the policy makers only. It is far away from the educational administration, the practicing teachers, the assessors, the supervisors, the education boards both at centre and in states etc. So the chronological age of the students and their level of learning have no match at all.

As discussed earlier, the rural Indian classrooms are quite different from the classrooms of the developed countries and they are even different from their counterparts in the urban areas of India. These classrooms have pedagogic issues to be solved, but they are more loaded with the social issues. In a study conducted by the author in six secondary schools in rural areas of Balasore district in Odisha state in India it was found that 18% students were orphans (either mother or father or both dead). The parents of 3% percent students were separated. More than 30% students had to assist their parents in their work to earn bread. Many students did not disclose about their family quarrels, but it is an assumption and apprehension that for more than 50% students it is 'yes'. More than 65% students belonged to families below poverty line (BPL) and only 4% belonged to families of creamy layer. Most of the children do not get parental support for their education, instead some parents oppose to their children going to school.

So the rural Indian classroom is complex not because of the structure only, it is rather because of the facts what the learners carry to the classroom. It can be the academic ability, psychological factors, mental agonies, sociological elements or economic disparities- all these play a very crucial role in their involvement and performance in the classroom.

Despite all these frustrating characteristics, there are dreams budding and hopes glowing in the children of the rural Indian classrooms. These dreams need to get the true shape and the hopes need to get the right direction.

### III. Role of the Teacher: Obstacles & Opportunities

The role of the teacher has always been central in any education system in any land. Even in the Learner-centre approach or in

the Learning-centre approach the teacher's role has of course undergone a shift, but it has never been minimized or withdrawn. The teachers have remained the key persons and they will remain so in all coming times. But in the age of globalization the Indian classrooms are certainly trailing behind the developed countries in many aspects. It has not been possible to give entry to all the best performing teachers to our classrooms. In some instances though there are teachers with good potential, they have not been able give their best, not the governance has been able to extract the best from them. Taking the ability, attitude and performance we can put the teachers into three main categories- a mechanical teacher, teacher as a professional and teacher as an activist.

There have been tremendous changes in the education system in India over last few decades through different commissions, committees, policies etc. The role of the teacher and the learner has been redefined from time to time. But the policy decisions have been made in the top-down process, when it needed to be inclusive. The importance of the teacher's presence has been least felt and so the contribution of the teacher has been minimum or sometimes invisible in this process. It has led to a silent resistance to the policies and the new practices from the teachers. Second, we have believed more in the statistics and been satisfied with the quantitative performance and achievement of our education system. The teacher gets least autonomy in his practice, let alone think of any scope for research by the teacher in the classroom and for the classroom. This has made the teacher act like a member of an ordinary occupation. The teacher is no more an intelligentsia. The administrative set up of the country, of the educational policies and administration etc does not have any such provision for the teachers. They are expected to work as puppets in the hands of the people at the top. How can such a teacher be considered something more than a machine or a loud speaker. S/he does not have anything in their own hands like power to take a decision according to the needs of their children. Jenny Ozga observes:

*Teaching is going through a period of crisis, from which it is likely to emerge as different in significant ways from teaching as it was characterized in the 1960s, the 'zenith' of teachers' professional autonomy.*

From the opinions of Farber it can be inferred that many characteristics possessed by the mechanical teachers is the product of the policy and governance system. According to him:

"Many teachers begin their careers with a sense that their work is socially meaningful and will yield great personal satisfactions. This sense dissipates, however, as the inevitable difficulties of teaching ... interact with personal issues and vulnerabilities, as well as social pressure and values, to engender a sense of frustration and force a reassessment of the possibilities of the job and the investment one wants to make in it."

Teachers as professionals are one step ahead of these mechanical teachers. The professional teachers possess good decision making skill, pedagogic skill and knowledge, ability of selecting, adapting and writing materials for their classrooms, creating motivation in the learners, designing syllabus according to the emerging situation in the classrooms. Are our teachers professional enough? Certainly the answer is 'no'. The teachers in the developed countries are much more professional than the teachers of India. The teachers there are taken into trust and therefore they are made part of the syllabus designing process, curriculum designing process etc. The decisions are less top-down in those contexts and hence the teacher has more autonomy in the teaching-learning process. It leads to the self-fulfilment of the teachers and ultimately it benefits

the learners and the society as a whole. There is huge benefit in making a teacher professional and giving them autonomy. Such teachers always remain prepared to take charge of their own classroom. They take pride in being part of the process and product of education. They set their own goals, contribute their best, inspire the students and parents and build trust in their learners for the best achievement of the system.

But being a professional is not enough for the rural Indian classrooms. What should be the role of a teacher in such a classroom? Is being professional enough for a teacher working in such context? In such classrooms the economic, social and psychological factors seriously influence the academic performance of learners. A teacher as a professional can influence the academic performance only. But the teacher in the rural Indian classrooms has to play a different role as a social and educational activist. The UCLA TEP made an agenda for social justice in 2002 saying that:

The racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity is our asset and we will add on this by constructing high quality education for all children, particularly for low-income, children of colour.

It is more than true to the Indian context. All these diversities exist here, but they are perceived as liabilities or obstacles. They must be turned into assets. First of all, the teacher has to create awareness among the parents and the children for education. S/he has to create conditions for learning in his/her immediate environment, i.e. both inside and outside the classroom. They need to have implicit motivation to learn. There shall be no force which can stop them learning, which can keep them away from school. Second, besides the learners' psychological background, the teacher will have to understand their family and social background. He needs to establish an intimate relationship with them and plan his school activities accordingly. He needs to explore all the huddles before the learners and possibilities of eradicating these huddles to bring them back to the classroom and bring smile for them. The educational law, the policy, the system may not provide the teacher ample opportunity to enjoy autonomy. But the teacher will have to move away from the corridor, build scope for autonomy to bring changes in the classroom, in the learners and in the society. S/he needs to understand the flaws of the educational policies, rules etc and made his/her contribution for finding scope for supporting the unprivileged learners. Third, the teachers will have to develop a risk-taking mentality and ability in them. It can redefine their roles not only in the classroom, but also in the society.

#### IV. A New Role for The Teacher

Education International, which represents over 23 million teachers worldwide, once declared "Teachers, A Force for Social Change" as the theme for World Teachers' Day. When we look at the classrooms of rural India, one will agree that the teacher is the key person to success in these classes. The teacher will have to take a new responsibility to enable change happen. He must accept change, he must be a model of change and he must be an agent of change. Besides being an educator and a knowledge builder, the teacher has to shoulder the increasing social responsibilities and play a new role as an activist. There are a lot of potential minds in those classrooms and there are eyes full of colourful dreams too. Simply being a professional cannot feed those hungry minds and hungry eyes. We need to give right direction and right pace to these dreams. A teacher who is socially conscious will certainly accept impressive responsibility of those innocent souls and will entrust himself to advocate for the young lives. He would realize

that this is the community his generation is going to inherit and move his first step of a giant action.

Cesar Chavez so eloquently wrote,

"Once change begins, it cannot be stopped:

You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read.

You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride.

You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore."

(*"Address to the UFW" 7<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Convention*, September 1984, pg. 121)

The biggest role of the teacher seems to be building dreams in the children and in the society and work for a sustainable impact of it. They need to be the friends of the children, and beyond that they need to play the role of a mentor of the children. They are the person who can inspire the children to hold their dreams tight. S/he may have to break the rules, but to give the benefit to the underprivileged or unprivileged; to reach the unreached. Social activism begins the moment one feels responsible instead of pity for others. Once this process begins social huddles like poverty, gender discrimination, superiority or inferiority complexes will all go away. It is high time for the today's teachers to have the ignition of social activism.

#### V. Conclusions

Once the students understand themselves and their role and goal; once they realize that "Education is Power"; once they realize that they hold within themselves all the power they need to change the world – once they know all this- we can rest assured that these students will take good care of the generations to come. It will bring equal opportunities for all, make us think and act from global perspectives. All teachers working in the rural India or like situation schools need to act as agents of change as a moral duty and foster social change in their classrooms to create a socially just society. All teachers must go beyond the entrusted basic responsibilities and adopt the social justice pedagogy for the reconstruction of the nation and as a whole for the wellbeing of the mankind.

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## Author's Profile



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