

## **Review**

# **Rejoinder: teacher, teacher, where are you?**

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### **Abstract**

*With fast changing social and economic milieus of society, our education system and especially teachers are put into compartment of scrutiny. Subjects and topics are taught in class as if they are static, emotionless, compartmentalised and predictable. An attempt has been made to highlight the relationship that needs to be institutionalised in the educational system between teacher-student to make the learning process a dynamic wheel for change. Education is about understanding the values of what one teaches, studies and has respect for that [un]learning. This paper attempts to explore the identifiable characteristics of teachers-student relationship, which tries to defy the persisting narration sickness believed to have permeated in the existing educational institutions.*

**Key words:** Education, Teacher, Student, Institutions.

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## **Introduction**

Definitely education cannot be only seen as an opportunity to gain employment. The role of education and its influence in

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creating enabling social structure should be beyond gainful employment. And in this, teacher plays a pivotal role. Khalil Gibran (1923) aptly said this in the following lines:

*“The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness. If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.”*

It is imperative to construe how Gibran has beautifully visualised the role of teacher for disseminating faith, love and pushing the limit of mind to threshold, rather than only aim at attaining gainful wisdom to achieve monetary pleasure, as the present fashion of education and educational institutions. In Tosaria’s (2009) article Prof. Krishna Kumar raised a question ‘does the right to education also give the right to undergo the ‘characteristic experience?’. Definitely right to education is fundamental right of any free society. But Prof. Kumar’s question also raised the issue - whether education has to be limited to the textbook learning or the horizon of knowledge has to expanded with dynamic teacher- student relationship to undergo the ‘characterise experience’. I do believe that this ‘characteristic experience’, does not imply only textbook learning but also to make students think beyond it. I take this ‘characteristic experience’ as a teacher-student relationship that ventures into the railroad of education system from elementary education to specialised higher studies to build a healthy society. I would take forward this note from Tosaria’s article and critically explore from my own experiences of learning

through different stages of life about this ‘characteristic experience’, keeping teacher-student relationship in focus. Based on my experiences as a student, this article carves out few identifiable and unique qualities of teacher-student relationship. These qualities I believe has potential to build educational institution with a purpose of creating curious observers and students for the society, rather than crafting employable commodities for the market.

### **Lecture of Dr R. Mashelkar**

It was in the year 1998; I was studying in class XII<sup>th</sup>. Inadvertently, one day when I switched on Delhi Doordarshan national channel, live telecast of inaugural lecture of Indian Science Congress, by Dr. R. Mashelkar (then Director General of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research) was running. In his insightful lecture he narrated a story of his school days, which made him to pursue his career in science. Dr. Mashelkar shared that in his physics class, students were given the task of measuring focal length of convex lens. Using the standard method of putting convex lens on stand and adjusting its focal point made everyone frustrated. At that time Mr. Bhave (who taught Physics to Dr. R. Mashelkar) came and told students to ‘look’ beyond the horizon of ‘book’, to explore new things. Mr. Bhave took all the students outside the classroom in sunlight. He took a piece of paper, moved the lens till the brightest spot located on the paper, and told the student that the distance between the paper and the lens was the focal length. Mr. Bhave held the lens for some time and then the paper burnt. He turned towards the students and said “if you can focus your energies like this and not diffuse them you can burn

(emphasis to achieve) anything in the world”. I stand in awe for those moments when teachers like Mr. Bhave elevated their students’ horizon from narrow approach of ‘book’ to broader bioscope of ‘look’, in pursuit of knowledge.

### **School days**

I remained amazed to remind myself of my Hindi teacher at my secondary school, who used to get unparalleled respect from students. It’s usual in school campus to see students giving proper respect (*‘pranam’* by touching the feet) to Mr. Mishra (my Hindi teacher) in front of other teachers. Definitely this is like stealing show from demanding teachers of Math, Physics and Chemistry, who prepare students for most sought after professions of engineering and medicine during school days. Although I was one of the followers of him in those days, I was never fussed to decipher this riddle of what features of Mr. Mishra made students to pay such a proper salutation, respect and attention in front of other teachers. It is only when I reached on the ladder of higher studies, I realised how devoid is our educational system in building a good character in students. Four years back (in summer of 2008), I met Mr. Mishra and after offering my *pranam*, I asked him gently - what you teach to students in class that made them to give you so much respect, in spite of being a language teacher, which is definitely not a lucrative choice for Indian students? He smiled very fondly and gave a simple answer – “in addition to teaching, I request students to respect their elders, colleagues, and friends; in that list the first and foremost ones are your parents and teachers. I remind them this lesson of respect year long during my teaching with one or other way in and outside

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the class. I feel this may be something to do with the respect that I get from students”. I never realised this, until I tickled my memory on that day about Mr. Mishra’s teaching and visualised that how his every class has been a lesson not only for learning Hindi but also for learning to give and gain respect from others, which got imbibed as part of regular habit without any identifiable notice.

### **At Modular Lab**

During my graduate days (October 2002), I got the chance to present a paper on ‘Nuclear Science and Technology’ at Bhabha Atomic Research Center (BARC), Mumbai. Being at the centre which attracts best and beautiful minds always leads a person to feel proud of oneself at the tender age of 20s. I was no different at that time, in addition to twenty nine other who joined me for the seminar from all over India. During our ten days stay at the BARC we met many eminent nuclear scientist and physicists like Dr. R. Chidambaram, Dr. A. Kakodakar, Dr. Raja Ramanna and others. I was astonished to see that they are more open to listen to us rather than teaching us what they had done. Definitely this is something difficult to find in Indian teaching system, which suffers from narration sickness. In one of seminar break we were offered ice cream. Like other few students, including me, not able to locate (may be deliberately when one is on cloud nine) dustbin we put the wrapper of the ice cream at the corner of big spacious dining hall of MODULAR Lab. However, few minutes later I observed something which made me feel shameful and to imbibe a learning to carry for the entire life. I saw Dr. R. Chidambaram (then Scientific Advisor to Prime Minister and eminent nuclear scientist) carrying the wrapper of ice cream toward the

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dustbin (which was away at corner) and on the way he picked up few wrappers from floor dropped by someone else. Definitely I (and many others) didn't think that a person of such stature would do that. This became a matter a discussion for few of us. Meanwhile Dr. Raja Ramanna joined our discussion and asked – do you know why a person like Chidambaram carries the wrappers and drops in the dustbin? All of us have no answer, as we ourselves didn't do the same. Dr. Ramanna benignly smiled and said – ‘if you are humble, you learn, if you carry ego with your stature and knowledge, you break down, not only in your learning curve but also in making other's to learn from you. I hope today you learned a lot from Chidambaram’. Now, I realised how important it is to be humble, if one want to learn. Because, humbleness prepares a person to improve his / her own weakness and make one acceptable to extreme criticism by others. And the absence of humbleness blinds a person to own critic and closes the door of knowledge creation and re-creation.<sup>1</sup>

### **Post Graduate Days**

‘Every object has its elastic and plastic limits. As a teacher, I know the elastic limit of students.’ This is the famous dialogue I used to listen from Professor Chandra during my post graduate days. Professor Chandra was one of the members who designed academic calendar for our four semesters M. Sc. programme, which included classes, assignments, presentation, projects, field visits etc. Not to say as other students I too was exhausted in class to my limits, which had blocked thinking of anything else for two years. In those days, the cultural heart of Delhi, i.e., India Habitat Centre (IHC; where our

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TERI University campus was situated) became a nightmare for me and my roommate. When we used to go by bus on Lodhi Road, we could not even bear to see toward IHC, rather we used to see *Mausam Bhavan* (India Meteorological Department) just opposite to IHC. It was usual to see someone from class crying every weekend under the pressure we had in and out of classes. At one stage, I also thought of quitting the M. Sc. programme and go back to Gorakhpur (my home town). But somehow fate decided otherwise. As time rolled on, I gradually reached to the end of the course and found that this extreme tactic of stretching to elastic limit for two years of academic life had led me to understand my own weakness and strengths of personal character and how to manage to work with others. It's been more than six years since I left my post graduate *alma mater*; however the confidence in doing hard work and achieving unachievable still remain afloat from the learning I had at the University.

### **Two Months Project**

To fulfil the requirement of post graduate degree at TERI University, all the students had to do a minor project. As student of TERI University we had option of choosing project guide either from University or from TERI. Choosing the guide from TERI opened multiple and excellent options for me and other students. For the same I also ran around the University and TERI campus with all my imaginary ideas. Having interest on issues of energy and environment, I discussed my idea with Professor Sudip Mitra, who has distinguished career and had carried out his PhD thesis from International Rice Research Institute. He was approached by two-three other

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students of total seventeen in my class and finally he selected me to guide. I told him that I wanted to study the process of how to break the methane cycle from rice plant, which is the major source of green house gas emission worldwide. Definitely the idea was not workable in two months; however he acknowledged my quest for deciphering mystery which was beyond the teaching of classroom course. He talked to me for more than one hour and told me the practical and convincing reasons why I can't take this study for my two months minor project. On one hand I was disappointed for not been able to work on the topic of my interest and on other hand I was pleased with the way Prof. Mitra guided me to understand the issues of doing any [research] work in a given context, time and considering availability of resources. After much discussion we decided to work on 'exploring the district wise emission of methane and nitrous oxide from the paddy fields of Assam.' For that I worked on standard formulae set by the Intergovernmental Panel Climate Change (IPCC), which was cumbersome task for anyone.<sup>ii</sup> I ran around different libraries and government offices restlessly for next one month to collect data for twenty three districts of Assam, for more than twenty five basic data unit points for each district to calculate methane and nitrous oxide emissions. In doing so the only guidance that I used to get from Prof. Mitra was that 'you can visit this library to get that data' and so on and so forth. I got frustrated but in the mean time I had to finish the project also. At last when I submitted the report, he showed me a excel sheet showing details of calculation for India, state wise and patted me for doing the same for district wise for Assam. He posed me a question – what would you have gained or lost if I had given you this excel-sheet at the



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start of project? I did not have the answer at that time; neither Prof. Mitra pressed me to answer, as he was happy with my work. Prof. Mitra came to know that I was weak in written and spoken English, for which I struggled in class during any discussion, presentation and scoring grades. At that time he advised me not to bother about speaking in English and just to focus on narrating the work as story to the audience, as no one else knows better than you. For me it was not my best presentation in English, when I compared the same with other classmates, however my minor project was graded 'A' (outstanding) by the project appraisal committee of the University and also openly appreciated for the effort I put to achieve same. That day I realised that if you have done good work with clear focus, language can never be a hindrance for moving ahead in life. For me these learning's and realisation for doing [research] work would have never been possible without the mentor like Prof. Mitra.

### **Conclusions**

Paulo Freire (1970: 52) said present education system has become lifeless and petrified with narration sickness. In this the teacher has become a narrating subject to his listening objects of students. Issues are taught in class as if it is static, emotionless, compartmentalised and predictable. It is like empty container (the students) which has to be filled by tanker (the teacher). However, when I see the learning that I and many others like me, are acquiring from Dr. Maselkar (his teacher Mr. Bhave), Mr. Mishra, Dr. Chidambaram, Prof. Mitra and many others, I feel that they had collectively defied the Freire's theory of narration sickness present in education system. They are acting to bring about changes by polishing student to go

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through ‘characteristic experience’, which Prof. Krishna Kumar, I hope has envisioned. I did not try to claim about what makes one a good teacher or who can become a good teacher, rather I attempted to highlight the relationship that needs to be institutionalised in the educational system between teacher-student to make the learning process a dynamic wheel for change. True education is about understanding the values of what one studies and have respect for that [un]learning. This cannot be judged in terms of remunerations or pay that one gets in his or her account. As someone said ‘money is one of many [emphasis added] ways of transaction’ with which human race try to live in harmony. Education that undermines other way of exchange really kills the social gene of *Homo sapiens* to make it *Homo economicus*, which is definitely not a welcome step for any true learner, educationist or educational institutions and for society at large.

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<sup>i</sup> The best example on this issue that I can recount is famous ‘Bohr-Einstein debate’ on the structure and explanation of quantum mechanics. In spite of poles apart in their approach to study physical reality and its interpretation in understanding the quantum reality, they never stopped their intellectual fight over famous ‘thought experiment’. For detail on this issue see the section three ‘titans clash over reality’ of book by Kumar (2009).

<sup>ii</sup> Refer to the paper of Bhatia et al., (2004) for understanding the calculations involved in the exploration of emission of methane and nitrous oxide from agricultural field as per IPCC formulae.