

Changing Social Perceptions

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‘Teachers in government institutions do not work, they have a leisurely job, ample holidays, they weave sweaters all day, eat peanuts idly and even if they decide to teach their students once in a week it is more than a boon for them. What after all will the students in these schools end up doing anyway? Not that they have to grow up and take up any prestigious, skill demanding occupations’.

These and many other such perceptions can be found around us even now. Girls are often advised to grow up and join the vocation of teaching because it is considered to be a relatively relaxed job and a job which can allow them ample time to even look after the house and the family. It is true that the times are changing but we must ask that with the changing times, are the social perceptions about teaching and teachers also undergoing any transformation? I do not know much about the other states, but based on my experiences in the state of Uttarakhand I must confess that these commonly held perceptions are becoming outdated. The teachers no more have the time to sit idly in the sparkling sunshine of winter and while away their time popping peanuts and neither do they treat their work with that attitude. They are keen to spend enough time with their students and come up with many new ways to teach them.

The geographical conditions of Uttarakhand are far different from any other state in India. And it is not possible to merely do a Google search sitting in Bangalore or Delhi and understand how different or difficult the circumstances there are. It is like safely sitting on the banks of a river and deliberating on its possible depth- this is impossible as knowing the depth of the river requires one to plunge into the water. So if one were to really know the circumstances in government schools in remote corners of the state one actually has to visit those places.

While the child reaches school he/she already starts feeling breathless, one feels as if even a single step more is not possible. But this is also the time when one recalls the fact that these are the same roads

on which both teachers and students walk miles to reach school every day. Are these difficult terrains and roads on the minds of those who comfortably deliberate on education- related matters? Are they aware of the long distances they travel each day? These everyday hardships? Now despite the fact that conditions have improved and roads have been built- roads that are long, thorny and dangerous , mud filled and slippery but at least there are roads! But what about those schools where even no roads have reached?

Getting to these schools by itself seems like an achievement. After this the whole experience of the school opens up. In a few schools, the children speak smartly in both English and Hindi, freely expressing themselves, asking questions. These children have uniforms, mid-day meals prepared fresh with delicious vegetables, teachers with innovative pedagogy who with immense love strive to work with their students.

To examine the environment and bring new information to the teachers, the children walk through the forests, they know by heart the couplets of Kabir and Rahim and even the children of the primary sections know their meanings well. Sarkhet Primary School’s student, Rahul, is in class 1 and walks 6 kilometres and crosses a river every day to reach school – his willingness and interest to come to school surely have a unique story to tell. There certainly and surely are many ‘Rahuls’ here.

What is evident is that these children are very interested in coming to school and by gaining that interest schools have at least succeeded in their first task. After this many other tasks of the school appear to get fulfilled when one enters the school. Of the many schools that I have travelled to in Uttarakhand, I found the teachers to be free of many worries and concerns. They are enjoying their work and feel that their reward lies in the sparkle in the eyes of the children.

When I was going to a school in Uttarakhand for the first time in 2012 and due to my breathlessness sat down often to rest, a teacher who was

accompanying me said that once we reached to school all my tiredness would vanish. At that time I did not believe her but when I actually reached the site all my tiredness magically faded away. I wondered whether a school could really be so beautiful.

I have studied in a government school myself but never had I imagined that there could be such a school in reality. Children had their originality and whatever they did was with complete freedom. They enjoyed studying and asked many questions.

After having visited many government schools I realised that what was unique and beautiful about them was their student's confidence and originality. They do not look as if they are factory produced. They talk uniquely, behave originally, befriend their teachers and even tell their teachers when they are wrong. It is obvious that the credit for nurturing this ambience goes to their teachers.

It is obvious that the teachers have broken free from the image of those who merely eat peanuts or knit sweaters all day. They teach with full sincerity. If we look at the situation post -NCF, then it is the government schools which are fast moving towards idealising the dream of 'Anandshala' or dream school even though there may be fewer examples of this kind. But at least the teachers in these schools have demonstrated that if one is willing nothing is impossible.

As far as teachers who are complaining is concerned their numbers are on the rise. It is legitimate that their complaints and concerns are serious. Just by seeing some teachers doing their work with happiness and sincerity, building bonds with students and communities do by no means imply that the situation has altered drastically. The point is to bridge the gap between these two realities. We have to understand what the motivation that some teachers enjoy is and where that comes from, an important step ahead can be to expand those circumstances where other teachers can also be motivated.

Sarkhet Primary School teacher Hemlata tells us, 'If children come to us from such faraway places having walked so much, if we waste their time would it not be sinful?' She is worried about the leaking school roof, the mid-day meal and its quality and the children's learning levels too. Dwara Primary School teacher Dipti Ramola says 'No matter how much we work people are going to always associate us with the image of sweater knitters'. But now we laugh off these prejudices. Earlier I used to get infuriated but now I laugh it off'.

It is not the teachers alone who have to change but the social perception of teachers also has to undergo significant change. We must cultivate a sense of trust.