



The Teacher and the Government

Rashmi Shukla Sharma

When we think about the teacher, images of students, classrooms and schools spring up in the mind. We talk about the number of students the teacher teaches, the furniture and teaching aids in the classroom, the type of school, small or large, and the like. These we understand as the context in which the teacher works, and we are aware that the context influences the manner in which the teacher teaches. We are also aware that the curriculum, the textbooks, the pupil evaluation system, the teacher's training as well as the background of the students have a profound influence on the teacher's approach and conduct of the teaching-learning process.

Less often do we think about government, and the manner in which it affects the teacher. We are aware that the government sets the frame in which the teaching-learning process takes place by formulating the curriculum and textbooks, training teachers, laying down the pupil evaluation system etc. These policies clearly have an impact on the teacher, and there are often debates about them among educationists, teachers and people in general. The government also plays a key role in setting the service and working conditions of teachers. Most teachers are government servants, or in some cases, Panchayat employees (Panchayats, as per our constitution, are 'institutions of local government'). The government determines the salary, tenure and other working conditions of teachers. But much less obvious is the fact that teachers are deeply influenced by the way the government itself functions. Teachers work in the organizational ethos and practices within government. The government supervises and supports teachers in various ways and provides several positive as well as negative incentives and signals. These organizational culture and practices within government have a deep influence on the teacher, and consequently, the classroom. Therefore, it is worthwhile, while trying to understand the teacher, to also understand the working of government.

The Indian constitution provides the legal framework in which the government functions. Our constitution clearly supports social equality.

The constitution does not allow discrimination on the basis of caste, community, gender etc. School education, as part of this endeavor, is sought to be made universal. The constitution mandates elementary education as a fundamental right, and each child in the country is entitled to elementary education. And in fact, the spread of government schools since Independence, and the recruitment of a large number of teachers, reflect this constitutional imperative. In this sense, teachers are critical actors for achieving the social goals of our constitution. Our constitution also mandates positive discrimination in favour of underprivileged groups, especially Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). This is reflected in reservations in jobs for teachers, as well as special benefits such as scholarships for SC and ST students.

Further, the constitution lays down the broad structure of government, defining the powers of the union government and the state governments. 'Education' is a matter to be dealt by both. Both tiers of governments play a role, with the union government addressing the broader policy issues, and the state governments taking responsibility for more detailed policy and the general administration of schools. For example, while the union government has legislated the 'Right to Education (RtE) Act', the state governments have made the rules and are responsible for implementing it. The union government takes up programmes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which provide funds to support school education, but the administration of schools, including salaries, working conditions, training and supervision, is with the state governments. Consequently, the infrastructure, pedagogic practices and quality of schools vary across states. The constitution leaves it to the state governments to devolve powers to Panchayats, and across States, we see that the role of Panchayats vis-à-vis schools varies. In several, but not all states, Panchayats appoint teachers.

The overall thrust of the union government has some impact on teachers, but teachers are affected to a much greater degree by the functioning

of state governments. Teachers in government schools are usually state government employees, or Panchayat employees. Only in schools run by the union government, such as central schools and Navoday Vidyalayas, are they employees of the union government. The curricula and textbooks are prepared by the state government, and supervisors and teacher trainers are also state government employees. Because of this, the type of education provided in our schools, teachers' salaries, working conditions etc. vary from state to state.

While school education in India is situated in the constitutional framework outlined above, the constitution alone does not determine the type of government that we have. For example, the constitution promotes social equality and makes special provisions for marginalized groups. This explains the expansion of the outreach of the schools, but it does not explain how these schools function, the types of text books prepared, the kind of teacher training given. These are influenced by the type of government in existence, and the policies followed by it. In turn, the type of government in existence also depends on the political scenario, the bureaucracy, and the processes followed within government.

The Indian democracy, the largest in the world, has been a source of fascination for political scientists, as sustained democracy is rare in the context of low socio-economic development and a high degree of poverty. We can take justified pride in our democracy, but we also need to recognize that the shape that it has taken is very different from the older democracies in developed countries. Our politics has two mutually opposing trends. On the one hand, politicians can only hope to win elections if they are responsive to the needs of citizens. This has often led to energetic action, such as the expansion of the school system, as well as initiatives such as the provision of free textbooks, midday meals, scholarships etc. to students. But our politics also throws up a great deal of corruption and authoritarianism. Citizens in India may vote governments out, but on a day-to-day basis, they face a high degree of corruption and a non-democratic style of functioning.

All government servants in India, including teachers, are affected by this political dynamic. On the one hand, they implement several pro-poor policies, but on the other, they do so in an organizational culture that does not recognize and incentivize

good work or encourage initiative, so that the actual implementation of the policies is unsatisfactory. Teachers who are politically connected may get a posting of their choice and may teach badly, or not at all, with few consequences. In contrast, teachers who are committed to their work may get little recognition within the system, and may even face difficulties, such as continuous postings in difficult areas. This creates an organizational culture where work is devalued, and affects all the people in the government, including teachers, whittling away at their motivation.

The character of the bureaucracy in India too has important repercussions. Our bureaucracy is not adequately professionalized. For example, school supervisors and teacher trainers often do not have adequate pre-service or in-service training for their work. Moreover, a person may hold a certain post, not because he or she is the best possible professional available for it, but because he or she has a particular patron, or has paid money to be given a certain post. As a consequence, we do not have the best possible supervisors and teacher trainers. In addition, once a person gets a post because of patronage or payment of money, their motivation to actually work is quite low. This means that supervisors and trainers are not able to provide a supportive atmosphere to teachers, and this in turn, has negative consequences for the motivation and the morale of all teachers.

The Indian economy has grown rapidly since the mid-1990s, because of which government revenues have grown, and the government now has much more money than it did in the 1950s and the 60s. Because of this, the government has been able to expand the school system substantially as per the constitutional mandate. But, as several political scientists have documented, the influence of patronage and money power in government has also grown in the last three decades. Ironically, after Independence, India began with a low resource base, but a better functioning government. At this time, government schools functioned somewhat better than they do today, but there were far fewer of them. Teachers were far fewer, but those that were there took their responsibilities far more seriously. As the money available with government grew, the functioning of government deteriorated, with the result that we have many more schools, but they function less well.

Another important point that needs to be noted is that, since the 1980s, across the world, there has been serious rethinking about public administration, and 'New Public Management' (NPM) has emerged as a paradigm whereby, rather than having permanent government employees, the tendency has been to hire people on contract, and to outsource work. We can see the impact of this thinking in the large scale hiring of para teachers in several states. While at Independence, the need to expand the size of government and a permanent bureaucracy were accepted widely, since the 1990s, these have been questioned. This has radically altered the working conditions, and consequently, the working style, of teachers in India. Notably, while NPM took root in developed countries in the context of mature democracies,

its dynamics in our newer democracy have been different: we need to examine whether it has exacerbated the play of patronage and corruption in the working conditions of teachers.

To sum up, teachers and their work are situated in the context of our government, as shaped by our constitution, polity, and bureaucracy. As the nature of government changes, a parallel impact on teachers is visible. To understand the teacher, we must not only understand educational policies and practices, but also government itself. Some salient points about government have been highlighted above, but a really detailed understanding of government is needed to fully understand and support the teacher.

Rashmi is an Indian Administrative Service officer of the 1984 batch, allotted to Madhya Pradesh cadre. She has worked at various posts in the Central and State Government, and has spent many years working in School Education and in Panchayati Raj. She has written two books, 'Local Government in India: Policy and Practice' and 'The Elementary Education System in India' (co-edited with Vimala Ramchandran), as well as several articles on education and local government. She may be contacted at rashmishuklasharma@gmail.com