



Acharya to a Service Provider: Travelling without Reaching

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It would be difficult to find a period when teachers and their central role in education was not acknowledged, but not much effort is required to notice the variation in the social status and public image of teachers and role played by them both across time and space. The unquestioned privileged position of the teacher who knew what to teach and how to teach has gone long agoⁱ. The insistence of the state to get maximum return on the public investment in education in the name of teacher accountability has been used to gnaw gradually at teacher autonomy. The State's passing of part of the cost of education to parents has empowered them to the extent that phrases like '*customer satisfaction*' are being used. By appointing para- teachers on different terms and conditions than those applicable to the regular teacher, states have succeeded in destroying the fellow feeling among teachers and instilling a sense of insecurity leading to their abject surrender and unconditional obedience. Consequent change in notions of teaching and teachers' role in relation to the system, students and parents calls for revisiting our understanding of who teachers are.

We are living in a time when our civic and cultural institutions are under siege and the gap between rich and poor is widening and it is the teachers who are being blamed. Most legislatures that have failed to live up to the expectations of the people have focused almost entirely on teaching and teachers. Various ways and means in the name of curriculum, textbooks, teaching methods, scheme of evaluation, teacher education are being tried to make them '*more responsible and accountable*'.

In this context it becomes relevant to know who these teachers are, what status they enjoy and what roles they play or are expected to play. We come across different answers to these and other similar questions that are indicative of a hydra-headed systemic and public perception of teachers and their roles as perceived in the society. Individuals or groups use the one they like to in a particular context. A causal understanding of the endeavor of teaching appears to be the driving force underlying all these understandings where all

that school graduates do or do not do is because of what teachers do or do not do.

The hydra-headed systemic and public image of teachers and their roles can also be seen through the lens of metaphors that have been used around teaching and teachers. Phrases such as teacher as gardenerⁱⁱ; teacher as liberatorⁱⁱⁱ; teacher as parent^{iv}; teacher as an applied scientist^v; teacher as therapist^{vi} are indicative of the distance teaching and teachers have travelled in terms of public perception. Recent additions like teacher as a reflective practitioner and teacher as a professional are to be encountered more frequently today. All this compels to ask the question: Who are these teachers? And what do they do? '*Metaphors that we live by*' systematically and unconsciously structure the way we think, perceive and act in relation to self and others.^{vii} With changing realities and consequent concerns of the modern society the expectations from education too have changed as can be seen in the series of metaphors above. To understand this change one has to use the figure/ground metaphor; the very concept of change becomes empty in the absence of ground, against which the change is to be understood.^{viii}

Understanding teachers' roles and status and the changes that have occurred in the same can be a tricky issue as one can attempt it from various perspectives, whether the general perceptions of teachers, or of the system about who teachers are and what they are supposed to be doing or the views of academicians – philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and others – about teaching and teachers. There is also the teachers own changing image of themselves and their status. Any attempt to understand the changes that have taken place in the perception of teachers' role and status which intends to cover all these dimensions in a single article is a perfect recipe of failure and, trying to understand the changes from only one point of view by ignoring the others for the sake of convenience and feasibility brings the story of seven blind men and an elephant to my mind. What is being attempted here can be seen as a compromise between the two approaches

– considering all versus neglecting all but one – where the status of the teacher is the focus and changes that occur coming from one or more of the dimensions mentioned. Whatever the word ‘teacher’ means and refers to today is to be understood as a cumulative product of the changes that we can trace looking through various lenses mentioned. The article uses the quadrangular framework of Guru (Acharya), functionary, professional and salesman (service provider)^{ix} for studying the changing systemic and public image and consequent social status of teaching and teachers with the earlier one functioning as the ‘ground metaphor’.

Teachers in India today can by no means be called descendants of the centuries-old *guru (acharya)*, but the nostalgia can be found running quite perceptibly in teachers’ talk, public discourse and social expectations. The effect of all this gets reflected in administrators eulogising the role and status of teachers, while belittling the present lot. Present day teachers and their teaching can never acquire the status of Guru as neither do they have the requisite knowledge and spiritual/inspirational qualities, nor is society and the education system willing to leave children and their education exclusively to teachers as was the practice in case of guru, with disciples spending all their time for the whole period of their education (brahmhcharya) away from society, a now non-existent and unrealisable status of teacher. It only make teachers feel guilty that they have let their profession down, a somewhat similar view to the western tradition which looks at teaching as a vocation – a calling. Teachers responding to a call can be understood as the call of God, call of society, and call of her/his own inner self. *“The sense of vocation implies a measure of determination, courage, and flexibility, qualities that are in turn buoyed by the disposition to regard teaching as something more than a job, to which one has something significant to offer.”^x*

Education in British India turned into a State affair and even private schools had to get recognition from the State. School organisation and textbooks were prescribed which schools and teachers were supposed to follow religiously. To ensure the desired school practices inspectors used to visit schools frequently and they were to be satisfied that things were going as per the plan. This gradually eroded both the autonomy of teachers that they used to enjoy in the status of a guru, and caused a change

in society’s attitude towards teachers who were no longer venerable, self-driven knowledge seekers and providers. Those in the job were there only because they couldn’t find anything better. Fear of getting a bad report from the inspector and losing the job turned them into perfect adherents of prescriptions which the inspectors insisted on being followed both in letter and spirit.

After independence, the functionary status of teachers has got further entrenched as the State regularly relies on and entrusts teachers with various sorts of responsibilities intended to further its own agenda. The task of nation building in the aftermath of the past in the name of regions, languages, etc. were passed on to teachers as their natural responsibility. The curriculum, syllabus and textbooks of the time lack authentic and meaningful participation of the teaching community in developing these materials which confirmed their functionary role in education where they were supposed to carry out the wishes and commands of the system. This is happening even today by covert and overt means, despite the explicit restriction imposed by the RtE 2009 on such practices.

The complexity of issues involved in education have attracted the attention of philosophers like Socrates and Plato, and philosophical practices of analysing ideas conceptually, assessing the arguments carefully and drawing finer distinctions with a view to avoid ambiguity^{xi} have been used by the analytical philosophers in the 20th Century to claim a professional status for teaching and teachers.^{xii}

This understanding of the importance of teaching and teachers has been voiced regularly in our policy and national curricular documents consistently since independence. As early as 1948 the policy makers were conscious of the fact that *‘people in this country have been slow in recognising that education is a profession for which intensive preparation is necessary as it is in any other profession’^{xiii}* And as recently as 2010 it was stated starkly – *‘Teaching is a profession and teacher education is a process of professional preparation of the teachers.’^{xiv}* These two quotes, having a time gap of more than fifty years, tell the story of what has happened to the policy intentions. On the one hand the functionary role of teachers has been maintained by getting them involved in all sorts of State’s function and on the other, their participation in decision -making be it in policy making, curriculum development and significant

school related matters has been kept to the barest possible minimum. Both the practices militate against teachers acquiring a professional status as desired by the policy documents.

Using the word 'professional' to refer to a teacher assumes several pre-requisites and characteristics of teaching and teacher like a codified body of knowledge, a community of practitioners, systematic preparation, etc. It also means that teachers provide an important public service and have a power over the life of the young people they teach. But *"the very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept"*.^{xv} Using the word 'professional' for teachers hides the highly contingent nature of the act of teaching where apparently similar issues are to be dealt with in dissimilar ways. One of the major reasons behind this contingent nature of teaching is the nature of knowledge involved – it includes knowledge of the domain that is being taught/learnt along with the knowledge of fields like psychology, sociology, etc. These domains of knowledge are a highly contested area of specialized knowledge in which the teacher cannot lay any claim to be a knowledge creator but simply be a consumer of the established knowledge produced by the experts in the field. The conceptual metaphor of teacher as a professional thus *"hides that teaching involves a continual relationship that has at its center a young person's personal development, the multifaceted accountability relations inherent in teaching, and the public nature of the teaching's knowledge base"*.^{xvi} A large number of academicians' and practitioners' insistence upon using the metaphor despite its limitations can at best be understood as a rhetorical device which is believed to enable and empower teachers.

Yet another strand of perception of teachers is that of a salesman who is preferably looked upon as one who offers her/his services in lieu of the salary given to her/him. A teacher's work, though, is unlike other service providers in an important

respect. Service providers are sure about who their client is which is not true in case of teaching, who is the client - the child, parents, State, employers, or society as a whole as all are stakeholders in one or the other sense? This multiplicity of clientele with incompatible interests, more often than not, makes it difficult for a teacher to decide how to proceed to the task of teaching. Children are neither aware nor independent enough to state their expectations explicitly; though interests of children can serve as an indicator. In addition, looking at child as a client is against the fundamental tenets of the relationship between the client and the service provider being consensual as child cannot give his/her consent. The power relation between the child and the parents is always tilted in favour of the latter. Though the state has passed on the cost of education partially to the parents, it still maintains its stranglehold on education and teachers by managing the finances. However, parents, since they are sharing the cost of their child's education, are making increasingly greater demands on what a teacher should and should not do. Employers are exerting a very subtle but incisive influence on teaching as they are the ones who employ their learners – emphasis on *'skillisation of education'* should be seen in this context. One can easily appreciate the predicament of a teacher being torn apart by the pulls and pressures from different directions to which her/his theoretical understanding of education and teaching adds further dilemmas.

To conclude, it is difficult to assign a title to the teacher today. Firstly, she or he does not have the faith of the society required for a guru. Secondly, parents have become so demanding that he/she cannot be a functionary. Thirdly, professionalism needs much more time, resources and autonomy than teachers are given. Fourthly, she/he cannot be a service provider because of the multiplicity of stakeholders and incompatibility of their interests. It is important to clarify this ambiguity about who the teachers are and what their job is if they are to be efficient and effective.

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