

Recently, we celebrated *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*, a glorious 75 years of India's independence. This means that we have been an independent country for 75 years and have our own Constitution in which we set out lofty values which we as a nation would like to follow to build a new India. However, it is evident that we have taken very little action in creating awareness about these Constitutional values – we have not made the Constitution accessible for reading or making children understand/ internalise the real meaning of the constitutional values. Studies show that values are actually acquired by children between the ages of 5-7 years and our efforts as a nation, society and individuals towards achieving these values have been inadequate. This article highlights what just one person can achieve if there is the will to do so.

A teacher on a mission

Shekhar Nayak, an assistant teacher in the Government Lower Primary School, Godinal, (Koppal district, Karnataka) is a teacher who attempts to practise Constitutional values in life. This school is in a remote community which has little knowledge about schooling or education. The small school campus has just three concrete rooms with a stone carving of the Preamble of the Constitution of India welcoming visitors at the entrance. A student reads out the Preamble and others follow her/him as a part of the daily school assembly so that by class V, every one of them is easily able to repeat the Preamble from memory.

Shekhar Nayak tries to use every opportunity he gets to instil Constitutional values in the children by:

- Equality: respecting children by calling them by their proper names; respecting physical appearance and socio-economic backgrounds; and treating all genders equally
- Liberty: allowing all children to speak, letting them sit in the place where they want to
- Fraternity: encouraging empathy for one another, teamwork, and appreciation of each others' work

He does this through what he calls 'the democratic process' practised everywhere – from the school assembly to the classroom. From a circular seating arrangement to giving importance to each child to open up during discussions, appreciating every child's opinion, and questioning them to understand and explore what is right and wrong. This has helped him gain trust and build a close rapport with both the children and the community. His sensitivity towards educating girls is appreciable and has contributed to increased enrolment every academic year. Currently, it is 142, with more girls than boys in the school.

Shekhar Nayak's attitude towards children and education has helped him in developing a classroom practice in which the teacher, both individually and together with the children, has set a few norms. These include a circular seating arrangement to ensure that the teacher and each student are visible to everyone during discussions and the teacher joins the children for the midday meal. Listening to others and appreciating each one's opinions, raising hands and waiting for their turn to ask questions or share their opinions during discussions are the norms the students follow, and which have helped Shekar Nayak's students in developing a sense of respect towards each other.

Initially, it was challenging for him to make children open up during conversations but by becoming one among them; contextualising their situations and connecting every discussion to children's lives, he has been able to achieve this. He says that being democratic is not very easy because it is an entirely new way of looking at things which takes time to get used to.

The process

Shekhar Nayak initiated this democratic process by giving children non-academic responsibilities, such as celebrating national festivals, inviting children's inputs on how to conduct festivals and inviting parents and the community to such celebrations. He started this with a small group of children

and saw positive changes in their behaviours and, gradually, their academic performance. The teaching-learning process has been very successful, with 95 percent of children from class III and above having achieved reading with comprehension and independent writing skills, as well as the four basic operations in maths.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, he visited every child's home and created two learning groups for children in public places near their homes. He invested half a day with each group ensuring their learning. He also supported individual children, whose parents were hesitant to send them to community classes because of the pandemic, by visiting their homes.

Additionally, children's questions on superstitions led him to organise community events to address these.

Four-point programme

Shekhar Nayak's democratic process emphasises the following points:

1. The Preamble of the Constitution of India should be made accessible to everyone. Presently, it is very hard to find it in public places, like offices and schools in the country. Displaying

the Preamble on the walls of schools will give it greater visibility and children, even if they are unable to understand its meaning, will at least see it regularly and tell others about it. This can be considered as the first step towards creating a notion of the society we want to create.

2. Most adults struggle to recall even the first two or three lines of the Preamble. The reading of it, along with the national anthem, during the daily school assembly should be made mandatory.
3. Real values are acquired not by what we say, but by what we practise and demonstrate. When children make mistakes either in the classroom or outside, the adults in charge should be seen to be practising the principles of the Preamble so that children follow their example without actively being prompted to do so.
4. Learning actively about democracy helps children receive the respect they deserve, irrespective of age, helps them voice their opinions and be open to accepting others' opinions, develops communication skills and the critical thinking required for scientific temper. Teamwork and collaboration should also be encouraged.



Figure 1. Government Lower Primary School, Godinal

Shekhar Nayak says, 'It is sensitivity and respect towards others, irrespective of their age, that has helped me to develop the concept of the democratic school process. Creating opportunities for every

child to speak and to question and respecting socio-economic and religious diversities has helped me to achieve these outcomes.'



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All of us have different identities, some of which are ascribed to us by societal and economic structures, such as caste, gender, class, religion, etc. All of these play a role in deciding our day-to-day choices as well as experiences. This applies to classroom spaces as well. This is where our role as a teacher or facilitator comes in – to navigate and address social, psychological and political aspects that shape our lives.

Isha Badkas, Comprehensive Sexuality Education | A Spectrum of Possibilities, p 49