

The Mahatma's beliefs remain vital to school education

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The clear blue sky and the bracing air were to revel in, and enough to distract from the overflowing muck of the open drain outside the school. Just another winter day in a small town in north India. All rooms were chilly, as they are in January—particularly classrooms. One among many things that haven't changed from my childhood. Much like the ritual of paying homage to Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January.

With over a hundred kids of classes 6 to 8 jostling around in the soothing sunlight out in the playground, the Martyr's Day function was anything but solemn. After the mandatory 2-minute silence, six kids were lined up in front to make speeches on what they had learnt from the Mahatma. No effort had been made by teachers to include and encourage the lesser speakers. These six were clearly the most confident and proficient at speechmaking. The function was designed to impress us outsiders, not to give an equitable opportunity to children.

We must speak the truth and never lie. Unsurprisingly, that was the gist of the first speech. The other five were as anticipatable. We must be non-violent. Hard work is the key to all success. Cleanliness is next to godliness. All Indians are our brothers and sisters, irrespective of religion, caste and region. We must love our nation and dedicate our life to it.

All rehearsed but sincere. Only children of that age can say such things with true sincerity. Yet uninfected by scepticism spawned by experience, and with unsullied dreams of the future.

The children trooped to different parts of the playground after the function in three groups. Regular classes started in the comfort of the sunlight, avoiding the classrooms. I joined the class 8 group with about 30 students and one teacher. The students wanted to chat with me, which is what the teacher wanted as well.

Since I had already been introduced at the function, the usual preliminaries were dispensed with. They wanted to know why I was visiting their school. Whether schools in Bangalore were also like their school. And whether I would help the school in some way. The conversation moved to the Mahatma and the speeches at the function. All those things that they said and heard; did they practise them? The answers were without artifice.

We lie. Sometimes, many times. We fight. We often hit someone or the other. We want to play, not work hard. The drain tells you how clean we are. Many of our houses are worse. Many of our houses are clean but that is because we throw the garbage outside. Loving your nation—it's not clear what that means. In any case, we would rather become a policeman, actor, collector, and more, rather than dedicate our life to the nation. Since the British have been thrown out, it may not even be required.

Then what's the point of Martyr's Day? What's the point of remembering the Mahatma?

It is enormously useful, they said. He tells us right from wrong. Else, with the behaviour of most adults around us, we don't even know what is right. He tells us that one can live in the right way because he actually did.

We underestimate the profound influence of exemplars at that impressionable an age. A view jaded by our lives and experience. For the young ones starting out in life, such stories matter. Even more so if they are real. In the sophistication and refinement of our educational thought, we must retain and build on these basics. In the content of education, in the discussions held in classrooms, and in the rituals of our schools. With every blow against the Mahatma and his ideas in our adult world, their value only increases in the classroom.

But there is more that our education can keep learning from the Mahatma, because he thought, wrote and did a lot in education.

First, education develops capacities and values in individuals, and these must be aligned with and arising from the vision of the society that we are striving to build. His educational ideas and practice were integral to and arising from his vision of India. We need to do the same, with our Constitution as the vision of our country; and this requires striving every day, as it is plainly insufficient to embed these in our policies and curricular design.

Second, that this striving every day is about the teaching methods and approach—the pedagogy—which is what brings any such thing to life. Mere affirmations of intention mean nothing. Life and experience in school must be coherent with these goals. His 'nai taalim' attempted that.

Third, practice leads to theory and theorizing, and not the reverse. One must be able to do something in real life, on the ground, and draw lessons from it, abstract from it ideas, which can then be used as theory. To be changed or refined, as new experiences accumulate from the practice of education. It is astounding how disconnected from this basic principle our institutions and system leaders mostly are. Most of them need a heavy dose of the Mahatma's methods.

In the winter sun, the kids at the school did not want to let me go. They had a lot of questions. If we can try to learn from him, why can't adults? Why do they behave like they do? What about our leaders? His life tells us that leaders can be good, and they can

improve things. But almost all our leaders seem bad. With such leaders, we would never have got freedom from British rule. Wish he was still here.

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