

# Opinion | The need to reimagine the place of schools in society

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He was running full-tilt across the misty courtyard shouting out to me. It seemed he would topple over with every stride, but didn't. Four-year-olds run like that. I stopped and waited for him. He halted just short of crashing into me and thrust something into my hand. It was a five rupee coin. "Yeh le lo, aur ghar jao, beti ke pass (take this and go home to your daughter)," he said. In a momentary flash of wisdom, curbing my instinct to return the coin, I took it and said, "Shukriya". He hugged my legs, his head below my waist, and a big smile on his face. He then turned around and ran back to his class across the school courtyard.

The boy was older than 6, but a life of poverty, with its severe nutritional deprivation, had stunted his physical growth, making him look like a four-year-old. That winter morning, I had spent an hour and a half in his class. It was a mixed group of six- and seven-year-old children. We had great fun chatting about their village, my faraway city, their school and much more. They refused to let me go, delaying my next school visit. When all arguments failed, I told them that my daughter was waiting for me at home. My daughter must really have been waiting, as she always does through my endless travels. They turned in that one moment, asked me to take some snaps with them, and then let me go.

Every child had instantaneous empathy, but this boy was so moved that he gave me all the money he had. He had heard how far my home was and wanted to help me get to my daughter. When I was leaving the school, I gave the coin to the head teacher, requesting him to give it to the boy in a manner such that he doesn't have to tell him that I returned the coin. Actually, I had searched for another five rupee coin to give to the head teacher. I still have the coin the child gave me. I am a hoarder of sentiments.

The hoard is large. It has chipped pens, dried flowers, a red ribbon, old chocolate, sea shells, and many more memories. A boy with a skull cap, sharing his meagre meal with another boy on a small steel plate. A girl struggling with a water hand-pump in the scorching sun for goats that had drifted into the school compound from the miles of desert sand outside. Two boys coming early to school every day to help push the vegetable cart of the elderly neighbour of the school up the steep mountain-side to the bazaar.

After 15 minutes in the class of the boy who gave me the coin, I had to break up a scrap. At the back of the cold classroom, darkened by the winter mist outside, two boys were hitting another boy viciously. My stern voice, in sharp contrast with the playfulness till then,

worked. They stopped and I asked them to come and sit in the front.

After things had settled down, and the mood had again become playful, I asked them what had happened. One of them said, “Badmash hai (he is naughty)”. I asked why? He said, “Bangali hai (he is a Bengali)”. I asked what did he do? He just repeated with greater emphasis, “Bangali hai”. In the minds of those two seven-year-olds, being Bengali meant being bad. The viciousness was their own, the prejudice was socially planted. In that district of the Hindi heartland, there are many Bengali settlements dating back to 1947.

The generosity of children is boundless. Empathy and compassion springs from natural wells in their hearts. As does spite, pettiness and prejudice. All with complex social reinforcements.

We don't need to settle the eternal question about human nature, whether it is good or bad. We know that schools play a significant role in the life of children, beyond knowledge acquisition, even if they do so unwittingly. Schools can tease out and develop both the good and the bad. They can deepen the wells of natural empathy or harden the walls of prejudice.

Almost all educators will endorse such a social-human role of schools as vital. But, in reality, the average school doesn't do this. The design and investment of our education system has not built schools that consciously develop the good. Only a few exceptional schools do so, energized by independent enlightened teachers. The inherent generosity and empathy of our children fades to the adult average as they grow up. Every day in our million schools, we have billions of opportunities to build a more humane world, but we squander these.

For schools to systematically develop the good that is there in the wells of human nature, we have to reimagine the place of schools and teachers in society. Only that can fuel the energy and will required to change the messy reality of the vast education system. It would be a ground-up reconstruction of all aspects: curriculum, teacher preparation and management, investment in physical resources, assessment, administrative and governance culture, leadership, and more.

If Jawaharlal Nehru had called schools “temples of modern India”, instead of the dams and steel plants, it may have led to a different organizing principle for the development of India.

We still have the opportunity. Perhaps schools can be the temples of new India, with the constitutional values as the sacred good, tapping in to the endless reservoir of generosity that children have.

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