

Teachers deserve trust and support

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October 11, 2017



His greying, closely cropped hair, and the white short-sleeved shirt, accentuated the strength of his body. We sat across a large table made of wooden planks. It was a sparse room with some steel cupboards. Drenched in sweat, my shirt was clinging to me. That the sun blazes with such intensity in end-September was unknown to me. The sand dunes around were smouldering. The air had 83% humidity. He looked cool and comfortable. I will not name him, because I want to protect his identity.

He told me that he was a child of the desert, born somewhere beyond those dunes. His family had enough means to be called middle class. He went to school in his village and then the government college in the nearby town. At 22, he got selected in the state police and became a constable. After his training he was posted to a nearby kasba. It was a matter of great prestige in the local community. The power that a policeman wields is experienced every day by the average citizen. And the community is well aware of the steady stream of additional income that policemen receive, they call it upari kamai.

His father was a big influence on him. It was the life that the father led, rather than words. So the few words that he spoke, became life principles for his son. One of these was “garib ko kabhi dukh mat dena”, that is, never give grief to the poor and weak. In his role as a policeman, these words haunted him every day. The upari kamai for the higher-ups came from richer people. But for the constable and the sub-inspector, it was from the street vendor, the small farmer and the small trader. He tried to stay away from the ways of the system. He saw how policemen preyed on the very citizens they were meant to protect. The culture of the system designed his role to give grief to the poor and the weak.

He lived with this visceral conflict for 15 years. And then he enrolled for a bachelor of education (BEd) programme. Fortunately for him, unlike many other states, the government of Rajasthan had its priorities right and was recruiting teachers. He went through the process and was selected as a teacher six years ago. He quit the police and became a teacher in a public school.

We were sitting in the office room of the school. He narrated his life story to me while methodically filling forms for a sports tournament in which his students were going to participate. Before that I had spent 2 hours in the school with the children. I had mentally given an A grade to the school on all three of the dimensions that I informally assess schools on, in such brief interactions.

First, the school was kept with care. It was neat, from the kitchen to the classrooms to the toilet. It maximized the use of its infrastructure and resources with imagination. Second, the children were free in their movement and talked with confidence. There was no fear in their eyes, only curiosity. They were engaged in their work with interest. Third, they could certainly read and do arithmetic. And this they did with understanding, not mechanically. The students also had a reasonable conceptual grasp of various matters we talked about.

Achieving all this with students, all of whom lived in deeply disadvantaged circumstances, missing the support and opportunities that economic well-being provides, was remarkable. He said that it was because the four teachers in the school worked as a team. Their goal was that their students must develop in every way.

I asked him to compare his life as a teacher with his life as a policeman. He said that it was very difficult to do that. As a teacher, every day was an honest day's work. And each such honest day paid for itself, seeing his students learning and develop. He himself learnt new things every day, since he was faced with creative challenges continually while working with children. He wished officers of the department would trust the teachers and support them. In his experience, only 10% of teachers were insincere. The rest would blossom in their work with trust and support.

As I was leaving the school, I told him that I would write about him. He laughed and told me to be careful about what I wrote about the police. And then he added seriously, "Please don't write ill about them, there are good people in the police also, they also need some encouragement."

Later that evening, we were 90km away from his school. In another part of the desert. Fifty-eight teachers sat packed in a room which had trapped the day's heat, the mood wasn't cooler. They were watching Samvidhaan, Shyam Benegal's television mini series on the making of the Indian Constitution. Playing and pausing the series, they were discussing what they saw. Matters such as freedom of expression, reservation and gender equity, which they saw being debated heatedly by members of the constituent assembly, were roiling their emotions even today. Whichever side of the heated debate they were on, every one of them left happy and satisfied, at 7pm. Not because they had won, but because they had learnt.

Five of them stopped to chat with me. They repeated his words. They need trust and support, because the teacher's role is creative, complex and challenging. These words are echoed by teachers across the country.

I wonder what it will take for the nation to listen to this voice, which is asking for so little in return for all of the nation's future.

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