

An appropriate tribute to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

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Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was born on 5 September 1888. A distinguished scholar of comparative religion and philosophy, he wrote prodigiously and taught in many institutions, including the Universities of Mysore, Calcutta and Oxford. It is only late in his career that he got involved seriously in public life beyond academia. In 1952 he became the first vice-president of India and, in 1962, the second president of India.

He performed his many roles with distinction, while remaining at his core a philosopher, attempting to clarify Hinduism, to its followers and its critics. When he became the president, his students and friends wanted to celebrate his birthday. He suggested: "Instead of celebrating my birthday, it would be my proud privilege if September 5th is observed as Teachers' Day."

Radhakrishnan, the clear-headed and proud champion of Hinduism and Indian cultural traditions, won't have been surprised to see Teachers' Day get eviscerated of meaning, being replaced with empty ritualism. We have come to a similar pass on too many of our traditions. We seem to believe that one day of garlanding and making grand speeches about teachers gives licence to foster a public discourse of false vilification and derision of teachers. One of India's best known scientists, a man of unimpeachable integrity and deep wisdom, who has been at the helm of our scientific establishment, said to me last week, "Other than when it comes to a photo opportunity, no one gives respect to teachers."

This status of teachers is not the making of fickle media and uninformed public. It is deeply structural and cultural. The education system is designed like any other large rigid bureaucracy, with teachers as workers at the bottom rung, both in the public and private sector. This is manifest in the lack of empowerment of teachers, in the everyday treatment they receive, and the authoritarian culture of mistrust. It is equally manifest in the poor investment in teacher preparation, lack of appreciation of the complexity of her role, and their scapegoating for all ills of our education system. This vicious spiral of mistrust, disempowerment and vilification of teachers is at the core of our problems in school education. It will not be changed by the hollow celebrations of Teachers' Day.

So, it was highly unusual that a Teachers' Day celebration became an effort to reclaim the rightful status of the teacher. It was even more remarkable because it did this by initiating a fundamental structural and cultural change across an entire state school system. On Teachers' Day last week, Karnataka launched "Guru Chetana", a support system for the

professional development of teachers. It is possible to see the import of this, only when compared with what happens in the name of teacher professional development across the country.

For over a decade, millions of teachers have gone through the desultory machine of teacher training. The narrow topics for the training are decided centrally at the state level every year. With hundreds of thousands of teachers being trained on just a few topics, there is no way of addressing the actual needs of the individual teacher. There is no coherence of the training across years. This approach reflects the deep disempowerment of teachers, where their actual needs are ignored to serve the centralized system. The actual training makes things much worse. Usually the trainers are selected for convenience not capability, and then trained poorly.

Guru Chetana has adopted an approach that is radically different. This reflects in its design and execution. There is a carefully developed curriculum for 100-150 days. Since a teacher may go through 10-15 days of professional development in a year, this would enable meaningfully connected efforts across years, while offering a range of choices within a subject. The curriculum covers the subjects' content, pedagogy and nature, as also matters of educational perspective.

The teachers choose the subject and the "module", and participate in the relevant workshops. Support will be available through multiple other modes, e.g. short monthly sessions, peer networks, online readings. Letting teachers choose what they want, has required the development of operational and IT systems to handle the variability and complexity. The 2,000 trainers for Guru Chetana have been carefully selected, and have gone through rigorous preparation.

It has taken the state 14 months of work to get all this done. I haven't seen this kind of serious dogged intent in any state for a long while. While the ongoing execution will bring its own challenges, the preparation could not have been more robust.

The educational vision of Guru Chetana is a stark departure from existing practice, with the integrated curriculum and multiple modes of support. The cultural change that Guru Chetana initiates is by letting the teacher choose what she wants to learn, by empowering her. This overturns the rigid role of a teacher as a passive recipient, in to someone with her own agency. It conveys another powerful message, that the state trusts its teachers. This is radical.

This radical move alone will not change the entire system in all its aspects. But this is a start and a change in mindset, which other states should emulate. Radhakrishnan would have been proud of such a celebration of teacher empowerment.

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