

Whose responsibility?

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Wherever we were in the world, the tragedy at the Sandy Hook school in Newtown stopped us.

The killing of 20 children, with six of their teachers and school staff, may yet prove to be a decisive moment in the history of gun control and its culture in the US. That's what most people whom I know in the US seem to hope for, and many are working for that.

After 14 December 2012, as the grief piled up in that nation, there was also rage about the insanity of the gun laws. But a part of the nation's population defended its current gun control law and culture.

Some of these people seriously proposed that the response to the tragedy should be to make schools safer by having guns in the schools. The idea was that teachers and school staff must be trained, including in the usage of guns, to tackle such attacks and defend their schools. Therefore, an integral part of this plan was to distribute the right kind and number of guns to schools.

Whatever is beyond complete disbelief is what this proposal evokes. It's hard to imagine a more extreme obfuscation of an issue which is as blindingly clear. Instead of fixing the rot in the nation's gun culture, the potential victim is made responsible for defending herself and her little wards, i.e., "the guns will remain and will shoot, so defend the kids and yourself".

Such a proposal made in seriousness, as it was, does emerge from a substantially different world view and normative structures, than what most of us have. In part, it's deeply influenced by the cultural significance of the possession of guns, and its related history in the US. It's also influenced by an extreme view of personal responsibility.

It's a view that holds that you are completely responsible for where you are, and what you do. So you must do what needs to be done, and if you don't that's your problem. In this extreme notion, personal responsibility dominates all other factors including context, history, socio-cultural legacy and so on. This is only the layman's way of putting it; in fact, this is the old philosophical battle ground of human agency and collective versus individual action. There are various shades of this phenomenon; "the poor are responsible for their poverty" is one kind.

But the prospect of guns being put in the hands of teachers to defend their students, paints a stark caricature which makes it clear that such a deep socio-cultural malaise can only be addressed at its roots, not by tinkering at the ends.

Our nation also went through its own collective rage and grief in December 2012. Not to be outdone by the US, we had our own lunatic fringe expounding its equally strange views, holding women responsible for what happens to them.

However, the Justice Verma commission quickly put together a thoughtful report striking at some of the roots, presenting a plan for a substantial step forward. Beyond that a lot more will have to be done by us as a nation, not tinkering at the ends but striking at the roots.

My guess is that most readers would be unaware that this is the second time in a span of six months that a Justice Verma commission has submitted a deeply thoughtful report, which if implemented substantially, can help change our country.

The other commission headed by Justice Verma was on teacher education and submitted its report in August 2012. This commission was constituted by the Supreme Court, while it was considering the dispute regarding the approval given by the western regional committee of the National Council for Teacher Education, to 291 colleges to start their programmes of diploma in education, despite the explicit recommendation of the government of Maharashtra to not grant this approval. The Supreme Court constituted the commission because it realized that what had been sent for its consideration was the proverbial tip of the iceberg, and so it wanted a thorough scrutiny of all aspects of teacher education.

Justice Verma and his team did a commendable job. Even a cursory reading of the report will communicate in clear terms how deeply and fundamentally flawed our teacher education system is and, therefore, if we want to improve our education, how we must overhaul this system from its roots.

Most of us involved with education have been advocating very similar ideas. To see it explicitly in a legitimate state document is a key step forward. The 12th Plan also focuses on similar issues of teacher and teacher education. If implemented substantially, these would fundamentally change teacher education in India, and this will impact Indian education significantly.

What the Justice Verma commission report also does clearly, with all its formal authority, is to help in exorcising the demon of extreme personal responsibility from our teachers. This is necessary, because while we have not yet put guns in the hands of our teachers, we do hold them responsible for the state of our education completely. In reality, they are responsible in only very limited ways, because the rot is in the system that prepares them as teachers, and the weakness is in the structure that supports and manages them.

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