

# Seeking philosophers

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Whichever university I go to speak at, I make it a point to say that we are recruiting philosophers, especially those interested in school education. Once, a professor came up to me and said that his philosophy department had 13 people pursuing PhDs. In other places even memories of a philosophy department aren't there, let alone 13 active PhD students.

The head of the philosophy department arrived later and began with an apology. Recruiting from his PhD student group was not possible. All of them were middle-level officials in the state government's animal husbandry and fisheries department. He told me that they had no interest in philosophy or animals or fish, their only interest was to add to their list of degrees.

We have not had much success in recruiting philosophers. Good philosophy departments in India are few and far between. The en masse desertion of the social sciences and humanities by middle class students has hurt philosophy more than other disciplines. "Philosophy karoge kya?" is a form of derision, covering not just the discipline but also any other tendency to think versus do. It is often compared to something more "real" like pursuing a course in enterprise resource planning implementation or English for BPOs.

But why are we so desperately seeking philosophers?

Actually, we are not seeking philosophers as much as those who can think about issues that are within the broad area of philosophy of education. This thinking includes relating it to education practice, and working with others on these issues. It needs rigorous, critical and systematic inquiry into basic questions. This is what constitutes (loosely) the method of philosophy. A good student of philosophy is better placed to do this, so long as she is interested in the questions relevant to our work. Others interested in the same questions, with willingness and ability to employ the philosophical method, do equally well. So what are these questions and issues?

I can give only a partial, illustrative list. What are the aims and functions of education? Is education about transmission of knowledge and conformity, or is it about the development of autonomy? Is education for personal liberation or social change? What should form the content of education, and why? What is to know, to have learnt something? Should all children have the same education or different groups have different kinds of education? Should the content accommodate views and perspectives of all social groups, and if so how, and why at all? What is the difference between educating

versus teaching versus training versus indoctrination? What notion of good and good society must education foster, if at all? All the preceding questions need not be discussed in the bipolar manner that they have been posed, it could be a bit of this and that, and then the questions that arise are about which bit where, and how is that to be decided?

But why are we interested in these questions and their implications for the practice of education? Aren't these so basic that they have been sort of settled or aren't they at such broad a level that they have no direct relevance for most people in education?

Let me go back to where I started. We need people who can deal with these issues, because we need them in our work, not because we have some particular fascination for philosophical enquiry. Our work in education ranges from capacity development of teachers and administrators, to curriculum development, to running an education-focused university, etc. We have worked in education for years and others have worked far longer. All of us have learnt that these questions and issues are immediately and directly relevant to all kinds of work in education. Those who are most effective have learnt to deal with these in relevant ways, whether they call it philosophy or not.

Let's take an example of how this comes to life every day. Should a student accept something as true because the teacher says so? Or should the teacher develop a reasoned argument? Why should the teacher do this—because it's important to develop autonomy of thought or because of respect for a fellow human being who just happens to be his student? What should the teacher do if that reasoned argument confronts the child's cultural beliefs? Exposure to issues of philosophy of education will help the teacher recognize and resolve these questions.

Given the process of learning, the nature of education and its purposes, philosophy and practice are inseparable, even though the practitioner may not recognize it. All practice often involves unexamined assumptions that are ripe for philosophical scrutiny. Since education has a deep impact, for better or for worse, on the next generation, it is important that teachers, principals and administrators become reflective practitioners. While philosophy alone will not do the job, it is an essential ingredient. That is why India needs people able to philosophize rigorously about education, even if they are not academic philosophers.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education. Comments are welcome at [othersphere@livemint.com](mailto:othersphere@livemint.com).

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