

Indian Express: India Empowered to me is...

A nation ablaze with the spirit of social progress

58 years after Independence, one question remains in my mind: why did we struggle for independence? For close to 3 centuries, British colonial rule was the norm for our countrymen. Even before the British, our nation had only known the rule of kings, monarchs and emperors. Having barely experienced any other form of governance, what then triggered the powerful independence movement?

I think the answer lies in understanding that the independence movement was not a struggle against the British. Rather, it was a struggle for an idea of India – a democratic ideal that first existed in the minds of a few and then sparked an entire nation.

Paraphrasing from our constitution, this is the idea of a society where spirit of brotherhood reigns among the people of India transcending all diversity; a society that protects nature and has compassion for all living creatures; a society of humane citizens; a society that strives towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity.

This, my friends, is a lofty and worthy vision for our country. However, in the decades since independence, are we any closer to realizing this idea of India? The independence movement cannot remain static history – it needs to be re-ignited. We cannot let that precious flame of national consciousness die when millions of our countrymen continue to languish in economic and social poverty.

In this day and age, I wonder how many of us can truly relate to these words of Gandhiji: "I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?"

I think this cry now falls on ears that do not necessarily listen, and it is likely that one key reason is that we have not succeeded in developing a spirit of compassion and social action among our citizens. We need to revitalize our social consciousness, and I see no answer that does not begin with the state of our schools; for education is the fundamental process for triggering social progress and reform.

Thus a seemingly simple question, why did we fight for independence, now transforms into something more specific: what kind of education will help our children develop into spirited citizens – citizens who are critical, creative and caring; citizens who will drive social improvement?

This is a large question, and I am not qualified to offer an answer. At best, I have a few ideas, some of which I present to you.

To begin with, I am clear that such a citizen cannot come forth in a classroom that is not democratic. In our schools, students are usually treated as beings who need to be didactically tutored, disciplined, and moulded. Students are "told" what to do, how to behave and what they must know.

It seems to me that the first step is to make classrooms more open, friendly and democratic. A classroom, where the student is an active and equal participant in the teaching-learning

process and is continuously formulating, questioning, thinking, experiencing, challenging, reconstructing – and thus learning.

My own experience is that a good teacher can impact a child deeply – simply because children learn by observing and trying to emulate adults. Therefore, the second requirement is to have teachers who are good role models. It is essential that our schools have teachers who are competent and committed; who are constantly learning; who are good listeners; who care about their students and about the world. We have to help the teacher become this, and she has to try and become this.

The third step is to recognise that schools are important spaces for social learning. Here, the child learns how to relate to her classmate, to the person who keeps the school clean, to the authority of teachers, to the stray dog, to the tree in the playground. And if the child learns to treat each being with love and equity, then the child will grow up learning to live in harmony with herself, and with respect and care for her world.

I am certain each one of us can come up with many more such ideas. However, if these ideas need to bear fruit, if our schools have to change, then it is imperative that each one of us is driven to action – as a parent, as an educator, as a student, or as a concerned citizen. In our own small way, and in our own backyard, we have to raise a clarion call. Only then will enough critical mass catalyse to ignite our societal juggernaut from its inertia.

I would like to end with words of Swami Vivekananda:

“Our duty is to encourage every one in his struggle to live up to his own highest idea, and strive at the same time to make the ideal as near as possible to the Truth. Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs rot there, undigested all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making, assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got byheart a whole library.”

Azim H. Premji

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