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Education for a just, non-violent and equitable society

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Distinguished friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure to be with all of you today. I must thank Mr. Sunney Tharappan for having invited me to spend this evening with all of you. I am aware, amongst you here, we have some of the most talented and dedicated people in India. People, who have made a choice to serve the society, fight the evils of this society and contribute to societal development within the framework of the law.

Diwali is just over and we are barely recovering from the sound and air pollution of the crackers that are so customary with this festival. In many ways it is a violence that is perpetrated on us by those who indulge in it.

Ashley, my colleague's 10 year old son studies in a private school at Ooty. Ashley and his father both are very fond of bursting crackers and right from the time Ashley began lighting a match-stick he has been persuading his father to buy a lots of crackers. This year, Ashley came home in diwali holidays and his father bought for him crackers worth Rs. 5000. But he was stunned when Ashley told him he won't burst any crackers since they create whole lot of noise and air pollution. Ashley told his father that he had taken an oath in the school not to burst crackers and he was committed to it. I was enormously impressed with the positive impact that the school had made on Ashley.

I felt very re-assured since it is my strong belief that the parents and schools together can make or break a child. That the schools and the education system have a powerful role in creating the kind of society that we aspire for.

While the world today is on the brink of disaster almost on all fronts social, environmental, economic - India herself is a big riddle for its own people as well as for the rest of the world.

It is such a unique blend of some of the most beautiful things and most awful things.

Let me describe the bigger picture that emerges before me of the global scenario that unfolds for India.

There are some things that we understand better. There is economic boundarylessness. The political and geographical boundaries too are getting blurred. Newer standards for quality, products, services, technology and media are emerging. Consumers have a choice.

There are some things that we understand lesser. A global citizen is emerging. Values of people are undergoing a sea-change. Hierarchies and long cherished social institutions are crumbling. The generation gaps have shortened.

And there are issues that we understand the least. What is the future of technology? People are saying that the computer technology will soon be obsolete. Something totally different would emerge. This is similar to the emergence of blue tooth which we had not imagined a decade ago. The discontinuousness of the technology is something that we don't understand. We also don't understand the newly emerging young member of the society often referred to as "Generation Goog". We don't have a clue of how to create a large scale change in the society. Almost all social changes are ascribed to an external threat either to the existence of the mankind or to the security of a nation. There are hardly any examples of an intrinsically driven change in the society.

So what is the kind of future human being and the kind of society that we can expect?

A generation that is fearless, expressive and fiercely rational! Generation that does not respect seniority, experience, age or hierarchy. Generation that is impatient and less tolerant. People who respect only those who add value to them on daily basis.

While we as a nation have several strengths and are considered by the rest of the world as an emerging super power, there is a lot of packaging happening both at the political and economic level.

Let us look at some of the challenges and opportunities that India faces after over 60 years of independence:

- India accounts for 16% of world's population contributes but only 1.6% of world's GDP
- Our Human Development Index rank is 127 out of 175 ranked
- We are among the top 30% in corruption index and bottom 20% in good governance
- Our literacy level is 65% vs. 80% world literacy average
- 50% of children in India under 4 years age are malnourished

- Only 38% children reach 30% and 10% pursue higher education
- 60% women anemic
- 4.6 Mln. are HIV positive growing at a CAGR of 10%
- 130 Mln. without basic health
- 226 Mln. without safe drinking water
- 50% of our population do not get electricity

The packaging and the reality: I spend about 40% of my time in rural India. I am unable to relate to what I see in the posh super markets and multiplexes in urban India. It is a make believe world. It is a façade that is available to only about 0.1 percent of the population. The real India is still full of poverty, unfairness, inequity, violence, helplessness, exploitation and deprivation. And a significant part of this real India also resides in urban areas.

Education as a real hope: I don't intend to oversimplify matters but I sincerely believe that education has the power to provide solutions to many of our problems. However, the current type of education will not help. Radical reforms in our education system can significantly address many of our challenges, problems and social evils.

For long the debate on the purpose of education has raged among the intellectuals. Is it to perpetuate the current type of society or is to reform the society through social change? To me why should we succumb to the tyranny of “either or”? It could be both - to perpetuate what is currently considered good in the society and also to reform the society to meet future challenges.

Additionally we have the responsibility to achieve the societal goals that are committed to by us in our constitution and in the National Education Policy.

Mere basic education and literacy are not enough. The quality and the type of education are very important. Some of the cruelest and most feared people associated with the massacre of Jews in the concentration camps were highly educated people. They were also very imaginative in the way they planned and executed the torture and death of millions of Jews.

India's commitment to quality education: Among the most notable goals that the National Education Policy articulated in 1986 are:

- Acculturate
- Refine sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion

- Develop scientific temper
- Independence of mind
- Furthering the goals enshrined in the constitution of India democratic & secular attitude, empathy for fellow human beings
- Develop manpower for different levels and purposes of economy

Execution of the policy is key: We can always debate on what can be added, deleted or modified. But at this stage what is most important is how much of this policy intent permeates in the school and the classroom. How much care is taken to develop teachers who have the perspective of the National Education Policy and curriculum objectives? How much emphasis is made to develop tools and examination systems that actually measure the achievement of curricular goals? How do we make the entire process of education relevant to people's life and to the nurturing of a society that we have committed to?

Education performance has been poor: All indications reveal that there are significant gaps between country's commitment and achievement of education goals.

A month ago, I woke up in the middle of the night with a sound of screeching of cars followed by two individuals abusing and shouting at one another. One of them was shouting at the other “do you know who I am? you are speaking to the CEO of so and so company”. Imagine at 2 am this person is telling the other person that he belongs to the elite class of the society and he was behaving as if he has never been educated in his life.

If you closely study the organisations that you work for, you will find several issues that are linked to the results of the current education system. The employees are academically bright students with a track record of high scoring in the examinations they passed. But they are unable to work in teams, unable to effectively communicate with others, unable to accept that people come from diverse societies and we have to establish basic working relationships with them. Despite being engineers, their scientific temper is grossly under developed. They do not use logic, evidence gathering, data gathering as a way of life.

Our day to day observation in real life tells us that some of the most educated and empowered people violate traffic rules, misuse public utilities, evade taxes and are most unaware of the social implications of their acts.

Our evaluation of over 30,000 schools suggests that hardly 10% of the schools achieve the basic understanding, comprehension and application of knowledge leave aside achieving the higher order goals that could fall in the affective domain.

Absence of the right environment in the schools: John Holt in his book “How Children Fail”, wrote most children fail in the school (to realize their potential) because they are either afraid or bored or confused. They are afraid because a very threatening atmosphere prevails in the school. They are bored because very little imaginativeness is shown by the system to make children the center of the learning process. They are confused because they observe and receive several conflicting signals from their parents, teachers, media and society in general. Nor does the school system make any effort in aligning the institutional interests with the students' interests.

Violence and threats everywhere during the education process:

The most distressing aspect of the way the curriculum is transacted in the school is the violence that it perpetrates on the hapless children.

Discrimination: Many of our schools are full of violence due to considerations of socio-economic class of the learner, caste, creed, gender and other similar factors.

Classroom practices: The very arrangement of the classroom seating could be a source of emotional violence to the learner. If the teacher governs the entire teaching learning process on the basis of the power of her knowledge, it is sufficient to create an atmosphere where the learner does not feel comfortable in asking questions, seeking knowledge, expressing genuine doubts and being inquisitive.

Lack of choice for the learner: Forcing the child to learn a subject that the child does not have aptitude for and that too in a very straight jacketed manner - is highly questionable. Humiliating a child for reasons that the child has been unable to rote memorize the content or did not answer a question or did not have the requisite knowledge at given point of time can scar the mind of the child permanently and create disinterest or fear in the mind of the child.

The socio-political system does not help: I think the entire root of violence, injustice and threat is in the power system in the society that we have been used to for thousands of years. Earlier we used to serve the kings and the landlords, now the power has shifted to the politicians and the bureaucrats.

In a democratic system it has somehow been forgotten that the real power is with the public that chooses the elected representatives.

Some way out: So what do we do differently in our education system to create a just, non-violent and equitable society?

1. Education reforms: The entire education system needs to be reviewed from the perspective of future. The current education system is based on assumptions and purpose that are 150+ years old. We need to analyse the needs of the society 25 years later and prepare the education system to meet those needs.
2. Delivery system: Probably the most critical aspect that needs an overhaul is the education delivery system. We must be able to actually implement what we intend to achieve. This means
 - a. Create shared vision: Everyone who is responsible for achieving the educational goals must understand what it means and accept that it is critical to achieve the same.
 - b. Creating strategies that are well understood,
 - c. Creating structures that are well knit, meaningful and adequate to meet the challenges, preparing planning well,
 - d. Preparing people who are passionate, motivated, qualified and competent to perform the task at hand
 - e. Frame policies that are empowering, brave and appropriate to achieve the goals of education
3. Accept centrality of learner: This is probably the most important theme of the National Curriculum Framework 2005. This needs to be widely communicated among all members that are associated with education. The current knowledge of this is abysmal.
4. Accept realities: Human beings have an equally strong tendency to be divisive as it is to live together. It is therefore important to promote the message of tolerance, understanding and peace consistently. A tolerant approach is often brought about by an education process (formal or informal) that aims to open the mind and increase opportunities for understanding.

5. Radical reform of school as pivotal institution: The school is often the first introduction to a formal education process and it is important that this education process promotes tolerance over divisiveness.
6. Teacher and Parents as role models for children: The informal process often reinforces divisive thinking around issues of caste, gender, race, religion and even other lesser differences. Children are taught to differentiate between smart and slow learners, between tidy and untidy children, between conscientious and naughty or aggressive children, between quiet and noisy, talkative children and between studies and sports, music, craft, etc.
7. Create an opportunity for the children to be robust to wither the external effects: As we live in times where our politicians go all out to further exacerbate petty differences amongst people for political brownie points, we must have a process to counter this effectively. Education in the school can be this process if planned and executed well. All this cannot be achieved by merely introducing subjects that are examinable like Peace and Culture studies, but ensure that we address issues and deal with divisive ideas rather than choose to ignore them. Most teachers and school systems choose not to address many of these issues in school. Neither are they trained to deal with them. Ironically, the reason why the teachers and parents are unable to deal with divisive ideas is because this was lacking in their education process too.

I believe what will hold the society together peacefully is a strong foundation that gets created at the level of the education process right from the school level. The only way this can be effectively dealt with is when teachers take it upon themselves to address these issues and promote ideas of tolerance and togetherness. While this is easily said, it is fraught with danger as the school can become a crucible for venting out real problems and emotional injuries that might have accrued with many children. The school can find it difficult to deal with problems if they are not prepared and when school systems do not have adequate counseling experts and systems to back up such issues. Hence, we require an elaborate approach to this, but it is vital that this needs to be undertaken head on.

There is little hope to have a better society unless we constructively deal with this in the classroom and create powerful takeaways for children.