

Teachers' Day Celebration – Puducherry



Venue: Mother Theresa Auditorium, Puducherry;

No: of Teachers: 94

Context:

Teachers Day was celebrated in Puducherry on September 6 this year. The theme of this year's celebration was **"Teachers as agents of social change"**. Here is a summary of the events of the day:



Session 1: Teachers' Reflections – 'Most memorable moment as a teacher'

The program began with a reflection session for the teachers.

Each teacher was given a story leaf to write their thoughts on 'My most memorable moment as a teacher.' This activity set the tone for the day – bringing the focus on how each teacher contributes to a better society through her classroom. The stories were collected and pinned around the hall for other teachers to read during the tea-breaks.



Session 2: Panel discussion - Teachers as social change agents



About the panelists:

- **Padmavathi** - worked as a journalist in junior 'Vikatan' a weekly magazine and 'Chuttivikatan' – a popular Tamil children's magazine. She wrote a column by the title - Maya teacher. She still writes in

the pen name of 'Ma'. She has written booklets on teens and sex-education, been a teacher educator and an independent documentary film maker.

- **J. Krishnamoorthy** - a retired government school head teacher from Puducherry. He brought about many visible changes in his school administration system. Post-retirement he works as a freelancer in the education field and is associated with the Pondicherry Science Forum.
- **Christy Subathra** - has authored 'Suttumvizhichudar' - magazine, 'engalthozha' - book. She has compiled a series called 'Kuppaimedugal' - children literature. Has the credit and varied experience of working in one school for 23 years.

Key points of discussion

Session began with Christy Subathra and the teachers singing a song on the child rights.

(The song translates to: life is my right, we will unite for it. We kids are humans too, we will find our rights. Beatings and scoldings, living in fear every day, is this fair? We deserve the right of education and opinion, to be respected, but why did the law ignore this? We need love, affection and respect.

Segment 1: What is an ideal society that we envision?

J. Krishnamoorthy:

- Is our society fine as it is now? Is it a rational, equal, secular society?
- At one of the Kamban festivals, Kundrakkudi Adigalaar (a popular orator) said "...This society should not be like a forest. In forests, big trees don't let other plants grow. Its very own shadow kills the little plants. The distribution is unequal. Ideally, a society should be like a fruit plantation where every resource is distributed equally." Likewise, the society that promises the basic facilities to all is an ideal society. Teachers play a big role in creating a society like this.
- A big drawback in our society is the inequality between men and women. What exists is just a mirage. Mere financial progress does not assert a woman's status. Women should be respected in their homes and given freedom to express themselves in the society they live in.
- This struggle for equality started a long time ago. For instance, Savitribhai Phule faced a lot of challenges when she embarked on the difficult task of starting a school for girls. People threw dung, excreta and mud at her. She was shocked but did not back off. When this incident happened, she approached a neighbour and borrowed a saree from her. She washed herself, wore the fresh saree and resumed her work. The next day, she didn't take bodyguards with her. She just took a spare set of clothes!

- Annai Nivedita, Srinivasa Rao are also other social-workers who struggled for a similar cause. Manalur Maniyammai of Tanjore, Tamil Nadu worked for the welfare of agricultural laborers who were suffering in slavery. In this endeavor of hers, she was strongly supported by Srinivasa Rao, an agriculturist. Here, both a man and a woman worked together to empower women. As teachers, we must go beyond textbooks and share such stories with our children.
- Inequality still exists in many forms in this society, be it gender based or economical. There are people who earn Rs. 70 lakh a day and others who earn Rs.100 a day. As teachers, if we cannot discuss these issues in the classrooms, we must at least provide them with such information. This is the dharma of a teacher.
- True education is a political activity. The words 'party politics' and 'politics' are different. Politics here refers to the act of influencing the 'people'. Education needs to play this role to reduce the inequalities in society.

Christy Subathra:

- One of the debates around Delhi Nirbhaya case was that should one of the criminals be treated as a child or an adult, since he was below eighteen years of age. However, what we need to ask is "Why does violence exist in our society?"
Even a murderer was an infant once upon a time. What did the society do to stop him from becoming a criminal? What did it do to not teach violence? This society must not be non-violent but be anti-violence. Violence is usually seen as incidents. Whereas, it is actually ingrained in the minds of people. I fear that we have buried seeds of violence in our homes and schools which spring out as violent incidents in the society.
- I once asked my students what they want to do in case they can eradicate a vice in the society. They gave me various responses "I want to stop alcoholism"... "I want to eradicate homelessness"... "I want to stop murders"... These are their responses to the incidents of violence around them. Children are not immune to this, in fact, it affects them deeply
- In the house, classroom, society - what we teach the kids are all filled with violence. During a discussion with students on 'Say no to corporal punishment', I asked a child if she gets beaten in school. The child replied saying that when she commits a mistake, the teacher beats her. This justification of using punishment to correct a mistake is the first lesson on violence. Even for good or bad, if we teach that we can use violence, that's the first wrong lesson we give.
- Instead of eradicating violence, if we can clip it at nub, that will be an ideal society.

Padmavathi:

- For some time, I was teaching in a juvenile home. My experience there made me wonder – “Whose fault is it that these children are here?” School and home is what shapes a child. So as teachers and as human beings, we must guide the child to find out his purpose of life. That will ensure that he does not go astray in life. If children see and understand the hardships and struggles of life, they will never turn to violence.
- “How many of the male teachers here wash their own plates?” (A lot of hands went up). However, most of us would hesitate to wash others’ plates. Our ego stops us from washing somebody else’s plate. Also, it is not expected of men to wash their plates / clean up after a meal. His mother or sister or wife will do it for him. This inequality starts from home and whatever is seen in the society is just the expression of the child’s upbringing at home.
- Teachers are in a complicated space. Children see horrible stuff in their homes and parents expect the teachers to raise these kids well. For as long as the family value systems don’t change, society won’t change. We can’t change the adults but we must change our kids to see a different society in future.
- When we wanted to break the gender stereotypes, our curriculum and lesson plans have merely changed from the mother cooking & father reading a paper to boy tying the festive decorations and the girl doing the Rangoli. Is this really change?
- Children realize their caste-community status and gender bias only around the age of 12-13. By then we must make the right kind of impressions in them which they would carry lifelong. We must instill in them the right values and guide them to find their purpose in life.

Audience Comments:

- *As a teacher, I face a time-crunch constantly. We should have a vision about being a teacher, a vision about education. But how can we stick to our conventions and still be thinking of changing the society?*
- *Children believe and obey their teachers. If teachers think, they can change the society. But the administration and curriculum is still keeping the teachers’ hands tied.*
- *Even in current days, the boundary of gender equality has only been pushed, not broken.*
- *Even boys undergo violence, the question must be about the violence towards every child, not on the basis of gender. See children as they are and avoid indoctrinating the stereotype of a gender-bound behavior in them.*



Note: Round two and three were combined into one longer session for the sake of inter-linked discussion and questions.

Segment 2: What is the role of Education in creating a society? How can the teacher create these citizens in the classroom?

J. Krishnamoorthy:

- According to me, education can be seen as a good vehicle for social change – a change that will reduce inequalities and discriminations, a change that will lead us to the kind of society we want.
- Earlier, families were the unit of the society. But today, families are disintegrating and each room in the house has become a separate unit. This is because of the influence of technological advancements (television, computer etc.). Here, teachers have an important role to play. We, the army of teachers, must use this same technology to integrate the society and prevent disintegration. Therefore, clarity on education and its role is mandatory.
- To bring about social change, education is a good tool. But how will these changes happen? It cannot happen on its own unless inspired individual teachers take up the initiative. Teachers can really influence people's lives. Recently, a TV poll on most influential people in life found that 99% people named their teachers.
- Some books like Teacher's diary, Toto chan, Pedagogy of the oppressed, Pagal Kanavu, A letter to teacher (en teacher enna fail aakineenga) are a good commentary on how education is changing and must change.
- A good example would be Paulo Friere's alternative education system. He compared the current notions of education to a banking system – students have empty accounts, deposits are made by teachers. Good exams scores from the students are like the withdrawal on challans. This should not be so. The classroom should not be a 'one mouth and sixty ears' setup. Education is a collective process in which students need to be equal contributors.
- A teacher must be ready for a half suicide. He must transform into a teacher-student. Students must be student-teacher. The class will become a musical soulful discussion. A best teacher thus becomes invisible in his class.

Christy Subathra:

- In 1900s, women getting educated was a shame. I can tell you about the story of a girl who was good at studies and was sent to a school in Trichy in class 4. But the very next year she was brought back when her mother had one more child. This girl got married at the age of 13, lived for 82 years and her only achievement in life was that she bore 10 children. This woman, my mother, lost a world that she had a right to. Her life was a lesson to me. She was my teacher.
- Every time we think in terms of common sense and stereotype. But Bharathi, a freedom-fighter and poet shows us that we are born to be different. Not to live an ordinary lives. This was a lesson I learnt from him. He was my teacher.
- Life is not a debate, life is not cinema, it is not a mosaic of popular thoughts. Unless we have a vision for life, we may get stuck in petty arguments and discussions.
- When a group of teachers from Netherlands visited my school - a child asked them who the father of their nation was. The teachers did not understand the concept. Because, in Netherlands, none of their leaders were teachers. They were bureaucrats or elected leaders. But our nation was formed by teachers. And if education does not work here, where else would it?
- The biggest enemy of a teacher is complacency. Thinking I know it all. The ability to learn continuously is important for a teacher to maintain vitality in her work. A teacher also needs a soft heart and open mindedness. I remember an incident when I sent a child back because he was late to class. Later, I learnt that he had actually come to school despite running a fever. I realized my mistake, and apologized to him in front of everyone. It was not some symbolic gesture, but a very important action for my own conscience.
- If we can look at our life, our society and our neighbors and wish for the change, we are political. We are politicians.

Padmavathi:

- Education needs to prepare children to examine everything around them closely. There is bias or meaning all around us. Have you ever thought about this - Why does even the carrom board carry lesser points for black coins and greater points for the white ones? Is there a politics behind that too?
- Values can be instilled through any / every subject. For example, a common mathematics question is – ‘a woman earns Rs. 40 per hour. A man earns Rs. 48 per hour....’ can’t we address these notions about gender parity here itself?

- We also need to address the influence of media. If media depicts poor content / values, we should question it. Tell children how some programs are a waste of time and detrimental. They will understand.
- There is an impression that not much happens in government schools. As teachers, we have the power to change this situation. Teacher associations also need to actively take up the issues of curriculum and syllabus
- We all know that today, only the most deprived sections of society send their children to government schools. The only other section that comes here is that which has been rejected by private schools after years of lagging behind its peers. Society cannot reach equity by discarding parts of itself. Teachers need to work with these children to give them an equal opportunity – by helping these children develop, you are playing a role in helping society develop.

Audience comments:

- *When we speak of education, we are still speaking of textbook education. This should also change.*
- *My inspiration to become a teacher came from my teacher at the teacher training school. Our entire batch has been doing well in the schools and we are proud to be in this profession.*
- *Education must be a public property. De-privatization is a must.*
- *Education's purpose must be re-understood. We teach ethical values as an addition to syllabus. But make this a part of syllabus. For example, the evaluation on a social science lesson on family & values can be on how the child behaves at home.*
- *Use art to infuse the values in the existing syllabus. Literature and art can by itself induce values.*
- *Changes must not come in papers and words but in a person's mind. If we run behind syllabus, we miss other buses, like values and ethics. Conduct is not a lesson, it is not an act, its life.*
- *As a very young teacher, I learnt important things today. I came into this profession for reasons other than financial reasons. And I am proud of it. After Engineering, MBA, and working abroad, I wanted to return and do something for our kids.*



Concluding remarks:

There are countries that have managed to set a very good example in education. For instance, in Finland, teachers and students together create syllabus and text books. There is no home work for the children. The teachers do homework and make the children do work in the classes. There is concurrent evaluation

- everyday teacher and students discuss, observe and all subject teachers evaluate a child together. They do not grade or mark as they think it insults the kids. If parents of children above 13yrs want to know the grades, they have to give a written declaration. Tuition is banned. No private school at all. There is so much interest among other countries in studying the Finnish education system that 26% of Finland's foreign funds come from such countries that are researching their education system.

If we unite and work towards this goal as a movement, we can make this happen. Only a sound public education system can promise social change and bring about equity and sustainability.

Session 3: Drama by government school teachers – Pagal Kanavu

The drama was an adaptation of Gijubhai Badheka's 'Pagal Kanavu'. Gijubhai worked as a teacher for a brief while and has written his experiences in the classroom. Some snippets from other books like 'Kanavasariyar' 'Toto Chan' were also incorporated in the play. Government school teachers were involved in composing the play, acting and background music.

Through the character of Gijubhai, the play depicts the story of every teacher who intends to try out something different in the classroom.



The play depicts the following incidents from the book:

- The teachers' initial struggles with creating an open atmosphere
- His attempts to connect learning to the real world – creating maps of the village, studying local history Making learning fun – learning grammar, using drama in the classroom His attempts at the overall development of his students – personal hygiene, interpersonal skills, group behavior

Comments on the Play:

- *Even if we face many bottlenecks in teaching, we are striving to make the changes. We weren't thinking of trying out other aspects except regular teaching. The play has reminded us our role.*
- *I have read the book but never watched it as a play. Very well done.*
- *The right scenes were visualized. Costume, acting and dialogue delivery were all well-chosen.*
- *Sky is not the limit. The possibilities in a classroom are limitless. It's my children and my world.*



Concluding remarks by the Joint Director, Department of Education:

- It was a good function. It is good to see teachers coming out to participate voluntarily and with so much enthusiasm – this really feels like “Teachers’ Day”.
- I liked what Prime Minister Modi said yesterday - Where real learning is happening, that’s where real teaching is happening.
- Quite a few government school teachers have brought about changes in their teaching methods in the classrooms. But it would be good if it happened in all schools. What prevents this from happening is our assessment methods. We still insist on rote learning.
- In a training I had once attended, countries were divided based on the number of patents they held. Japan was first. Then came China and Korea. India ranked 120th. India has a lot of human resources but not enough resourceful humans!
- No nation can rise beyond the standard of its teachers. The drama reminds us that a passionate teacher can bring about change in his classroom – and through that, in the society.
