

Just a Gentle, Affectionate Touch...

Pratibha Katiyar

While returning from school the other day, my mind was so restless that I could not think clearly at all. I thought of sharing my state of great uneasiness with my friends so that I could relax but that also did not happen. So many months have passed by, but the restlessness is still there. In the meantime, some new dimensions have definitely been added to that feeling of disturbance. What happened that day was nothing special, it was like any other day, then why so much disquietude!

That day I was returning from a school where I had gone four or five times before also. Almost all the 22 children of that school were known to me. We knew each other by name. We had become friends... close friends. I used to tell them stories and they would also tell me stories. We used to interact. I spent some time in class V that day. There are nine children in the class. All the children read books from *Potli*, as they only maintain the *Potli* library. They do not just read the stories, but they read them with comprehension and discuss them also.

That day we played a writing game. I asked them to write something about what they liked in the stories they read. My experience is that when children are asked to write on their own, they like it and especially when they know that their writing will not be checked for writing errors. All the children started writing. Then, one by one, they started reading out what they had written. But three children, Bhuvan, Somali and Rudra were not lifting their heads from their notebooks. It appeared they were writing something very seriously. All the children finished reading but these three children still had their heads stuck into their notebooks. I asked lovingly, 'Show me as much as you have written.' Then the child sitting near them said, 'Madam, they do not know how to write.' The child who said this, had a mild expression of ridicule on his face while these three children hid their faces in their notebooks. I looked at the teacher, who simply repeated, 'Yes, they do not know.' Such ease and that expression of ridicule were enough to make me restless. But more than that, I was worried about how those children must be feeling. I wanted the children to

feel easy, so I said, 'It doesn't matter if you cannot write, tell me orally, how did you like the story you read.' The children stood up but said nothing. They each had a book in their hand but were silent. After a while, Bhuvan said, 'Madam, we don't know how to read'.

It was beyond my comprehension that these children could not even write their names and read the title of the book. Even though during my last five school visits, I found these children to be very active and eager to learn. They would participate in every activity, especially Bhuvan. He is the class monitor, as well. I had also seen him reading books and once he told the whole story turning the pages of the book. I asked him, 'The other day you were telling the story from the book, is it not?' Bhuvan said in a very relaxed tone, 'I listen to the children who read and can make out what is written on which page and where...so.' Now Bhuvan was smiling. It seemed as if he, the other two children, the rest of the class and the teachers have accepted that these three cannot learn to read and write. The teacher was of the opinion that 'some children just cannot learn and these three are such children. It is not a must that all the children should learn, is it not?' I do not know whether she was saying this to me or to herself, but I was disturbed with the thought that here is a child who by observing his friend reading could understand what is written on which page, then why is he not able to read and write himself. Also, these children are not the ones who absent themselves often from school. Bhuvan's big eyes, his smile and his confident statement that, 'Madam, we don't know how to read, we don't know how to write,' deeply hurt me and was eating away at my soul. The school system had convinced him that some children are not able to learn, and he is one among them.

Even after so many months, Bhuvan's eyes are in front of me as I write all this. They are the eyes of every such child who is not able to read and write, who is travelling in a separate compartment in the train of education and will

get down anywhere anytime. Some may leave school after class III, some after class IV or after class V. The system is also not bothered about their dropping out because these children diminish or harm the data. Bhuvan was enrolled in this very school in class I. Today, he is going to pass out from class V from the same school without being able to read and write. Other than reading and writing, Bhuvan is good in calculations, does everything properly and participates in drama, poetry, storytelling and more.

I have a strange mind that takes me close to people who are (so-called) losers, backward or marginalised. What I did, how much have I been able to do and how Bhuvan has started writing his and his friends' names now – it is meaningless to talk about this journey because the question is much bigger than this. At this juncture, I remember a similar experience narrated by a friend from Rajasthan. The child's name was Dilkhush. He was so mischievous that he would not allow anyone to read or write in class, scatter all the stuff, and quarrel with everyone and did not study at all. If the teacher called his parents to talk to them, they would start beating him saying that he does the same at home. Later, a friend from the Foundation¹ worked with him for a few months and found that the child's brain is very sharp, and his knowledge of mathematics is unmatched. I also remembered a girl from Almora who used to go around holding the saree of Neeru Madam and did not talk to anyone. She too was not interested in reading and writing. I remembered another child from Dineshpur, whose coming to school was like spoiling the system. All he did was to quarrel and abuse. He neither studied nor wanted to study, so he used to tear the notebooks of other children or hide their pencils. Later, the teacher found that the child was not getting enough food, neither at home nor at school. His appetite was more than other children, but he was getting the same quantity of food as the others. Like this, one after another, many examples came to my mind. A girl who was short-sighted and had lost her mother, a child whose father used to drink and beat her mother every day or the one whose brother tore her books.

All these children were not able to learn in spite of going to school. The problem was that the system had assumed that there are some children who are not able to learn at all. Or there is an acute shortage of teaching staff in schools and circumstances that make it difficult to even think about working with these children individually. These arguments may be correct, perhaps they are true also, we may also be satisfied with the learning of seventy or eighty percent children recorded in the statistic, but the eyes of children, who came to school with a desire to learn, will keep on following us.

Now one understands how important it is for the system to be sensitive to children who come to government schools and their environment. Any kind of learning starts at the same point of sensitivity where the desire to learn and love to teach come together. What my colleague once told me about any kind of teaching and learning is like a mantra to me which goes like this - first of all, put your hands on the head of the children gently and lovingly, look into their eyes and see how many dreams are there, befriend them and then reading and writing will happen automatically. I think that such a large system of education is not going to work through such emotional things, but then, I also see that there is ample space for this sensitivity in our educational documents. Otherwise, why would they talk of equitable education for all, child-centred education based on a child's needs and participation of every child in the learning process? Whether it is the National Education Policy, National Curriculum Framework 2005 or National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education, all of them recommend this. More recently, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 2005 has provided a comprehensive approach, incorporating ways to provide quality inclusive education to all children. It clarifies that teachers need to do the following:

- To be sensitive to the individual needs of every child
- To provide child-centred, socially relevant and equitable teaching/learning processes
- To understand the diversity of their social and cultural contexts

That is to say, it is not just about being emotional, it is about understanding the core idea that these things should not just get recorded in the

¹Azim Premji Foundation

documents but should be connected with the life of every child in the classroom with sensitivity. Without understanding children, their needs and their surroundings and without having a sense of respect for them, it is difficult to implement these. So, when a teacher says that the parents of certain children do not pay attention to them, then I fall in love with 'those children'. And I tell teachers

and colleagues that it is important for everyone to learn because everyone has a right to learn. Just as everyone has a right to life. The pedagogy to begin this process is to be able to form a relationship from the heart with every child who comes into the classroom, to respect them and to be extra vigilant in the processes to make sure that no one is left out.

**Names have been changed to protect the identities of the children.*



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