



What is it that makes a few teachers outstanding in comparison to other teachers? The very thought about this question brings images of several teachers in the depth of any mind and I thoughtfully started analyzing their images and work. The heroes of my story are none other than teachers working in remote village schools run by the Government. This is without any prejudice against the urban or the private schools, but is a mere coincidence that during the last 15-20 years, I have mostly had opportunities to work with rural government primary schools.

My first protagonist is Mahesh Oad, a teacher in an alternative school in a small village called Camp No. 4 in Madhya Pradesh. I distinctly remember the first time I visited the school. All the children of the school surrounded me with their slates and note book asking "Master ji, give us sums". I started providing them sums one by one and they kept asking for more addition, subtraction, multiplication and division sums. They were solving at lightning speed – so fast that even before I finished giving them sums, one of them came running upto me with answers. The children did not seem bored and after a little while I found myself tired. This experience is still afresh in my mind. By now, you might be wondering why I am talking only about children while I wish to really describe the teacher. I am doing so, because I could see the teacher in the eyes of his pupils.

Incidents in this school were extraordinary and nothing similar to other schools I visited previously. Hence my first hero is Mahesh, the teacher who has been doing an exceptional job. I would like to share some simple yet significantly important characteristics about this teacher. Mahesh's acceptance of each and every child as a complete individual personality was something unique and unheard off. Mahesh was taking care to address each child and make non-academic conversation with them. Some examples of this included - "Shobha, how is your calf? Sunil, has your maternal uncle returned? Rekha, who set your hair pleats today?" such informal conversation was making the children so comfortable and the atmosphere was one of no-fear. Mahesh did not see the children as a group but each time he found time to work with each child and called them by their names and did not ever address them as

'Hey Boy or Hey Girl'. This was an important attribute which I feel contributed to his acceptance amongst the children.

The other most important thing that I felt about his teaching method was that Mahesh never considered himself as the only reference person. Whenever any child came to him with a problem he did not try to solve it himself and instead asked the child to go to Seema (another child) and encouraged the child to solve it with her. It seemed like he was never in a hurry to give an answer to the problem himself but patiently suggested a method to the child so that the child either reached the solution herself or sought the help of another mate. Nothing ready-made was available and this resulted in keeping all the children busy with one thing or the other. The arrangement was providing the children an opportunity to learn by themselves; this was helping children use their energy and they thoroughly enjoyed the feeling of joy and discovery each time they solved a problem. The next in the series of outstanding teachers is Saraswati.

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Saraswati's school reflected a different scenario from that of Mahesh's school. Everything seemed very organized. Children were seen sitting in small groups of 5 to 6 each. Saraswati had the days work plan for all the groups. At the beginning of the day Saraswati made the children sit with their groups and distributed them work one by one. Each group was given a different task. After distribution of tasks she went different groups one by one and tried to help them begin their work. She had planned it all out - where to make the each group sit etc.

While some groups were sitting inside the building, the others were in the open ground. Despite this no disorderliness was visible anywhere.

Giving tasks and examining them were both being done by the children amongst themselves; Saraswati looked not like a teacher but like a senior child. One group was working on the parts of a tree. Saraswati did not do it by teaching from any book or by making any sketch but discussed about roots, stem branches and leaves by getting the children to uproot a plant. She then asked them to make sketches in their note books. Saraswati then explained about the parts of a tree from a chapter in the book. She understood every word of what she was teaching and this attribute made her clearly stand out.

My next protagonist is Ramesh who is the lone teacher in a single teacher school. His school is situated in the remote 'Mori Block' of Uttarkashi District in the state of Uttarakhand. Ramesh is the epitome of sensitivity when it comes to his children. His incredible patience and willingness to listen sets him apart. Despite children surrounding him with innumerable queries Ramesh listened to them attentively and responded suitably to each child. He had a democratic way of taking decisions when it came to handling a class. Tasks in his class were never a matter of formality. Instead he actually planned his classes along with the children. I can call this school as 'the children's school', where every child was involved in decision making.

Ramesh's extraordinary talent was his ability to adapt his teaching as per the decisions of the children. As a teacher he was brimming with self- confidence and had a firm grip over his subject.

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He was also innovating as per the requirement of the situation which make him different from his peers.

In the schools where my protagonists taught, there was a vast difference in the methods used to teach children. When we tried to draw out some fundamental commonalities we found the following- having due respect for children, involving the children in the process of learning, thus making them active participants and not passive learners, encouraging children to ask questions, giving children the freedom of expression and living by democratic values etc. Learning in such schools is not a mechanical process but a visible dynamic process vibrant with interesting activities.

Besides this, there is a distinct commonality amongst these teachers. All three teachers mentioned in this article did not consider themselves as 'learned teachers' instead they believed that they were "learning teachers". The hunger and urge to learn something new was very much alive in them. As a result, they engaged in constant reading and wished to learn something new each day. Hence rusting over a passage of time is not a real threat with such teachers.

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