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Learning Teacher: Reviewing the Narrative of a Teacher's Journey

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Text narratives dominate academic debates and discussions. Rarely do activities, experiments, audios, films, or digital materials enter our classrooms. In the school classrooms, textbooks dominate, where again one rarely finds imaginative use of illustrations, cartoons and images². In higher education, just as in academic discussions of every journal, we rely on the written word or assume that it alone can create ripples of academic discourses. It is an even rarer event to have a film being made with academics in mind. The film under review (ironically through the written word) *Teacher's Journey* opens up and demands us to visualise the possibilities of exploring academic discourses in a distinct manner. It combines the documentation of a teacher's practice and an enabling tool for the teacher educators to interact with their students. The film fills in what often educationists explore: classroom practices and the social world of a teacher.

This review is an attempt to reflect upon the twin challenging questions which Deepak Verma's "Teacher's Journey" poses before us. The film is clearly made with an

audience in mind—the academic institutions and education practitioners. That is much unlike the ways in which documentary films themselves get directed in our country, which claim to be made for the general public as audience. The narrative in the film is way above what one usually finds in the 'educational' channels of the television, where these channels glorify the existing poverty of our classroom practices - 'chalk & talk.' In this context, the director points out to those involved in education practices, to rethink how a school teacher survives beyond the poverty of classrooms and the regime of textbooks. Through the film, the director expects that films gain presence in higher education classrooms that are devoted towards teacher education and inspire student teachers to begin their own journey into the profession.

The film narrates how a teacher—Mukesh Malviya—learned through his practice as an ideal reflective practitioner; this film in some ways is a documentation and reportage of his experiences. The multiple roles this teacher lives, experiments and narrates to us are that of—guide and judge in the classroom for children on the one hand; and on the other as a social persona within the milieu of a tribal hamlet in central India; and probably to the state, he is merely someone at the lowest rungs of a bureaucratic education system. The bureaucratic education system does keep him responsive not to the children or to the community but to the system itself where in he is expected to cater to every survey, every census and every abhiyan!

The multigrade scenario in which he functions as a single teacher for children of class 1-5 was that of chaos (arajakata). The teacher survives the scenario and finds a solution. He observed children have been learning from each other since there are fewer classrooms for them to be separated; they learned and taught each other what they knew; they taught each other whatever little bit the teacher had been able to teach between arajakata. Hence he is determined to make use of groups and interactions of children among themselves to ensure learning. This is a significant pointer wherein it is often argued teachers do not innovate because they are not autonomous and are bogged down by the state system³. The arajakata into which Mukesh was thrown in the school made him innovate. The noise in the classroom is made useful and learning takes place beyond the textbooks. This has been foregrounded right at the beginning of the film through the

written text as follows “for a decade, my school was a single teacher school. While engaged in several non-academic government works, I was able to spend some time in the school To learn from children and develop an atmosphere of mutual learning and sharing responsibilities together.”

Across the film, textbooks have vanished. None of the activities were per se content driven - yet if one can list the skills that were transacted through the activities as follows—counting, creating graphs, recognising family members, observation of environmental aspects, classification, compiling or surveying information, motor skills to begin writing, sequencing and logical thinking, etc. Mukesh says it would have been possible for him and the school to function better if only the burden of textbook driven teaching had been removed. Each of these activities and information collected are very much centred within their locality, which again to him is a crucial aspect in enabling the learning process. These activities point towards the ways in which teacher alleviates the poverty of classroom practices. It challenges the notion of centrality of textbooks to be replaced by the dexterity and autonomy of the teacher.

If we pose two questions—How does this additional material create a rupture in the culture of home and school? How does this material redefine the role/ways in which teacher student interaction is determined? Looking at the practices in film, it is encouraging to find that teacher does not bring in things that are alien to them but makes use and builds on the knowledge of the familiar: for example, the use of number of family members to teach how graphs are made. The film portrays how a culture of relation between the child and the teacher is redefined because of the presence of a variety of activities and teaching practices involved, other than the only involvement through textbooks⁴. The method of rote learning can be banished from classrooms if only such materials or teaching strategies are used. It is the willingness of the teacher to introduce such material that needs to be appreciated as a core value.

Some instances like the following symbolise willingness of the teacher to give away everything that is associated with regular classroom practices—where teacher is at the centre. The teacher in his interactions does not stand and face the class—but is willing to sit down at the child’s level on the floor to demonstrate and write on the slate—and hence the

demonstration is not happening at the level of blackboard alone but at the very space that the child uses. When the teacher finds or thinks that a student probably does not have the slate-pencil to write on the slate he is willing to offer the chalk that he uses on the board. Similarly the children use the board (in spite of the fact that they are not necessarily at the students level) to make graphs for the whole class. Children are seen looking around and learning from each others slates without hesitation. Classroom and the school is maintained in a participative manner—children take up the tasks of opening and cleaning up the classrooms, when necessary taking care of order and discipline in the classroom as well. Hence in many ways what Mukesh says about his classroom ‘all of them are teachers’ becomes more than apt.

In one of the scenes a child did not want to sit on the muddy floor, where she felt her dignity is being questioned. Often this absence of basic infrastructure is glaring. The absence of such elementary resources and unfilled posts of teachers pose challenges to those involved in school system and should not be wished away. One cannot but notice the fact that in spite of the promises to make right to education a fundamental right and waves of mission mode mobilisation to ‘bring’ children to schools through SSA, DPEP (Comment: full forms suggested) (Comment: full forms suggested) etc, very little has been done to empower the teachers with functional autonomy or create policies that would provide enough staffing in schools.

Personally to me the process of disciplining in classroom and discussion on physical punishment remains the most ambivalent section in the film. On the one hand, it asserts the teacher’s determination to avoid ‘physical punishment’ and on the other the process of shaming the child found guilty undergoes. The teacher democratically persuades the fellow classmates to accept that ‘murga bananese seekte nahin hei’ and hence convince them to consider the opinion of the children to be evaluated. He invites the opinion of the accused and the victim; all in the classroom who were witness to the beating were also asked their opinion as to how the accused should be punished. But in that process which probably went on for about five to ten minutes the offender definitely underwent the process of shaming.

Mukesh respects the skills of the child and values them. He says since he was aware that children could drive bullock carts

and collected *tendu patta*, it is presumptuous of the state system to consider them as 'children'. Hence when schooling happens it is essential to treat their knowledge and lived experiences as valuable and should be integrated into the classroom. While treating them as children, often the state system and the textbooks over simplify learning. This, the teacher wants to be overthrown. The teacher says that it is not possible for him to assure anything about the future of these children but for the fact that they will have the confidence to stand for what they believe in.

In spite of the fact that visual medium and its technology has been available now for many decades, it has never been used for academic purposes in an appropriate manner. Deepak says during his endeavours to make films on scientific themes for the state owned television channels there was often resistance to the idea of radically changing the narrative structures. Often the educational material available through this medium in our country fails to synthesise the academic knowledge that needs to be transacted with the quality of the visual. This is especially true about the recent glut of educational CDs, where they are often driven or are centred on textbookish narratives than driven by the possibilities of visual medium.

It is a remarkable achievement for their team not to have made the presence of the camera obvious to the children or the teacher. This ability to use visual narratives provides much more accurate descriptions of the classroom that has often not been brought out in written ethnographies of classroom practices. Such a visual narrative also has the potential to provide the teacher with feed back on their practices. All such issues are at the heart of higher education system and for academics who are involved in the schooling practices which have not been fully explored.

The film promises to be the first in a series. We can look forward to viewing more engaging ways in which classroom process and teachers' lives are documented. The film has already begun to make its presence felt, winning the Japanese Hosono Bunka Foundation award for the year 2007. The film has also been screened for teacher education programmes and gained wide acceptance. Hence with the availability of rich visual material, at least one aspect of the poverty of classroom practices could begin getting eliminated.

¹ The opinion in this article is that of the author and does not represent that of the organisation/s that he is associated with. The copies of the film are available from Hakara Media.]

² I may probably add "till recently" given the fact that I too was involved with the new textbooks in social science that have come up post NCF2005 phase by NCERT. But those cannot be identified to generalise the textbooks across disciplines or classes. Hence I would continue to maintain that textbooks largely have not learned to use the possibilities of visuals.

³ For example Peter M. Senge, Nelda H. Cambron McCabe, Timothy Lucas, Art Kleiner, Janis Dutton, Bryan Smith - 2000 "Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education." Nicholas Brealey Publishing: London. Pages 32-33 point out the similarities and differences of innovation in school practices. They observe that unlike those in the industry, the school functions in a much more controlled scenario thereby deterring teachers from innovating.

⁴ It may be noted in the margins that the teacher does use textbooks in his practices, however like in the film, we shall move away from its description.