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A Postcolonial School in a Modern World

Vidyashram – The Southpoint

This essay is about a school, taken not only as an educational project, but as an active historical intervention. A discussion of the school helps us to interpret the history of education, and perhaps all history, with new insight; to understand the nature of modernity in a provincial city; and to fashion an approach to both theory and practice that could be called postcolonial.

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The school originally called Southpoint Vidyashram, later changed to Vidyashram – The Southpoint,* was set up in 1990 simply as ‘a school for boys and girls’, extending in the first year from pre-nursery to class 5. Its site was a provincial city that none of the founders belonged to. The school was not set up with an intention to express some grand philosophy of life or nation-building. It had nothing to pronounce of a fixed nature about the history or past of India, or which way the future should go. The people in the small founding committee were serious people motivated by a zeal for improvement on several fronts. But they were sceptical of grand aims. Perhaps they would intellectually argue that in the long run we are not only dead, but that our well-meaning work dies with us too, and not that action is futile, but that we cannot claim to have found the secret

to life’s problems with our action. They, or at least the authors, felt unconvinced by the aims of all prophets and visionaries, ideologues and missionaries. They simply wanted to see a job well done.

Perhaps the school was set up in a moment of naivete, when we – the authors will speak for themselves from now on – convinced ourselves that intellectuals, too, must act. As parents, we had the imminent problem of a nine year old and a four year old daughter’s schooling in a city where investigation into some one dozen reputed schools had revealed to us depths of pedagogic violence unknown to us from our own experience, later to be confirmed by years of formal research on schools. As Indians, we had the question to face of “What are we doing about it?” whenever we engaged in a discussion on the anomaly of the continuation of colonialism into our lives in the present. And certainly there must have been an assurance and a pride. Although not trained school educators, we were well-read in literature, philosophy, and the social sciences, and had faith in our powers of observation and learning as we taught ourselves the skills of educating children. We could not help but believe that the level of activities that went on under the rubric of ‘education’ around us could not but be improved by our well considered efforts.

So, the intention of founding the school was to create a space where, unlike in the institutional spaces we saw around us,

children could be comfortable and happy as they learnt. Where children would not be dominated by arcane authority structures, and not be subjected to mindless rote learning and testing. Where a green and beautiful space could surround learners, and where they would learn to take the responsibility for their environment in every sense.

That the school could be called ‘postcolonial’ occurred to us later. Just as colonialism was not natural or accidental (it did not have to happen, but it did not happen by chance either), so is postcolonialism not merely a point in history. It is actively constructed, by intellectuals and critics, professionals and ordinary people. Vidyashram Southpoint is a school that actively seeks to be postcolonial, in two ways. One, we see colonialism as responsible for a poor pedagogic technology, with excessive dependence on textbooks, examinations, authoritarian teachers, mentalities of dependence, and an inability to make connections between texts and experiences. To be postcolonial is to break the cycle of reproduction of these colonial structures and seek to construct new ways of teaching and learning (which are not new on the surface of the earth, only in the colony). Two, we see colonialism as a relationship that dominates interpersonal relationships, and even the person to herself through her discourses and histories. To be postcolonial is to refuse and reverse these relationships of domination. The ways in which this is done are elaborated below, in the course of other discussions.

The school has grown over 12 years to class 10, and those, like our older daughter, who were in class 5 at its inception, are even done with college now. It has been successful with its students, in that they have all become active learners who believe in taking initiative and have gone on to good high schools and colleges. But it has not had many students, and most have left after a few years for more mainstream schooling. Its teething problems with funds and a stable teaching staff have not vanished with the years. It has not created a major revolution in the city’s society, and continues to be questioned and misunderstood by parents. But it has not made compromises on its simple/

* This is an actual school located at N 1/70 Nagwa, Varanasi, which interested people are invited to visit (it is run by NIRMAN: <http://www.nirmanweb.com>). We do not specifically mention or discuss Varanasi because our argument is a larger one regarding provincialism in India. Because the authors are speaking of themselves, there should not be an idea that there are no other people as active in the school as they. The most active person, whom both authors would like to mention with respect, is Priya Iyer, the present principal of the school.

complex aims of child-centredness and postcolonialism. Below are discussed under separate headings, what the case of a school we would call 'postcolonial', located in a context which can be understood as 'modern', can teach us about history.

Space, Beauty and Garbage

When you walk into Vidyashram Southpoint, you find it very pretty, with a greenness and shadiness all over. Some can instinctively feel its difference to the outside, and murmur vaguely something to the effect of, "This is how a school should be". Most do not comment on the greenness. Perhaps if they did they would have to further make some logical connections on how it is produced as compared to the garbage of the world outside its walls.

Every school in the city, in contrast, lacks a green and well-tended space. Some have sizeable grounds, used enthusiastically by children. Others have smaller open spaces, used equally happily by children. The happiness of children parallels that of the adult residents of the city who cannot see the mess they live within as amenable to change. Adult citizens boast of their freedom in living as they like in their city, that is, in throwing garbage wherever they like, spitting, and urinating. Children inside the schools also share this idea of freedom, and schools do an inadequate job of disciplining them into other ideas of citizenship and responsibility, as should be their mandate. Schools are the vehicles of modernisation and nation-building, but their spaces, and the public spaces of the city, do not reflect success in this.

A simple proof of this is a modern 'colony' (residential neighbourhood) in this provincial city, which looks as garbage-ridden as the worst 'slums'. In the colony live every kind of educated, well placed, prosperous people: doctors in the best hospitals of the city and Ayurveds; professors and teachers in modern institutions and Sanskrit pandits; businessmen; government officers; private executives; university students and foreign scholars. Yet, the public space in the colony, especially the sizeable space left in the centre for a 'park', is a horrible mess of stagnant water, mud, overgrown grass, and most indicting, the garbage of all the households. No one in this colony has learnt the lesson of civic responsibility.

The two questions that arise are, if you do have a space that is different, how does your different space help explain this

garbage? And what possible lessons can be learnt about changing the rule of garbage?

The invasion of garbage in every public space can be seen to be the intertwined result of, so to speak, culture, history, and nature. Culture: systems of caste and ritual definitely lead to well developed ideas of division, hierarchy, and pollution. History: these systems were selectively exacerbated instead of being weakened during colonial rule. A further notion of 'my own' was engendered by the experience of the colonial state as both invasive and foreign, which made 'outside' spaces not my own. A dependency syndrome was also generated whereby it was not oneself but the 'parent' state that was supposed to take care of public life. Systems of civic activity decayed at every level. Garbage in public spaces increased. Nature: modernity in the sense of obedience to external, blind, objective rules, is not 'natural', but derived, learnt, and internalised. It is natural to throw your waste materials just anywhere. Why is it worse to do that, as every single person in the city does, rather than in a specially designed receptacle? It is not, unless the receptacle rule has been made, has been taught to everyone, and then there is a check on its violation. Contemporary modernity is such in provincial India that, international banking and internet cafes notwithstanding, such rules have not been made, taught, or enforced.

The way to change the merry dominance of garbage in public life is, most simply, to make, teach, and enforce some rules. Most modern schools in Banaras have not done this. Those that have then should face up to the second level of the problem. How do you make the rule 'natural'? Observation of the behaviour of students of disciplinarian schools reveals that their behaviour changes radically outside school grounds. They associate certain rules with school space and when outside that space, relapse into other ways of thinking. It is a problem of both space and time. Chintamani Mukherjee, the founder of the local Anglo-Bengali Inter College, may have been a superlative slave driver in forcing order and beauty into the spacious grounds of his school 50 years ago. But insofar as the sense of respect for the surroundings was not institutionalised in the school family, after him, *le deluge*. The grounds of Anglo-Bengali look today like no-man's land.

When one searches for ways to transmit the principles of cleanliness, beauty, and

respect for the environment, one is forced to think precisely of 'science', 'tradition', and the 'nation', to fight with 'nature', 'history', and 'culture'. Science because it is necessary to overcome the naturalness of certain ways of living by teaching age-appropriate versions of the germ theory and environmental pollution. Tradition to fight colonialism, not only by turning to certain resources in the cultural fund of the population – to stories of nature worship, the images of ashramas, river banks and forest retreats; to the poetry of oneness with nature and the emotions of seasonality – but also to pre-colonial processes of self-help and public responsibility. And the nation to overcome 'culture', because the definition of 'self' and pride in 'one's own' is bred largely through rituals, and rituals can be defined in a way that the self is made larger. Yes, the nation can be threatening to those excluded, but such exclusions are not natural but constructed processes. Rituals can produce definitions that are positive, non-threatening, and non-exclusive, but constructive of a clean, garbage-free environment.

Searching for these ways, we realise how history can help us. Similarly, we can help, so to speak, history writing. To make children take germs and the environment seriously means to strive for the scientific individual. To design rituals that take pride in 'our' land means to promote some brand of nationalism. To use the resources of literature, philosophy, and mythology means to propagate some sense of 'tradition'. Action in the present obliges us to take science, nationalism, and tradition more seriously that we would otherwise do. Such action and responsibility towards positioning shows us that we are embroiled in a history that is continuous with the past. We see in a more rounded way that history-writing needs a humanitarian effort of the imagination and not merely a sterile and brilliant intellectual effort. And yet academics have fallen into an analytic habit of distancing themselves from the history and ideology of past actions as if they have stepped outside history and ideology altogether, and could merely inspect it out of their free will. Instead of acknowledging the continuity with the past, they assume themselves to be sceptical and reflexive, and others in the past as making only utilitarian choices with no imagination, reflexivity, or doubts attached to them. In the simplest terms, they never ask as a hypothesis, "What would we have done in that position?" The difference between us

and the academic who thinks she is uncommitted and merely looking on at history or society is that she is taking a position without acknowledging it and is involved in action by default, whereas we are quite clear that we are in favour of science, reform, and nationalism; and we are able to use the tool of empathy for those who were so in a study of the past or the present, even while critiquing them or deconstructing them.

Our position is radically different from that of the bemused academic who interferes in a youthful dumping of garbage on the street, and is rendered silent by the youth's challenge, "Do you think this is England?" to trail off with the implication that demanding a cleaner environment in India is tantamount to being untrue to India. In contrast, we suggest that such an ethnocentric non-historical youth who considers garbage control as tantamount to westernisation, could be taught the following considerations:

(1) There is a certain trajectory to history which puts into question static ideas of what is 'England' and what is 'India'. In countries such as England certain norms were set in the 18th and 19th centuries dictated by the bourgeois state, the capitalist system, and mass education, which made for what is now – but was not always – a clean, green England. We may not want a bourgeois state or a capitalist system without qualification, but mass education? What will be the nature of our choices if we want approximately the same kind of garbage-free society as resulted in Europe but without similar class and gender divisions, profit accumulation, and colonialism? That is, we must respect history and not essence as being at the heart of the form of things, even as we recognise that history is not a template or a roller coaster that moulds everything impassively, and can indeed be moulded.

(2) The young man's notion of what is 'English' and what 'Indian' are short-term and ahistorical. But to have a longer perspective means to evoke a past and a tradition that might give us the inspiration to overcome the indifference to garbage. We have to tread a fine line here between an ethnocentrism that celebrates an essentialist and ahistorical notion of what is India in opposition to the west; and an imaginative confidence that what is Indian is largely what we construct as being so. That is, we need to shed all fear of being outsiders just because we are reformers, because reformers there have been all the

time; and to shed the fear that we may be inventing tradition, because that is one of the healthiest relationships to have with tradition.

The arguably limited case of garbage is important because it highlights that modern schools in a provincial city are failures as agents of the nation state because they cannot teach the skills of discipline, civil society, and the discourses needed by mobile citizens in a globalising world. The schools are failures before a street culture, exemplified in the physical spaces of the school being influenced by the physical look of the street, rather than vice versa. This street culture, however, is not 'authentic', being produced by a discernible interplay of nature, culture, and history. By attributing authenticity to it, the historian would limit her vision of a complex, conflictual process to merely one particular construction.

It seems clear to us that we stand at a moment in time (at a 'crossroads' as the imagery goes) where the only valid choice of path seems to be one leading towards science, but environmentally sensitive science; technology, but culturally appropriate technology; and development, but development aimed at redressing gender and other inequalities. We must recognise that to not act also is an action – in support of science, technology, and development, without the qualifications above.

Now this action, in favour of science, tradition, and nationalism, has also to be taken in a particular way. Such is the nature of provincial modernity that a building and a space which tries to execute the above qualifications and also use child-centredness as a central criterion is treated with suspicion. A modern school in India means a box-like building with a large gate that is shut securely. The whole thing should be closed and solid, unattuned to the climate, wasteful in its use of materials, uncomfortable to its users. Vidyashram has evolved over the years from smaller to larger spaces, and is unusual in its odd angles, use of bamboo and clay tiles, open feel, and colourful finish. People are perhaps afraid that it is not 'modern' enough, and they look on it askance. They cannot imagine anything but a solid, concrete, box-like structure as being 'modern'. No one in a provincial city is impressed.

There could be three reactions to this dilemma. We could assume that 'they' are like that, and leave them more or less benignly to their own ways while we enjoy our more compatible structures in other

places, either in enclaves within the city, or in other cities, or in other countries. This was partly the colonial attitude, and today is the tourist's, and to some extent the anthropologist's. Or we could do 'them' a favour and try to educate or reform 'them' into what we might consider a higher consciousness. If we were dealing with the poor, we would simply pity their deprivation, including of ideas, and give them some basics. This was also partly the colonial attitude, but mostly the missionary's and the reformer's.

Or, thirdly, we could not rest content, and be ready to admit at any given time that there is no simple solution. We could strive for an interaction where we are not interacting with 'them', but are all in a mess together and can only resolve it together. To run away or to act upon 'them' are not solutions. To act together is the key, which includes argument, difference, mutual efforts at domination, and slow understanding of the common aim. This aim cannot be a common sense proposition such as "the health and prosperity of the child", but rather consists of negotiations over 'health', 'prosperity', 'success', etc, and certainly 'child'.

A postcolonial school is one that does not give in to local culture, as local schools do all the time, arguing that 'such is the place, such are the people' – 'kya kare, ye log hi aise hain'. Nor does it bully local people into submission arguing that 'such is necessary'. Both these are colonial approaches. It recognises the dilemma but resolves it without the distancing from the other which is at the crux of a colonial-colonised relationship.

Citizens and Their Guardians

There are some students who are consistent underachievers in whose case it is easy to see that it is their guardians who are to blame. The over-rich and mollycoddled aside, these are children of families where minimal importance has started to be given to schooling; where both parents or at least the mother is uneducated; where the nature of the father's profession and lifestyle precludes giving time to the children; where the norm is to be a precocious child who if not working in childhood is engaged in similar pursuits of freedom and pleasure as adults. It is impossible to communicate adequately with such parents, nor is it the school's business to try and educate them in how to run their families.

In our school, however, we do a remarkable job of trying. In a way unprecedented in the city we have parent-teachers meetings where we try to draw the parents into discussions of their responsibilities towards the children. Within the school the teachers regularly discuss each child in the context of her home conditions.

The real solution to the problem of under-achievement lies largely in a classroom structure where time is provided to deal with social needs. If necessary the time has to be provided outside but as an adjunct to the class. The solution lies largely in making the classroom activities of such high levels of attractiveness that motivation arises from even among those indifferent to learning. The solution also lies, and in connection with the above, in pulling together real-life experiences of children with the academic skills they need to learn.

None of these solutions is tried in provincial schools today. Indeed the notion of 'underachievement' does not exist. The child is simply labelled 'dull' if he fails to achieve and the family labelled 'backward'. Having become familiar with such children in our classrooms, we are inclined to judge with more alertness the pedagogic failure of schools all around. This failure is multiple. The simplest is the failure to try any pedagogically astute or appealing techniques in the classroom. The reason for this all-India provincial phenomenon is usually understood to be 'poverty', but may be better diagnosed as the continuation of a colonial mindset and culture. The teacher acts as a colonised adult, that is, not as a free and responsible agent in her space, the classroom, but as a slave to other's agendas. She performs her role reluctantly, almost in anger, referring to the curriculum and textbooks as prescribed by 'them', as being mistaken, and as the mistake being made at her cost. In this situation, to expect her to devise more successful methods of teaching is to be unrealistic. Here the antagonists are the state and the educators, with the children a passive, suffering population victimised by the former via the latter.

The more complex failure of most provincial schools is their distancing themselves from even the most basic teaching of languages and disciplines, even in the most rote-learning based way. As they dispense with their responsibilities they successfully make a norm out of an exception: the engaging of private tutors for their students. Parents expect by now that they must pay for private tuition for their

child, achiever or not, and that they cannot engage in any dialogue with the school on the subject. A system of parallel schooling or duplicate schooling has fully been institutionalised, with the child going to an ordinary school in the daytime for five to six hours, and to a second one in the form of a tutor in the evening, or night, or morning, and sometimes at two of these times.

Such is the nature of provincial modernity that these private tuitions have become a prized consumer good, decried for their expense but valued as a status symbol. For those who simply cannot afford them, they have become the real obstacle to an egalitarian society, because schools are not judged by how much they cost, but rather by how much private tuition their system needs. So-called English medium schools apparently always need so much private tutoring that they are effectively closed to modest-income families.

Such, further, is the nature of provincial modernity that there does not exist a single parents' organisation in any school in the city, or any kind of forum that could speak for the child's needs from the point of view of the parents. Our research shows an amazing vacuum in communication. Almost all parents without exception complain of the lack of attention to their children by the school, of oversized classes, of negligent teachers, of an over-heavy curriculum, of unrealistic extents of homework, parents' help, and cramming. Some minor complaints are volubly made such as the carrying of ridiculously weighty bags to and fro, but no larger issues reach the status of public debate. On the other side, almost all educators and administrators without exception complain of the lack of cooperation of parents, and their inability – being not educationally sophisticated by the school's standards – to do their share in the education of their children.

Here the antagonists are the parents and the educators, as each blames the other for not doing their part of the job. This is but a continuation of the colonial set-up in which the modern school originated as an arm of the colonial state and was held at a distance, and treated with awe, by the people. There was no possibility of questioning the school's workings, and there is little understanding of such a possibility now. Indeed, schools are divided up into the 'better', more highly disciplined schools, and the looser ones. The former tolerate no interference in their policies, and exercise their 'discipline' against

parents as well as students. The latter are local institutions where guardians feel more powerful. There is also an unequal market relationship between demand and supply that makes schools a precious partner in the relationship that may not be aggravated. Culture, that is, the culture formed in history, adds to the workings of economics. Organisations based on region, language, caste, and profession, do start schools in response to demand. Once they formally do so, the same organisations become now the agents of an external, mysterious process. All formal schools remain in provincial India a foreign, colonising power that have to be obeyed and pandered to.

We emphatically do not want more of the 'local' institutions only because they are kinder to the family, because the amount of violence exercised by them in terms of damaged self-esteem and damaged prospects of security and mobility for children is immeasurable. Nor are we critiquing the 'better' schools because of the perverse Foucauldian kind of control they exercise over their tie, belt, socks, shoes, badge, and buckle clad students. We are critiquing them, ironically, because they do not perform their modernising mission successfully. Just as they do not teach about garbage disposal, they do not teach the disciplines, and they do not teach the discipline of self-reliance and responsibility. They do not teach English, as they all profess to so. The few children who seem to learn all this while attending them do so because of the labour of their parents and private tutors. This lopsided reliance on the family for the actual education while denying the family the right to participate in formal schooling whether through advice or any other form of participation is a double blow to the modernisation project in India. It further widens the colonial gap between school and family and poses them as adversaries of each other. It trashes those families that will not or cannot take over the education of their children at home, and these are the vast majority of families. The population of India is at present divided up into those who can teach their children through their own resources, and those who cannot and therefore rely fruitlessly only on schools or stay away from schools as impossible propositions.

A postcolonial school is a difficult thing to run, as is anything 'postcolonial' because of the legacy of colonialism. But we use the lessons of history to

suggest some concrete steps that are all being tried.

First, the postcolonial school does not discriminate between children on the basis of their family background, including through subtle features like the name or appearance of the school, the fee structure, the dress code, and most of all, the expectation of home-education from parents.

Then, starting from the bottom up, it actively strives to woo those children to learn who have never encountered book learning before. There is a series of pedagogic strategies for this, and the aim being clear, they are all developed with tireless labour and tried variously.

For the faltering performance of children from families where there is no previous education and there is also active resistance to the culture of the modern school, the children are not faulted. We are in this historical situation together, and nothing about the modern position is transparently unquestionable. So, the school revises much curricula and procedures to incorporate the home culture, which like any culture, is full of a wealth of potential for any possible use.

The Rammohan Roy Syndrome

Rammohan Roy wanted to be taught everything of western learning because the other eastern knowledge was already accessible and, as we understand him, it is better to belong to two worlds and be universal than to one and the less powerful one. He was not so much westernised as a westerniser.

This desire has stayed with ambitious Indians since, but no one has worked out a formal pedagogic strategy for the implementation of it. The school, as the main production unit of this project, given that it controls curricula, books, rituals, and language, should be able to demonstrate a stronger strategy than it does.

Rammohan Roy was a polemicist and a reformer. He was not an educator in the sense that he had not spent hundreds of hours teaching children and observing the effects of his teaching (which we claim educators must do). His call for western learning for Indians consisted simply of the introduction of the English language and European philosophy, science, and history into schools based on the British organisational model in which Indian children should now study.

The problem with this approach was, and is, that it is a layman's solution, not

a pedagogically skilled or a technical one. We are not condemning the history but taking it for granted. All peoples and nations adopt 'foreign' norms and forms and forge new syntheses that prove functional and, eventually, even aesthetic. Because of a complex of economic and political circumstances in the 18th century, there was a strong move in India towards western learning and ideas. But judging by today, one cannot be sure the 'adoption' has worked. The problem is not merely aesthetic or political. It is of substance. It is not that we have no working educational strategy, and no great Indian model of schooling. It is that we have little learning altogether. There is occurring a massive waste of human resources.

In Vidyashram we have children from backgrounds as authentically 'Indian' as you could want. They are familiar with Hindu or Muslim mythology; have a holistic attitude to nature; are in touch with the countryside, even visiting ancestral villages frequently; know Hindi and usually Bhojpuri well; and are comfortable with their identities. We try, in Raja Rammohan Roy's mode, to downplay this knowledge and taken-for-granted identity, and push for comfort with the English language, western ideas, images, stories, concepts. Like Rammohan Roy, we feel that because they have a sufficient dose of 'the Indian' at home and are never exposed there to 'the western', that is, 'the universal', we must compensate for this by using up the school time as a balancing mechanism. This is probably a simple but fair description of how all good schools, including ours, have operated from Rammohan's day.

But there is a difference in our school. We are openly uncomfortable about this home-school split and the fact that it has continued for some 200 years, with the only challenges to it coming from religious schools that exclude non-co-religionists and belittle their knowledge formations. So we take the next necessary step of creating new rituals for children, consciousness raising for teachers, and new texts for both – and not as "we" against "them", but together. The staggering dimensions of the task, and simultaneously the indispensability of it, makes it comprehensible how insofar that it was not tried, there was only inefficient pedagogy.

To reduce the Rammohan Roy syndrome to basics – western learning in the school, Indian at home – and then to go beyond it with different curricula is one thing we try. The other, more intangible, thing again

also refers to a certain understanding of history. The school and home have been locked in a battle for these 200 years, but have each done their job more or less. The school has been more powerful for the elite, and the home more powerful for the majority of India's provincial and rural population. But if we interpret the history of learning as positive and productive, and see how much has been gained by the nation in 'preserving' entrenched knowledges (the success of the home, the failure of the school), and also how much has been gained by assimilating English and western knowledges into the Indian systems (the success of the school, the failure of the home), we can have a vision of how the home and the school need not be counterposed and could work together very productively. This needs a tremendous comfort with history, a lack of shame at 'what happened', a confidence that it was, and can be, moulded, and a recognition of ourselves inside it.

Power of Rituals

The practice of running a school convinces once and for all, with a firmness beyond dispute, of the importance of everyday rituals as a hidden curriculum, that is, as responsible for as much of the teaching occurring in the school as the more explicitly stated curricula.

Once this point is digested, it is not possible to interpret efforts either in the past or present towards building up a certain kind of person or consciousness by any other yardstick but: did they institute the proper rituals? Failure cannot be judged harshly, because, again, practice tells one that appropriate rituals are difficult to construct. But efforts can be so judged, and educators' statements can be analysed carefully for the seriousness of these efforts.

Almost no group at any time, in the whole history of education in India, submitted mechanically to new colonial constructions or follow unthinkingly a colonial citizen or other similar model. Groups, whether region or caste or language or occupation or ideology based, all tried experiments in synthesis. They understood the power of naming and the power of bestowing meaning in various ways. They wished to pick and choose and adapt and combine names, symbols, and rituals for their purposes. In the case of schooling, however, as far as history tells us, they did not demonstrate pedagogic acumen.

Observation in schools today confirms that the same weakness persists. Educators continue to make bold statements about the 'Indian citizen' they wish to produce, and then have almost no thoughts on how this alchemy will occur. Indeed, modern Indian educators still have to resolve which of several conflicting messages we wish even to present to our students.

A modernising nation has always used the power of rituals together with more directly conveyed messages to socialise its younger generations in desired values. We in India have still to decide, which values? To become aware of the fact that we were teaching some values already anyway, only not reflexively, would hasten our choices and decisions, but this awareness itself is lacking. Observation in a US school for one day would make it self-evident that the values being taught with consistency are: individualism, competition, consumerism, occasional environmental friendliness, the 'us' as modern, rational, advanced, and American. Observation in a provincial Indian school for one day would lead us to believe that what was being taught was: indifference to surroundings; the absence of any authority but the teacher; no sense of self-worth; the mindless following of instructions; the expectation of being judged all the time; the "us" as moralistic, but otherwise undetermined and left for private determination at home.

To be instrumental in changing this, as said above, those involved in schooling have to be aware of the problem first. But even the simplest technical difficulties of the 'east-west' synthesis are not recognised by anyone. Hence, in the some 100 schools of a medium-sized Indian city, the paraphernalia of tunic, tie, badge, belt, buckle, socks and shoes is used to support rituals like morning assembly, marching, raising hands, stopping at doors, and so on. The hollowness, indeed the pernacity, of this is recognised only by those with a solid ideology behind them, such as Gandhian nationalism, Ahl-e-hadis reformist Islam, or Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh Hinduism. They are decisive in condemning western 'gadgets' that do not suit our climate or culture, but they do not realise that they then have to invent substitutes, not discover them in the Vedic, Quranic, or traditional village past. All other teachers and parents in a provincial city, of whatever sex, age, class, or community, speak only acceptingly of the whole packet of what are called 'convent' practices – meaning, colonial

derived, theoretically English medium schooling – and would not dream of challenging the smallest, most mistaken aspect of this structure.

We say 'mistaken' not because we are fond of the 'pure'. Processes of syncretism, hybridisation, and creolisation are precisely what constitute history, and should be considered central and not peripheral to its workings. The experience of a subject decides where the centre lies, and her experience is likely to be that of hybridity. But in terms of power, both economic and symbolic, there are definite winners and losers. Thus, while the whole of Indian history has surely consisted of domination and adaptation, assaults and responses, interaction and synthesis, in the colonial period the violence of this is larger in scale but also directed to very vulnerable groups. As a result, there is a distance from the target aimed at by both sides, the colonial and the nationalist. The modernity and the disciplining aimed at by the colonial forces did not evolve, but neither did an 'Indian' modernity aimed at by the nationalists.

The problem is not, as both nationalists and intellectuals would have it, that there is westernisation, and we were, and still are, imitative and derivative. The problem is that there is vacuousness. Children, and their educators and parents, do not know why they are wearing, repeating, responding, behaving in a certain way. The rituals and symbols of the school are unallied to the home and street, and children are non-creative and awkward with them. The rituals and symbols being in this sense meaningless, the children create their own meaning in them, which is: "This is what is demanded of you. Do what they ask, lie low, then go about your preferred business." Colonial education created, and continues to create, two faces in the educated Indian: the public 'yes' and the private 'no'.

Our active practice shows us clearly what often escapes academic study: that rituals and symbols are always created and manipulated and are never natural. When looking at a certain time in the past, say the establishment of British rule, a scholar might find that indeed, that was a time of symbol constructions, but then inferentially regard previous constructions as natural. Involvement with schooling teaches that at each time, just like today, leaders, reformers, and educators had to make an active choice about symbols. Where they were not alert or active, they made mistakes.

The other argument is about change. The average teacher, belonging to the same pool of adults who unreflectively condone and perpetuate existing structures, is not the person to expect to change schooling in this regard. Only a very talented or experienced teacher could, from the lessons that emerge to her from her practice in the classroom, do so. Otherwise it is only the postcolonial thinker who has to deploy her understanding towards fashioning rituals and materials for the creation of the future by negotiating with the past in the immediate present.

Power of the Teacher

Rituals, symbols, and the philosophy they reflect are the determining components of a school, and each educational system maintains its legitimacy and power by these means. Until the 19th century the natural seeming discursive formation of Sanskrit education for the elite and 'pathshalas' for the masses, seemed to be unshakeably entrenched. Yet it did get shaken and replaced. Apart from being a simple comment on the vagaries of history, this teaches specific lessons for schooling today, and the schools that result have lessons to teach about history.

In the shift from Sanskrit and vernacular teaching to colonial education, the power of the teacher was taken over by the administration. The power of the text was replaced by the power of the textbook. And the power of the word went to the power of the examination.

What if today, almost 200 years after the reverse process was launched, we want to restore the power of the teacher? This is what our postcolonial school is trying to do, and we face at least three problems. First, unlike the British, who came in from another system with their own baggage of meanings, we are bred within our own system. Every single person acting in India today has been produced within its educational system, which as we have claimed above, breeds an insidious effect of obedience of authority, dependence on others, lack of self-worth, moralism, etc. The techniques of escape from a cycle of reproduction are not well understood yet. The closest we have is to the notion of the postcolonial, the reflexive and universalist intellectual who is in the business of deconstructing colonial and colonial-derived discourses. This is also our solution, to which is added very emphatically the postcolonial insight missing for most

such intellectuals: that history does not stop and we are not outside it.

The second problem is that we need the unassailable economic and political power to assert our right to meanings, such as the British had when they asserted their equivalent right. And third, we need to fight on a cultural front the persuasion already imbedded in people's minds that the colonial modes of schooling are the only ones possible. These notions are strong because mental formations and relations persist even after the legitimising authority behind them has retired, and specially if retired from a position of strength. So, even if we can imagine being a government in power with sufficient economic resources, we need to marshal the support of conviction that existing educational techniques are not the only ones possible.

These insights help us to understand history better. The British, we can now suppose, had a much harder time in trying to install their system of schooling against the existing Indian ones than is generally supposed. It took long and occurred in slow phases as their cultural legitimacy grew. It was resisted for varying reasons in most provincial towns and cities. And when it was accepted, it was accepted with modifications.

We share then a feeling of difficulty with change similar to 19th century British efforts. But there is another ironic problem also to be compared, and we would like to end with a possible solution to that. The justification of colonial action lay in that the existing system was inferior in their view and they had a duty to set it on a correct path in the cause of civilisation and enlightenment. We are similarly calling an existing system insufferable and implying that we have a 'duty' towards children in changing it, though we would prefer not to name any legitimising agendas. The colonial move is typically condemned as political: they actually needed cheap clerks, a westernised consumer market, a loyalist citizenry and overall brainwashing into accepting the British. And we? Are we the less political? We may not need the modernising bourgeoisie's efficient labour force and docile public such as present-day Indian schools should, arguably, try to produce but dismally fail to. But we do want to teach the virtues of environmental protection, concentration on the job at hand, control over one's life and responsibility towards others, and an attitude of creativity and achievement. These are no less political goals than the colonials', only

different ones. We may consider them infinitely superior to colonial and modernising ones, but even so, in the conflict they arouse between the unreformed Indian adults of the provinces and we educators, they are also 'colonial'.

It is not in the content, therefore, that we can overcome colonialism. Any intervention in contemporary problems, any action in history and life, is violent and destructive of others' beliefs and rights, and therefore partly colonial, no matter how glorious the cause.

It is only in the process that we could be postcolonial. Schooling is itself a process, and is colonial. Moreover, the schooling has to be carried on at several levels, not only of adults towards children. At all levels, then, there has to be no toleration of the following relationship: the subjects, reformers, acting upon the objects, those to be reformed. To be actively postcolonial is a never-ending challenge. Teachers cannot be forced to take responsibility in their teaching spaces, as they were once forced out. They have to understand the power of this responsibility and adapt it to their needs (which means that they can fail to do so, or actively refuse). Maids cannot be forced to keep the rooms clean because such is the new need of the nation. They have to be permitted to choose the work, by being moved around (after being trained in) different jobs. (But they can refuse to cooperate). Children cannot be forced to stand in line because that is one of the few visions of a possible disciplining. They have to be given sufficient time by adults to interactively comprehend and develop rituals (and will provide unforeseen challenges in doing so). Failure is tolerable on all these scores if a germ of change occurs with it. Failure is temporary in the *langue d'urree* of history. Our school is 'postcolonial' because it believes in the method. It might fail in immediately overcoming its modern, colonial surroundings. It succeeds in producing change, albeit slowly. **EPW**

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[This essay is based on a common conceptualisation of problems and vision of solutions on the part of the two authors extending over some 12 years. The writing style and jargon is Nita Kumar's. She would like to always remember Som Majumdar's generosity in permitting this indulgence, even while the two authors continued to debate endlessly their understanding of principles and practices.]