

Teachers' Day

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I, normally, do not set the alarm when I go to bed at night. My body-clock wakes me up about the same time every morning. However, on 5 September, 2021, an alarm-like sound emitting from my cellphone woke me up way too early in the morning. While still sleepy, I couldn't, at first, figure out what was going on. Soon I realized that I had been receiving a large number of pictures on my phone, and the phone was making that relentless bell-like sound with every single picture received. The sender, I noticed, was a Bengali female, who I was not at all familiar with. Still sleepy-eyed, I quickly glanced at those pictures. There were thirty-two pictures, altogether, of men in their 80s or probably 90s, none of whom I could recognize. I quickly concluded that some kind of mistake had been made by the sender. However, there was a brief note at the end, written in Bengali, and when I read that, it totally astounded me. If I translate that note in English, it would read as follows:

'Today is the Teachers' Day in India. Take a good look at these pictures. I am sure some of these men once taught you when you attended the school over here. See, how many of them you can recognize now.'

More than sixty years ago, at the age of thirteen, I went to a boarding school in Sriniketan, in the Birbhum district of West Bengal at grade seven (class VII, in India). Visva-Bharati University has two arms; one is the popular and well-known school in Santiniketan, established by Rabindranath Tagore in 1901 and the other, the less

popular school in Sriniketan, about two kilometres west of Santiniketan, also established by Tagore in 1921. Why I went to Sriniketan and not Santiniketan is another story and not relevant to this article. However, I was a boarder and stayed in that school for only two years before I was brought back home in Calcutta (now Kolkata) to continue my study. Though I was not a bad student, I was not that great either and at that tender age neither did I leave any mark during those two short years such that, more than sixty years later, someone would reach out to me from Santiniketan on the Teachers' Day. There were other reasons.

In that brief note, she also introduced herself as the youngest daughter of one of the teachers, with whom I kept in touch through letters for many years. When I visited him for the first time, more than forty years after leaving the school, he and his wife, also a teacher, had retired and settled down in a spacious home in Santiniketan. Their children had all grown up and left home. When I attended the school there, he was probably in his mid-20s, newly married, and didn't have any children. Their staff quarters were adjacent to our hostels. The youngest daughter is a teacher and had left home with a teaching job elsewhere. However, after her mother passed away a few years ago, she returned home to be with her father. Her father was in his 90s, by my estimate, but still in relatively good health. She also mentioned that her parents often talked about me and other boarders and that her father would be

very happy if I would give him a call. I still remember well that her parents used to patrol all four hostels every evening to make sure that we were in our rooms, studying, and not loitering elsewhere. After reading the entire note, I returned to take another look at those pictures and I *did* recognize her father. Since the message came in my cellphone's WhatsApp, I had no difficulty calling her back and had a pleasant conversation with her father, my teacher, whom I admired so much and had always thought of him as a remarkable human being. I promised to pay him a visit as early as possible.

That message on 5 September made me curious about one more thing, and that is, the Teachers' Day. I left India for the United States in 1969 and I do not recall ever celebrating the Teachers' Day. I was not even aware that it existed. However, the Teachers' Day, that is celebrated throughout the world now, probably originated in India in 1962, thanks to then India's president Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. He was the first vice-president of India after India became independent in 1947 and he became president in 1962. He was a philosopher, author, statesman and educator, and one of the most erudite of Hindu scholars of all times. He was a professor of Eastern Religions at Oxford University and the first Indian to be a fellow of the British Academy. He was also named the 'Knight of the Golden Army of Angels,' the Vatican's highest honour for a Head of State.

5 September happened to be Dr Radhakrishnan's birthday. On that day in 1962, after he became President, a group of his former students and friends visited his residence and sought permission to celebrate his birthday. Dr Radhakrishnan, however, did not approve of any celebration but rather requested that the day be celebrated as Teachers' day. Hence, the beginning of the celebration of Teachers' Day in India. Here

are some of the best quotes of Dr Radhakrishnan:

- Books are the means by which we build bridges between cultures.
- When we think we know, we cease to learn.
- Teachers should be the best minds of the country.

Celebration of Teachers' Day in America has an interesting history. Its origin is a bit unclear. It is believed to have been initiated by one or two teachers in the 1940s, one from Arkansas and the other from Wisconsin. Though this history is unclear and unsubstantiated, either one of the two, or, both teachers turned to the former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt for her assistance in backing their case in establishing a Teachers' Day in America. As a result, in 1953, the former First Lady took an interest in the cause and tried to persuade the 81st Congress that there needed to be a specific day to recognize the teachers. Prior to her involvement, some states did practise some kind of annual teachers' day celebration. Even if Eleanor Roosevelt took the case to the Congress to get their help and support, it took Congress 27 years to establish the first official Teachers' Day on 7 March, 1980. This day in March was observed for four short years, until National Parent Teacher Association deemed the first full week of May to be observed as Teacher Appreciation Week in 1984. The following year, the National Educational Association (NEA) put it to a vote and decided that the official national day be celebrated on the first Tuesday of the Teachers' Appreciation Week every year going forward. On that day, students and parents show their appreciation for teachers by writing thank you notes and by offering small treats and gifts. For example, Teachers' Day was celebrated this year (2023) on 2 May, the first Tuesday in the first week in May.

There are still a few cases of oddities in the country, such as, Massachusetts celebrates Teachers' day on the first Sunday in June. There may be others. Although the first Tuesday in May has been set aside to celebrate the Teachers' day, the schools in the Los Angeles area, where I live, do not show this date in their annual school calendars, where all other important events throughout the year are noted. The calendars, used by the general public, also do not identify this date in May as Teachers' Day, but all other important days, whether observed or not, throughout the year are noted. The reason is hard to explain, as if, it's not important enough. In the United States, about 45 percent of teachers leave the profession in their first five years and about 40 percent of teachers enter the profession from other careers.

In 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization selected 5 October for celebrating World Teachers' Day. On this day in 1966, a precedent for the Status of Teachers and their rights was established at a special inter-governmental conference in Paris. Over one hundred countries celebrate 5 October as World Teachers' Day. There are countries around the world, however, which celebrate Teachers' Day on a different date for different reasons. For example, Australia celebrates it on the last Friday in October, while New Zealand celebrates the day on 29 October. While U.K. and Germany celebrate it on the date set by the United Nations, France celebrates it on 27 November. Four African countries, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, celebrate it on 28 February. Mexico celebrates it on 15 May. Though Russia celebrates it on 5 October, in China, Teachers' Day is a national holiday and is celebrated on 1 September. It is believed that this holiday in China, in its different interpretations, has existed since the middle ages and teachers and coaches have always

been honoured and respected. However, the modern holiday was awarded a national status in January 1985. Teachers' Day is also a national holiday in Singapore and is celebrated on the first day of September. The celebration usually takes place on the prior day when the secondary and junior college students are allowed to go back to the primary and secondary schools, respectively, to honour their teachers. A complete list of all the *Teachers' Days* is available on the internet.

In every society, there are people with all different professions: doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, judges, policemen, engineers, bankers, accountants, politicians, diplomats, government workers, and many others. However, there is one common link between the people of these different professions. Every one of them, at some point in their lives, had to enter a classroom in a school and be taught by a teacher. A good teacher may focus solely on the curriculum, teaching the three Rs (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic), regarded as the fundamental of learning, while a great teacher, on the other hand, besides being very competent and a committed individual, relates to the students in developing their skills and potentials, strengthens their dreams and aspirations, widens their imaginations and goals, and touches their hearts and souls. He is a caring human being, inspiring, engaging and always committed to his craft. A great teacher is that important in the lives of his students.

We never forget our teachers, who once taught us; particularly, the ones who have left permanent marks in our hearts and souls. We tend to forget all other things we consider important. For example, as much as I love sports, I do not remember who won the Wimbledon or the U.S. Open tennis tournaments, or, the NBA (National Basketball Association) championship, or, other popular sporting events around the

world, held only a year or a few years ago. I do not remember which movie was awarded the Oscar, or, which actor or actress received the highest award for their performances. However, teachers are different and we never forget them. I still remember the teacher who changed the correct spelling of my name from 'Binoy' to 'Benoy' when I was in grade (class) two. I didn't protest. I didn't have any birth certificate then. I was born at home. In those days, the high school diploma served as a birth certificate in India. I met her many years later at a bus stop in Kolkata. She had grown old and didn't remember me, but I did. I spoke with her briefly, but didn't want to ask why she changed the spelling of my name. She wouldn't have remembered, anyway.

Of all the professions in the world, the profession of teaching is perhaps the noblest of all. All great minds and souls in this world are fundamentally teachers. And yet, quite paradoxically, if young students, from either rich countries or poor countries, regardless of nationalities, are asked what they would like to be when they would grow up, very few mention that they would like to be a teacher. Perhaps, the teachers, in general, are not well paid and their profession has never been glorified or glamorized by society.

It is almost impossible to come up with a single list of names of the great teachers of the world, because there is not just one list, but quite a few. However, here are the names of some of the great teachers the world has seen: Chanakya, Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Sir Isaac Newton, Anne Sullivan, Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, Albert Einstein, Rabindranath Tagore, Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Swami Vivekananda, Vivian Paley, Abdul Kalam, Erin Gruwell, Andrea Zafirakou. This list of names is, by no means, all inclusive. There are many

more. If we look at different religions, all religious leaders, like, Jesus Christ, Gautam Buddha, Lord Krishna, Prophet Muhammed, and others, are fundamentally teachers. And there are thousands, if not millions, of nameless teachers all over the world, whose teachings didn't confine themselves to the four walls of the classroom. They inspired and opened up a world of opportunities to their students. Socrates, the great Greek Philosopher, is considered to be the greatest teacher the world has ever seen. The essence of his teaching was a two-way dialogue between the teacher and his students.

The teacher, whose daughter contacted me on the Teachers' Day nearly two years ago, was a strict disciplinarian, but a genuinely kind and caring man. More than forty years after leaving the school, when I visited him for the first time, the first question he asked me was, where I was staying. When I mentioned the name of the hotel, he asked me to go back to the hotel, check out, and come back with all my belongings. I had to convince him that I would follow his instruction on the following morning and I would spend the entire day with him, before I returned home taking a train in the evening. I did just that. On the following day, his wife, whom we called Boudi, following the tradition of Visva-Bharati, brought out old, nearly faded out, and yet, carefully preserved, black and white pictures of us when we attended the school there. She recounted many stories, which I just about forgot, and I noticed that while she was narrating those stories, she was wiping away tears with the corner of her sari. My teacher and his wife were indeed both very kind and caring individuals. They loved the students as their own.

Now, I need to pay a visit to him as early as possible. ■

* An engineer by profession, Mr Samanta currently resides in Los Angeles, California.