

The role of school education in a positive peace

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The Government declared recently Peace Day in schools and implemented a resourceful programme in its connection. Currently, when we are in search of a reliable solution to our National Question it is opportune to initiate a programme to engage schoolchildren in such a project. Now is the time to commence this endeavour to instill in young minds the immense value of eternal peace in our troubled land.

Already we notice a wave of gangsterism prevailing in schools. Some of these social evils are abortive love-affairs leading to student killings, examination failures leading to suicide, students assaulting teachers, inter-school rivalry ending in students suffering severe injuries, freshers rags, molesting of women and harassing and injuring them physically, breaking of the highway code drug-addiction and so forth.

Often disputes that arise in the classroom lead to fisticuffs and worse, confront-action on the highway, in buses and other modes of transport which overflows on to schools, where it becomes inter-school rivalry. It is in this respect that peace should be promoted in schools. When we talk of peace, most of us think that it means the abandonment of war, or the non-existence of war, which is an incurable interpretation.

Consequently most of our peace programmes have been launched as an ancillary to our National Question, or with the sole notion of the cessation of hostilities. But it is a false concept, however within the different kinds of social violence, war is only one type. Though it is one reason for the break-down of the social fabric, but it is certainly not the sole reason to ignore the other attributes, we believe that in the near future the Government will be able to solve this national problem as a solution to the war.

Multi-faceted programmes

However, in pursuance of such a Peace, multi-faceted programmes should be initiated in several fields. The prime aim of such projects should be the establishment of a culture of peace. The ideal centre for promoting such a project is the school.

If so, we have to perceive what a culture of peace signifies. In this instance we will find useful the following articles in the UNESCO Charter made in concurrence with the provisions enshrined therein at the 51st session of the UNO in 1996. The following proposals are most important for us. Peace is not only a valuable concept, but a complex and subtle one. It enshrines the concept of Liberty, Justice and Fraternity. Peace renders the above three concepts a unique balance. Accordingly it is clear how important education is to build a culture of peace. Therefore I feel the time is right to focus our thoughts in this direction and to discuss some relevant issues.

Primarily -

1. To note that we live in a multi-cultural environment;
2. Since we live among several ethnic groups our day to day social intercourse takes place in a vast conflicting social environment.

Therefore it is endemic that we have to view with respect others

aspirations and needs. For such an attitude one must have a sharp and disciplined mind. It is this sense of empathy which enable us to believe and honour others beliefs. For such an attitude one must have a sharp and disciplined mind.

Listening to others

At home if parents listen to the children, the latter too would follow suit. In school if teachers listen to students and vice versa most confrontations could be avoided. But such a situation is a mere day dream, yet to be realized. Even in other institutes of higher learning including our universities, it doesn't seem to be a 'fait accompli'. But today instead of listening to others we form preconceived notions of other concepts. If one is not accustomed to such interaction at home and at school it is not an easy task to convince one to do so with other ethnic groups.

Secondly, Prof. Belmond has said that the external world that surrounds us encircle us with an invisible web around our social customs which is multi-culturalism. So much so, we are unable to exercise our own free will in these matters and to tolerate such differences. What we heard, read and saw in the past promoted or propagated intolerance.

The language, religion, social customs, and dress of others should not be viewed with ridicule or repugnance. Tolerance is essential really for a sense of camaraderie between different ethnic groups. If such diversity amongst unity exists certainly unity between nationalities will be a reality.

More or less we must provide scope for a vivifying humanism. If we do not envisage a vivifying culture different nationalities tend to exist in isolation and invariably they become defunct. Today our schools as well as universities do not seem to have any scope for promoting multi-ethnicity. If there exists any state devoid of multi-culturalism, it becomes a cultural desert.

Today in most schools, at morning assembly students belonging to a different religion from that established in the school have no opportunity for their religious observances. This is a noteworthy feature in most schools. Unfortunately this was how the school authorities pursued the spiritual aspect of education.

Perhaps, this may not have been done purposely or intentionally. The freedom for any student from a different ethnic group to wear his/her national dress has been restricted for the sake of uniformity of dress. Yet, these are some

simple pre-requisites for launching ethnic peace.

Besides, these are programmes that need not be implemented by issuing circulars. Parents, principles, teachers, elders and students themselves should undertake the responsibility in this context. There should be a multi-purpose thrust to build up such a culture of peace.

Conflict management

We should not forget how conflicts within the school should be contained and settled. Certainly we cannot create a conflict-free society. Conflicts exist everywhere while it isn't an unhealthy phenomenon. Wherever conflicts exist difference of opinion occurs. However, conflicts lead to pandemonium when they end in violence.

We need to create a form of mechanism by which we could contain and eradicate conflicts creatively without antagonising either parties. Further, conflicts cannot be settled by introducing harsh laws or closing down institutions.

Such settlements are neither successful nor reasonable. Today the world over conflict resolution has become a popular subject. Hence it should enter the school curriculum.

In school such a project should first engage the attention of teachers and prefects. Today, conflicts break-out in schools because the primary causes of such violence are not nipped in the bud. We sense it only after it exploded as a bridge crumbles between the school administration and students.

When conflicts amongst students break-out school prefects should be able to analyse the root cause of such disputes and quell it peacefully in its nascent stages.

Unfortunately today the prefectship has only become an ornament that adorns the student. Even student-counsellors in the universities are the same. Some believe in establishing peace by suppression. Though such suppression may lead to some momentary peace its survival is short-term.

Prescribed school texts

In propagating a culture of peace prescribed school texts perform a valuable task. Unfortunately, these prescribed texts, it seems to me, serve an entirely different purpose. To say the least these texts are inundated with ultra-nationalistic notions and other extremist ideologies that run contrary to the current peace process.

Some four years ago, a project to scrutinise these texts was launched by the (NIPU) National

Integration Programme Unit to comment on its material and prepare a report thereon. This report has been forwarded to Her Excellency the President. However these prescribed texts have still not been withdrawn. The authority of writing prescribed texts belongs to the NIE.

The same editorial committee, responsible for providing these texts have been functioning for a long period and has become an absolute authority. So the concepts they hold regarding the National Question and Peace are parochial and perfunctory to the present situation. During our school days there were supplementary texts other than the prescribed one for every subject. There was no state authority preparing textbooks. However the situation today is quite different. The intellectual community should be encouraged to write prescribed and supplementary reading books and the state monopoly should be broken, and students motivated towards the reading habit.

Instead of removing history texts from the school curriculum, students should be motivated to study the various facets of unity. More analytical than the popular history series we study today dealing with different facets is a supplementary reading book written in 2000 had been held up by NIPU.

According to the facts I have set out above our school curriculum could be amended under the following short-term and long-term projects.

Short-term

1. Now as an urgent move, peace-building committee should be formed in the schools. This committee should comprise teachers, parents and prefects national and district level committee to organise conflict resolution awareness workshops. The committee could then forestall impending conflicts.

2. School authorities should have access to civil organisations for peace-building.

3. Schools should commence creative programmes for establishing peace within. The goal is how to live in unity within diversity. How to accept and respect diversity and how to live with it.

4. The peace programme should be conducted at every national festival. Politicians should be debarred, since their participation diminishes the students' belief in the peace process.

5. Inter-school cultural festivals and dignity of labour (Shramadana) sessions should be conducted at which food items specific to different nationalities should be served.

6. At morning assemblies con-

ducted in schools opportunities should be provided for students of every denomination to observe their own religion.

7. School uniforms should incorporate the national dress of every student's denomination.

8. Every religious festival should be held in school enabling students of different denominations to participate.

The goal that such programmes seek is to lead those who participate in the popular peace programmes to go beyond inner-peace towards the management of emotion, tolerance, empathy, acknowledgement, acceptance, respect for others opinion and forgiveness and reconciliation.

Thus students would be able to settle any dispute, peacefully without resorting to violence and realize the danger of resorting to violence.

Long Term

1. Through the introduction of the subject 'conflict resolution' into the curriculum of schools and colleges of Education the necessary environment for the introduction of the subject "skills" should be established.

2. Concepts leading to Peace should flow into every subject e.g. Recognition of diversity and respect for it, using an aesthetic subject for its propagation.

3. Introducing and encouraging supplementary reading material in schools illustrating the value of Peace-building.

4. Printing and the preparation of texts and elimination of state monopoly.

5. Re-organization of the National Institute of Education. A special training programme to enlighten members of the Prescribed Texts Editorial Committee on the nature of the multi-cultural education.

6. School authorities as well as civil organizations should jointly organize activities leading to peace-building activities. While eradicating any obstacles to it.

7. A special training programme to enlighten lecturers of colleges of education in peace-building.

8. To organize workshops and other activities to enlighten students of colleges of education on the value of peace-building and to instill a sense of discipline in them.

9. Preliminary arrangements to be made to conduct research in this sphere and to teach the subject at the universities.

If the points I have stated above are considered and noted seriously establishing peace in the school isn't a difficult task.

School curriculum means all the activities done in school. It comprises the formal curriculum, the non-formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum.

The hidden curriculum consists of not only the principals' and teachers' behavioral patterns and lifestyles but those of students as well. Emotional experiences, conflicts and pre and post-judgements are included. Such actions done purposely or not are the result of prejudices due to habitus.

It is in school that we imbibe such extremist habitus in our state of mind. Hence it is the responsibility of the school to see that we acquire a sense of patience and sympathy for the other person. If the school undertakes this responsibility and establishes it, it would be no difficult endeavour, to achieve positive peace.