Speech at National Progressive Schools Council Day
New Delhi
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A teacher's life is difficult, it is complex and it is unrelievedly demanding. A teacher must hide private sorrows, for a teacher is expected to be stoic. A teacher must curb the play of temper, for a teacher is required to be equanimous. A teacher must smile, but not so unrestrainedly as to be regarded weak-minded, a teacher may even laugh, but not so loud as to be thought frivolous. A teacher must not look helpless, for a teacher is meant to help, she or he must not look forlorn, vulnerable, precarious, for students, scores upon scores of them, who are forlorn, vulnerable, precarious, are looking up to the teacher.

This is not easy.

For you are human too, are you not, with dependants to support, illnesses, sometimes life-threatening, to cope with, debts to clear; you have your anxieties as anyone else; corrosive disappointments like any other mortal, your desairs, your grief. You have feelings, you have likes, dislikes, prejudices, even hates. For you are human. You were born to flesh, the flesh that feels hunger, thirst, pain, rapture, that wants relief from hurt, that wants the touch of the senses like any creature in Creation. But, as you are teachers, you are obliged – not by others but by your own self-esteem – to keep your smiles within an ambit of permissible, your laughter within a decibel count, your tears in a miligramme drop of admissibility for you must not seem too common, too regular, too weak. This is not, cannot be, easy.

A father may frown or berate, a mother might shield or forgive but you are meant to be different, for you are teachers.

How do you scold without causing hurt, instruct without preaching, assist without seeming to patronize? How can you join in a celebration without fearing loss of form, join in lamentation without appearing to compromise your stoicism? And yet you try to do so, for you are teachers.

Society, tradition, custom require you to check but not dominate, influence but not indoctrinate, shape but not so hard as to stultify.

You are not by any means, moneyed. And yet when you seek, sometimes agitate, for better terms, you have to do so without seeming avaricious for you are teachers and teachers are meant to be austere if not ascetic.

You are not by any means, in a position of power. And yet, you are in a position of heavy responsibility.

Testing students, you are yourselves under a test.

If young, you cannot be flippant. If not young, getting to be old, you cannot forget a date or a name.

Your road is not a highway, not a path, not even a village cart-road. It is the razor’s edge.

You are asked to evaluate objectively – with your mind. But you are expected to relate to each student personally – with your heart.

You are to encourage, but not to favour. You are to support but not create dependencies. You are to like your student but not be partial, you are to give but not receive, you are to forgive but not exculpate, give another chance but not indulge, smoothen feelings, quieten rages, dry tears, cleanse speech. You are meant to lift fallen spirits, assuage hurt egos, encourage bravery but dampen bravado. You are human; you are meant to be more. You are required, always, to attempt what is so difficult as to be almost impossible.

You have to teach a love of language but not permit it to become insular. You are meant to inculcate a love of community but keep it from becoming sectarian, a love of region which is not parochial, a love of country which is not chauvinistic.

It is not easy to teach patriotism which does not end up hating neighbours, to instill a pride in Swadeshi but not allow it to turn xenophobic, a sense of belonging which does not degenerate into cultural ghettoism. How difficult!
You have your problems, real life-challenging problems. But no one likes a teacher to agitate. You have views; but no one likes a teacher to be opinionated. You have affiliations; but no one likes a teacher to be a partisan.

Well you may feel – do I, who am always on the give, not need, sometimes, to get?

Do I, who am always to appear ideal, not need someone, somewhere, to see my own realities?

Must I, a teacher, who have an aged parent, a daughter of intellectual promise and cultural sensitivity to be educated and, by custom, to be ‘wed’, or a recalcitrant son to advise and guide into his full potential, not to mention the needs of my own body, mind and soul, have to go about, walk, talk, comport, teach like one who is a fully evolved human being, the alpha and the omega of the perfect human specimen, who has absolutely no cares?

Well, you might ask those questions, reflect on those conundrums.

But, as you are teachers, you will know that the answers to those questions, those cogitations, are unavailable in society. They have to be found in the silence of your contemplation.

There is however something that society might care to do on Teachers’ Day, which is to ask itself whether it is right to want to be taught without being ready to be receive teaching, to expect teachers to deliver as if they are a courier service, to demand instruction in gulp-size pre-digested portions, sufficient to cross the hurdle of exams, rather than to want to learn, to understand.

And there is something teachers might care to consider, which is this: I am in a job, in profession. But mine is a job, a profession that lies beyond those two situations. It is a calling. What is the difference between a profession and a calling? A profession is entered primarily, though not exclusively, in search of livelihood. Not so, a calling. A calling is in fact not entered at all. One is drawn into it by the tug of a purpose beyond oneself, a purpose which belongs to this world and yet moves above its surface tensions, like a magnetic field whose power can be felt, though not seen. And what is that purpose? It has to be, it needs must be, it cannot but be, anything other than two things:

First, helping even one single student’s mind to reach, without a shred of prejudice, a trace of bigotry, or as much as a shadow of envy, the complete fulfillment of its uniqueness.

And two, to help the student to come to terms with that biggest of all individual and collective quests for which religions, philosophies and ideologies have miserably failed to give us explanations, namely, the fact of human suffering.

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Being young means seeing, touching, feeling, tasting, breathing, experiencing with a ‘Hey!’ rather than a ‘Why?’

It means being able to find surprise, appreciation, wonder, pleasure and even rapture in things that are happening around you. Hey! Look! and Hey! That’s new, that’s great! and Hey! How’s that! or Hey! Watch Out! are all about being young. I looked up the word ‘on-line’ and found that traditionally, Hey! was just an exclamation. Sometimes it expressed delight, sometimes a warning. But increasingly now it is used for saying something, anything, with feeling, as in the expression But hey! It is also a greeting in its short, colloquial version, Hey? Instead of How are you? And it is a pretty close kin to Hi, which it seems to be replacing. Hey! is also a way of
showing surprise, dismay, discovery or, as with magicians, of announcing the landing of a trick as in Hey Presto!

So, being young is about being able to find wonder.

When you begin to find wonder and say ‘Hey! I am finding wonder!’ you have ceased being young, you have begun to age.

And wonder need not really say, through the vocal chords, ‘Hey!’. I am sure most of those gathered here have seen Satyajit Ray’s ‘Pather Panchali’ many times. There is a scene early on in the film where Apu and Durga are drawn by the calls of the wandering bioscope man. ‘Dekho, dekho’, he calls, ‘Dilli ka Qutb dekho, Agre ka Taj dekho, Bambayi ka Bandar dekho, Madras ka mandir dekho, dekho, dekho!’ The brother and sister are transfixed by the spectacle, by that visual journey, speechlessly.

They are in wonder, without being aware that they are in the world of wonderment. They are in fact aware of little other than what they are seeing, in sheer awe. They are unaware of their mother’s anxiety as at that very moment, their father is leaving on a journey to unknown parts.

So, being young is also to not be self-conscious. It is to be able to lose one self completely in what is absorbing. ‘Concentration’ and ‘attention’ come naturally to them provided the object of attention is the right one.

There is another attribute of being young. And that is the opposite of being excited. It is to very easily get bored, as with this lecture, when there is nothing really wondrous or exciting or new coming your way. At meetings where boring people speak boringly to bored audiences about boring themes discussed within a scale of boring to more boring to unbearably boring, those that are a good five or more decades away from being sixty would and should want to go to sleep.

There is in the very young a freedom from some attributes of the former-young, the ex-young. There is a freshness of mind, a clean-ness, as of a new window-pane. When they want something, even long and crave for it, they do so without covetousness, without wanting to filch, defraud or impair someone else. When they want to excel, they want to do so in absolute terms, without envy, certainly without malice.

I would not like to glorify ‘youniness’. Children can be quite difficult, even impossible and especially among boys, they can use their relative advantages of age and physical strength to overpower those that are younger, weaker or more vulnerable. ‘Biguns’ among children discovering the method of being mean to other children is no work of imagination although the disturbing novel by William Golding, ‘Lord of the Flies’, is. I will not describe it.

By and large, the universe of the young is the world of the uncorrupt.
Schools mediate the transition of that universe of being into the world of becoming and then again, of that world of becoming into the country, province, city, mohalla, para and gully of daily living. That mediation is an enormous responsibility and my mind goes blank when I contemplate what it involves.

I have not what it takes, including audacity, to offer any thoughts on how that mediation may be conducted. I would only say that competitiveness looms in the world outside. Like a wave, it waits to lift up or hurl down, the entrant standing on the sea-shore. Should a school prepare the young citizen to learn to give fight, to compete, to get even and get ahead? Or should it prepare her and him to let the hordes of competition go rumbling past and step aside, stay aloof, rise above? This existential question is not easy to address. And is impossible to ignore.

I can only say what I would like a school to prepare a grandchild of mine to do today. I would like it to tell the child that the choice is not between victory and defeat but between success and victory. You can succeed without wanting to be or in fact being victorious. Saphalya is one thing, vijay another. In one’s saphalya, there is fulfillment; in one’s vijay there is another’s parajay. Some successes cannot come without victory; so be it. But at the very least, in such situations, the aim should not be another’s defeat, and no gloating when that happens, nor mourning when it does not.

If that fine distinction is drawn, and ingrained in the child, I believe it will be better able to take competition’s cruel blast.

Examinations are a fact of life. But they are not the only situations in which schools make competitive rivalries axiomatic with progress in the institution’s calendar. Must poetry, recitation, declamation, painting, essay-writing, sports-events be conducted in terms of competitive grading, of prizes?

The noun ‘prize’ is defined as a reward for victory or superiority, as in a contest or competition, also as something that is won in a lottery or the like, something seized or captured, like an enemy’s ship and cargo captured at sea in wartime. In fact the origins of the word lie in the old English ‘prise’ which we know of in the sense of prising out, extracting. But the word is used, and the practice is observed in terms of an award for and a recognition of relative merit. This is where the trouble starts. If ‘prize’ was used not as a noun but as a verb in the sense of ‘esteeming’ or ‘valuing the worth of’, the student would be saved much of the unhealthy features of competitiveness.