‘Teachers Day’ comes every year on September 5 and most of us pay homage to Dr S Radhakrishnan on whose birthday we observe this occasion. It has been reduced to a ceremonial formality. But some call it a ceremonial hoax. It is true that today in many schools and colleges, students will be showering gifts on their teachers but that need not necessarily be out of regard for them. For some it could merely be a pretence to show their own power of money that they possess.

When a student hardly finds a teacher taking his classes seriously, how can he have any genuine regard for him? If coaching institutes have outnumbered the regular schools in Allahabad, what does it show? That more than school and college teachers it is the teachers of the coaching classes which attract the boys. And ironically enough, in many cases the teachers are the same—those who teach in schools teach in coaching classes as well. They do better in tutorials than in actual classes. When students find that his teachers are not taking seriously the college classes but asking them to join their coaching classes or take private tuition from them by paying exorbitant fees, how will a student have respect for them? It will be more of a commercial transaction than transferring knowledge from a Guru to a Shishya. The student knows that the teachers can be made to dance to the tune of their money power. And don’t they do so? How can students have respect for teachers when they know that they are on the payroll of the Copying Mafia and are helping them in running a parallel system of examination where you can
easily buy your ‘division’ by purchasing the best of the answered questions? What would they think of a don who has completed his term in office but is still sitting tight by tampering with the rules till he is found out? And what do teachers feel when they see currency notes of different denominations being pinned in the copies of the examinees, asking them to help them through the examinations? Doesn’t that show that students, who pin the currency notes, are convinced that the teachers are corrupt and can be purchased that way?

Respect for a teacher flows from within. And this happens when the teacher teaches. Just recall those days when a village teacher, with hardly any economic status, would pass through the village and all the villagers would stand up to show their reverence to him. They could have been the zamindars, the taluqgars, the tehsildars, the hawaldars! And the teacher too strove hard to prepare his lectures and treat his students like his own children. Today that is not so. Why? Where have those times gone?

There may be exceptions as there will always be. I bow in reverence before them. But let me say that they are in thin minority. I do know of some school, college and University teachers who command high respect from students. This is because they teach—and teach well. But there are others who shame the profession. Haven’t we read reports about teachers seducing their girl students? This was something unthinkable in the years gone by.

Respect flows from the heart. It cannot be forced or purchased. I would certainly like to recall one incident that took place in Allahabad University. A former Prime Minister of Nepal, who had studied in this University, was visiting his alma mater when he was holding that exalted office. A Red Carpet welcome awaited him. His Excellency was walking on the Red Carpet, with University teachers lined on both the sides when he noticed two of his teachers standing there too—Prof S.C. Deb and Prof O.P. Bhatnagar. The Prime Minister broke the security cordon, forgot all protocol and rushed towards them, finally reaching the two and touching their feet in full public view!

We had a number of others who were adored because of their phenomenal knowledge. Dr Ishwari Prasad was one of them. When he was being honoured in Delhi once at a big function, he was helped to the dais by people around. But when time came for him to dismount one of the dignitaries from the dais came to help him. He was the then Chief Justice of India, the late Mr Justice Ranganath Mishra who had been a student of Allahabad University decades ago. As he escorted Dr Ishwari Prasad down the dais, the CJI asked him, ‘Sir, I was your student. Do you recognize me?’ Prompt came the reply, ‘Of course, Ranga...’

Today two persons sitting on a table in a restaurant may be talking together for hours together, discussing politics, sex, poetry and beauty and not knowing that one of them is a teacher and the other a student. Why? Because the teacher seldom takes classes and the student hardly attends them!

The ‘Guru-Shishya’ tradition has vanished. Now students in many cases put their teachers to embarrassment by correcting them in the classroom and telling them that they have made a slip. They will quote several sources to fortify their stand. This happens because the brilliant students today no longer depend on their sleepy teachers. They hunt for latest material on Internet and get it too.

The teacher of today is drawing fabulous salary and perks compared to what his forefathers received while serving the profession. They might not have commanded any bank balance like the present ones do but the goodwill they enjoyed was bigger than any material returns that they could dream of.

Can we get back those teachers? Think of the saintly J.K. Mehta of the Economic Department.
His very presence spiritualized the environment. Think of Dr P.D. Hajela and recall how he would mesmerise his students in those extra Sunday classes when the large lecture theatre used to get packed to the brim with boys standing outside the door or on window sills. They would forego the morning show of an English movie showing at Palace in order to attend Dr Hajela’s lecture. If I say that his lectures were a ‘box office’ hit, it would be no exaggeration. Firaq’s lectures were well attended. Students from other classes would rush to his lecture room. He did not merely teach; he educated you. I recall how Dr Harivansh Rai Bachchan, on finding the University closed, extended his seminar class in the KPUC to three hours – and taught every minute of it. I was present. Who all should I recall? Prof P.C. Jain? He was like a godfather to students. They would go every evening to his house and from his personal library he would lend books to them. Dr V.S. Naravane treated his students as friend ensuring that the proper distance between the teacher and the taught was maintained. The personalities of Prof K.K. Bhattacharya, Dr Baburam Saxena, Dr Banarsi Prasad, Prof A.B. Lal, Prof A.D. Pant, Prof Adaval, Dr P.E. Dustoor, Prof P.C. Gupta, Prof Y. Sahai, Mrs Geeta Ghatak, Mrs Jaya Gupta, Prof H.M. Jain, Prof J.S. Negi, Prof Chowfin, Prof Ansari, Prof G.R. Sharma, Dr A.N. Agarwal, Dr B.N. Asthana, Dr J.S. Mathur, Dr S.L. Parmar, Dr Mahesh Chand, Dr Ram Kumar Verma, Prof Richard Dutd, Prof Nirmal Ghosh, Prof Skand Gupta, Prof Malaviya, Prof Manas Mukul Das and from the younger lot Prof R.N. Lohkar, Dr V.K. Puri, Prof V.C. Pande and Prof Yogeshwar Tewari, to name only a few among several others who are reeling across my mental screen. shining like intellectual heroes. The only way students can repay their debt to them is by taking a pledge to follow in their footsteps. Teachers from their heavenly abode and those who are still amidst us will shower their blessings on them. If such a spirit can be revived, celebrating the Teachers Day will not be a ceremonial formality. Let it be a pledge-taking day to emulate our predecessors. Let us at least try to become what they are even if we cannot do so. That would be the most befitting tribute to Dr Radhakrishnan as well.

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