



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Are we normalising the humiliation of teachers?



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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Why should teachers be respected? A significant majority reading this will find such a question inane if not objectionable. Inane because it is a universal value that teachers must be respected; it is the basic premise of learning. It is objectionable because someone has the audacity to ask something so contrary to any civilised society’s value system.

But because of some events of the last few years, this question is no longer so ludicrous and, for some people, not objectionable at all.

This is why a female teacher in Jashore was viciously assaulted by a Jubo League leader on August 23. The teacher was punched repeatedly in the classroom, in front of her students, and then dragged outside by her hair to the playground. It was only when other teachers pulled him away that the victim was saved, though the injuries were so severe that she had to be hospitalised. The reason for this violence was that the teacher asked her student why he had gone out during an ongoing exam and why he had used the teacher’s washroom without her permission. According to the case statement, the student started using abusive language when she questioned him. It was when the third-grader complained to his father that such unbelievable violence was unleashed. In a positive move, the police arrested the Jubo League leader and sent him to jail, where he awaits trial.

Yet, the fact remains that this teacher was humiliated first by her student and then by his father, who resorted to ruthlessly assaulting her. Even after her wounds heal, this teacher will be haunted forever by the memory of this attack. Students must have been traumatised by this incident as well. But they have also been exposed to the ugly idea that it is okay to insult your teacher; that if you are connected to power, you can do anything you want.

We all remember the horrific

incident in which a powerful lawmaker humiliated the headmaster of a school in Narayanganj in 2016. The MP made the headmaster hold his ears and do squats – a repulsive, mediaeval form of corporal punishment for school kids – in public. He was also asked to seek pardon for “demeaning religion,” an allegation that was later found to be baseless. A video of the incident went viral and people from all over the country posted pictures of themselves holding their ears with the caption “Sorry, Sir” in protest. The outrage showed that there were still many Bangladeshis who held on to the traditional value of holding a teacher in the highest regard, a culture in which such a reprehensible act of humiliating a teacher would be considered an unforgivable crime.

In a laudable show of respect for the headmaster and his position, the then education minister reinstated the teacher and scrapped the school’s governing body, which had failed to protect the highest ranking person of the institution. But does anyone believe that the headmaster will ever forget the trauma of the incident that blew up into smithereens his dignity and self-respect? And what about the MP who had inflicted this shameful abuse? Was any action taken against him? Being from a “politically powerful family”, it was not surprising that he faced no repercussions whatsoever.

In June 2022, a college teacher in Narail was forced to wear a garland of shoes around his neck by a mob, as punishment for trying to protect a student who had been accused of “hurting religious sentiments.” The student had gone to school and faced a mob of students and locals who wanted to beat him up for his post. He went to his teacher’s room to take shelter. So his apparent crime was to protect his student from getting lynched. In the old days, we thought that was exactly what the duty of a

teacher was – to protect their students from harm. But in this case, that was exactly why the teacher was punished. A case was filed by police against 170 to 180 people though only three were arrested and sent to jail. The National Human Rights Commission asked authorities concerned to take legal steps against the policemen, who did nothing to stop the mob from the abhorrent act of humiliating the teacher.

While both incidents had communal motivations behind them – as both victims were of Hindu faith – what was also evident was the complete lack of respect for teachers displayed by the local politician, administrative bodies, students and the police. Students can be chastised for being bullies but what can you do when people in high seats of power display such disdain and aggression towards teachers? What message does it give to the students and other members of society? It normalises the idea of humiliating a teacher, disregarding the position of a teacher and even assaulting a teacher.

So what kind of values do parents who use their position in society to abuse anyone they feel like teach their children? As in the Jashore incident, a third-grader thought his status as a political leader’s son allowed him to verbally abuse his teacher and make sure his father taught her a lesson.

Unfortunately, there is a whole new emerging category of parents who feel that their wealth and power allow them to be unanswerable to anyone for their criminal behaviour, and consequently, their children are entitled to the same impunity. Think about the MP who humiliated the headmaster, the mob that forced a teacher to wear a garland of shoes. Think about those teachers, school administrative bodies and police who stood by and allowed such abhorrent things to happen. When important members of society either take part in or show silent acquiescence to teachers being openly humiliated, how can we teach our children that the fundamental principle of learning is to respect and value the persons imparting knowledge? What is the point of classroom lessons if the society at large does not value the absolute necessity of young people to become decent, honest human beings?



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In the southern state of Florida in the United States, where I have been visiting recently, Governor Ron DeSantis has called for the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion programmes in the state’s public schools and in state-supported higher education. One would have thought that these would be the principles an education system should be striving hard to follow. DeSantis is campaigning for the nomination of the Republican Party in the 2024 presidential election. Former President Donald Trump is still the front-runner, as per public opinion poll, for the Republican nomination. DeSantis now aims to garner conservative voter support by making education an election issue.

A campaign strategy for DeSantis is a crusade against “woke” culture. A positive shorthand for awareness of social injustice and bigotry used originally by progressive groups, “woke” has become a catch-all culprit for *anything* right-wing conservatives view as a social problem – from the

Constitution’s four basic principles of state policy: democracy, nationalism, socialism, and secularism. The military rulers, from 1975 to 1990, shelved the Khuda commission’s report, distorted the character of the Constitution with numerous amendments, and set up various education commissions and committees to put their stamp on the education system.

The successive elected governments since 1991 failed to overturn the legacy of the military rulers in many areas. A three-way, mostly low-quality school system developed that became a vehicle for division and disparity. The education policy of 2010, adopted by the regime still in power, gave legitimacy to the divisive system, though it espoused the objectives of a unified, equitable, and quality system. More significantly, nothing much was done to reorient the existing system by trying to implement the National Education Policy 2010.

In 2010, the Hefazat-e-Islam, drawing support



VISUAL: STAR

collapse of banks to rise in crimes to mass shootings.

In 1996, prominent Christian rights leader Ralph Reed declared, “I would rather have a thousand school board members than one president and no school board members.” A former Trump adviser, Steve Bannon, recently said, “The path to save the nation is very simple – it’s going to go through the school boards.”

Public schools in the US are funded by state and federal budgets complemented by local taxes, but the management of schools (including the hiring of teachers and deciding curricular content) is the responsibility of some 14,000 locally elected school boards.

An analysis by *The Washington Post* found that, over the past three years, legislators in 45 states proposed 283 laws that sought to restrict what teachers can teach about race, racism, US history and gender identity; increase parents’ control over their children’s education; limit students’ access to school libraries and books; and promote what lawmakers defined as “patriotic” education. Of the proposed bills, 64 have been signed into law in 25 states.

The first amendment to the US Constitution prohibits the state’s sponsorship or support of any religion or restriction of free observance of religion by citizens. This has been the basis for the Supreme Court’s interpretations of the “separation of church and state” doctrine. But this doctrine has not eliminated debates and conflicts about religion and the state’s role, especially with respect to state-supported education.

In 1925, in the State of Tennessee, science teacher John T Scopes was convicted in a trial – popularly known as the “monkey trial” – for violating state law by teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution in high school. The state law was eventually repealed in 1967. But the political debate and attempts to influence education content and practice have not stopped.

The debate about control of education has become more intense across the globe, manifesting in varying ways in different historical and socio-political contexts. In South Asia, the rise of authoritarian populism and polarisation in political culture have fueled a form of culture war in national education systems.

The BJP government of Narendra Modi in India, in power since 2014, shares a staunch chauvinistic and cultural nationalism, and a populist appeal, with Trump’s Make America Great Again (MAGA) credo and also the belief in neoliberal capitalism as the motor for national growth and development.

A new education policy (NEP), the first in a quarter-century, was announced in 2020 in India. Critics are concerned that BJP sees NEP as a tool to spread a Hindu nationalist agenda. In recent years, curricula have been adapted and textbooks (on history, for example) rewritten with an ideological bias. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Hindu-right-wing ideological support base for BJP, sees education as the instrument for shaping people’s cultural consciousness as per its own orientation.

Some argue that the new policy is a cautious compromise that navigates different ideological positions and reconciles diverging objectives. Others are sceptical, given the fierce commitment to the Hindutva agenda that the government has shown and the political advantage it sees in pursuing this line to mobilise its support base.

In Bangladesh, the first Education Commission Report of 1974 by Quadrat-e-Khuda attempted to formulate education objectives reflecting the

from the Qawmi madrasa network, was formed in Chittagong. Led by Ahmad Shahi, it was meant “to safeguard Islam from alleged anti-Islamic policies and to end secularism” and to create an Islamic State in Bangladesh under Sharia Law. In 2013, Hefazat came up with a 13-point agenda, demanding gender segregation, punishment of “atheist” bloggers, mandatory Islamic education in schools, and restricting “anti-Islamic” NGO activities. Hefazat flexed its muscles by calling a “siege of Dhaka” on May 5, 2013, which was violently suppressed by the government.

The Awami League government, however, has been conciliatory to Hefazat, expecting to use the group to counter the political power of its main opponent, BNP, and the radical group, Jamaat-e-Islam, which had collaborated with the Pakistan Army in 1971.

The government conceded to Hefazat’s demands, including arresting some secular activists. And in 2017, the government ordered the removal of 17 stories and poems by secular and non-Muslim writers from Bangla textbooks following demands by the group. In 2018, the government recognised Dawra-e-Hadith – a degree programme of the Qawmi madrasa – as being equivalent to a master’s degree in Islamic studies from a general university.

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In August 2022, Hriday Chandra Mondal, a science teacher from Munshiganj, was accused of defaming Islam for teaching about the theory of evolution. A student had recorded his conversation and a school staff member lodged a complaint with the police. Mondal was promptly arrested by police. He was granted bail after 19 days, and eventually acquitted in court. But Mondal kept receiving derogatory messages and death threats.

Earlier this year, opposition politicians criticised the inclusion of Darwin’s theory of evolution in textbooks introduced as part of a school curriculum revision. They claimed (falsely) that the text said humans evolved from monkeys. They demanded withdrawal of the textbooks which, according to them, defamed and opposed Islam. The books have been withdrawn and revisions have been underway.

Ever the optimist, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed wrote shortly before he died in December 2019 – in his foreword to a book by this writer and two colleagues on political economy of education – “In South Asia and elsewhere the upsurge of ultra-nationalism, rejection of pluralism and secular humanism, self-serving populism, xenophobic trends and the majoritarian subversion of democratic institutions and values have emerged as new threats to human progress. Education itself is in danger of being misappropriated to serve these retrograde forces.” He urged that the education community – including teachers, parents, and students – unite to reclaim the idea of progress itself in education.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

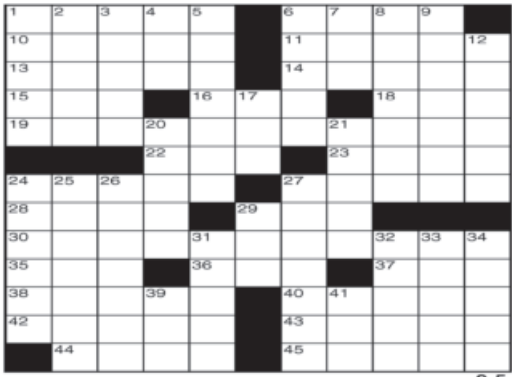
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- 6 competitions
- 10 Be bold
- 11 Bit of history
- 11 Checkout line count
- 13 Comic Radner
- 14 Varnish
- 15 ingredient
- 15 Pub pint
- 16 Cloth scrap
- 18 One – million
- 19 Union figure
- 22 Arthur of TV
- 23 Painter
- Magritte
- 24 Destined to happen
- 27 Prices
- 28 Yard sale label
- 29 Unit of resistance

DOWN

- 30 Pep rally figure
- 35 Playground game
- 36 Keats work
- 37 Australian bird
- 38 Nebraska city
- 40 Tex-Mex treats
- 42 Twin of
- Romulus
- 43 Banded rock
- 44 Owed amount
- 45 Swiss cheese features
- 1 Majestic
- 2 Walled Spanish city
- 3 Luminary
- 4 Finish
- 5 Had the lead

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- music
- 7 Had lunch
- 8 Dwells
- 9 Famous
- 12 Traps
- 17 In the style of
- 20 Past plump
- 21 Scent
- 24 Element
- 25 Red-faced
- 26 Reason for overtime
- 27 Fastest mammal
- 29 Outmoded
- 31 Comedic tribute
- 32 Car sticker
- 33 Ham it up
- 34 Tricks
- 39 Center
- 41 Before now



TUESDAY’S ANSWERS

