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# Vishwaguru to shreshta shishya

By 2047, I hope for an education system that fosters fraternity and humility

ANNIVERSARIES INVARIABLY EVOKE expectations. To set out a vision for India at 100 from where we are today at 75 is daunting, given the bewildering pace at which the world is changing. Yet, having spent most of my working life in the higher education space, I have learnt the value of the audacity of hope.

Maria Montessori said, "establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is to keep us out of war". The need for education to play an effective role in nurturing "cultures of peace" is internationally acknowledged. Change, complexity, fragility and uncertainty define the world today, with Covid reminding us of the need for leveraging cooperation, collective action and an ethic of care for a sustainable planet.

In multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies like India, which are fractured along the lines of class, caste, region, religion and gender, the transformative potential of education to play a peace-sustaining role faces challenges. Populism and jingoism the world over have deepened divisions, triggered sectarian violence and reinforced prejudices.

Indian education must set itself the task to provide effective antidotes to the "militarisation" of the mind and proactively nurture the canvas of coexistence. Critical thinking, dialogue, civic participation, community engagement and non-violent action are integral to this moment.

In 1995, UNESCO endorsed a declaration on the Integrated Framework of Action on Education for peace, human rights and democracy. It was the first international instrument that established the link between the practice of democracy and learning about diversity and "the wealth of cultural identities".

Education can provide the conceptual al-

phabets for a vocabulary of peace, only through the consistent interrogation of pedagogical frames that overtly – or even subliminally – transmit prejudice and intolerance. The implementation of the new National Curriculum Framework (NCF) must provide the context to not only mould "global citizens" but also "intelligent patriots" with the courage to hold up the mirror and question the shibboleths we live by.

Critical thinking, beyond "proscribed texts" and "prescribed" curricula, is needed to propel education towards nourishing predispositions and an inclination for peace in societies. Education must be open to the not-always harmonious reverberations of learning. The pluriverse of the global Learning Commons can potentially arrest our cartographic anxieties and processes of "othering". Its sheer diversity can inure education from proselytising tendencies, sectarian impulses and partisan agendas.

(The contestations over the writing of history are all too familiar to us).

History is replete with examples of "heretical" interrogations within "dissenting traditions," opening new continents of thought. The contributions of an Aryabhata, Buddha, Copernicus, Galileo, Al-Zahrawi, Descartes, Newton, Marx and Einstein were built on paradigm shifts that disrupted settled comfort zones. The oft-invoked Nalanda tradition too excelled in pushing the Sutras to evoke new voices through reasoned debate – from "safe spaces" to "brave spaces".

In the Preamble, our Constitution foregrounds justice, liberty, equality and frater-

nity as interlinked foundational principles. The one value, however, that has received the least attention both in policy and legislation is fraternity. It is time to address that lacuna, with education playing a decisive role.

I imagine an India at 100, that inscribes the spirit of *sa vidya ya vimuktaye* (that alone is knowledge which leads to liberation) into its educational initiatives. I imagine pedagogical practices imbued with a social purpose to remove all forms of discrimination.

I imagine an India at 100 that provides a hospitable space for pedagogies that cultivate the intellect and also integrate body, mind and spirit to balance our ecological, ethical, emotional, creative and spiritual needs – emphasising what makes us human – not merely our global competitiveness.

The emphasis on self-knowledge with the recognition of the interconnectedness of all sentient beings and context sensitivity has been integral to our traditions of learning. How well can we retrieve these values?

Civic responsibility in an interdependent world requires perspectives on how every considered action can potentially impact multiple lives across time and geography. This to me appears as fundamental to the spirit of "Vasudhaiva kutumbakam".

I dream of an India where institutes of learning will cease to be domesticating spaces and will reconstruct themselves as transformative, and above all, engendered spaces. These spaces do more than assure mere numeric representation for women. They ensure substantive equality to counter

the violence and exclusions of class, caste and patriarchy. For instance, although women constitute an unprecedented 49.3 per cent in the higher education space in India, they still face several obstacles to the full and equal participation guaranteed by our Constitution.

At 100, women will not remain the hugely underutilised resource they are today. They will drive and helm processes of change for a more inclusive, humane world, crafting a new social compact that fulfils the emancipatory potential of education.

This calls for opening up more spaces to converse in the metaphoric mother tongue (the potent utterance of the sacred Vac) the language of empathy in which maps can change and scripts be rewritten to include invisibilised histories and that can speak truth to power.

With 100 per cent substantive literacy, India at 100 will be home to the finest citadels of learning that mould sensitive, global citizens who make their voice count in world affairs, providing ethical and intellectual leadership in every field of human endeavour.

India at 100 in my imagination will evolve from the certitudes of a Vishwaguru to the resilience of a "Shreshta Shishya", with the humility of the eternal seeker, ever learning, ever flowing, malleable enough to put her own truths to stringent scrutiny.

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