



The woman with a broom: A meditation on education

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Krishna Kumar

The woman with a broom

A meditation on education

Looking at the woman assembling dry leaves and plasticized wrappers with her long, municipal broom outside my door, I sit down to practice Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's search for 'interbeing' in the hope that it will reveal a secret of education my university does not know.

Every morning she comes, knocking out another little bit of the earth's soil cover with her broom which is designed to do this. The design comes from long tradition, from times when no one had a reason to worry about God's gifts like the earth's surface. Today we have plenty of reason to worry, for our city is already so full of dust—the carrier of discomfort and illness, a ubiquitous symbol of the degradation of soil. We should have designed brooms that don't break the earth's surface, but we haven't. Every morning a few million hard brooms create little eddies of dust as they break the already broken bits of soil further. We have not designed better brooms for reasons I can imagine; reasons like the low status of the woman who uses the broom as an instrument of livelihood. Her life, comfort and efficiency do not matter enough to deserve the attention of professional designers.

May be, someone has designed a better, surface-friendly broom, and the new design has not reached the woman sweeping outside my house for the same reason for which the late David Horsburgh's textbooks, though better than the NCERT's, have not reached the school whose children would soon walk by my house. They are

children of *karmacharis*—‘class four’ employees of my university. Most of these children fail in the high school examination or pass with poor marks. The curriculum proves too difficult for them to negotiate, solely dependent as they are on badly written and even more badly produced state textbooks, translated in a strange and cruel Hindi from the English original. The examination makes no distinction between these children and those studying in private schools where English is used as a medium of instruction and children buy a whole range of extra material to supplement the prescribed textbooks. The teachers of these private schools have stronger motivation to be more attentive. Many of the students take expensive coaching to gain a few percentage points for entry into the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology.

As a premiere institution of technology research, the IIT could well have been the place where someone might design a surface-friendly broom. If the woman sweeping in front of my door has a child, and if the child is a boy, he has, in principle, a chance equal to anyone else’s of going to the IIT when he grows up. It is to maintain this parity of chance that the system of education compels every school to follow the same syllabus and take the same examination. Between the two public examinations taken at the end of grades ten and twelve, some eighty per cent of the country’s children who had survived in the system up to grade ten—already less than a third of the total who had started attending school ten years earlier—are eliminated. These are mostly children studying in government schools in both urban and rural areas; they are children of the ‘weaker’, though politically stronger, sections of society.

She gathers the dry leaves of *jamun*, *ashoka* and *neem* into a pile, and gingerly touches the pile with a burning matchstick before leaving the site for the day. This habit of hers annoys me no end.

The sight of little burning piles of leaves is common in our city and in the university campus. My own institute, which trains teachers for schools, has no other method of disposing of dry leaves and other garbage. I have discussed this matter with the gardeners and the sweepers of my institute, explaining to them the dangers of global warming to which the burning of garbage makes a contribution as well as the more immediate risk of further pollution in Delhi. They always agree with my criticism and concern; so do the gardeners in the university campus, but the practice does not stop. One of the gardeners told me in the course of one of our dialogues that it would be

cumbersome and difficult to make a sufficient number of pits if all the leaves in the campus were to be buried rather than burnt. Apart from space for that many pits, the labour required to dig would be difficult to muster. I doubt if anyone has actually calculated the space and the labour needed for leaf-pits in the campus, let alone the city. It seems that the point about advocating leaf-burial for compost, as an alternative to leaf-piles for burning, is one of those suggestions that are right and proper, even scientific, but no one has worked it out in detail for trial.

The gardener told me that if the university really wanted the leaves falling off the enormous number of deciduous trees in the campus to be buried, it would have to hire or buy extra space to make a sufficient number of pits. Extra seasonal labour would have to be hired too. More plausible, he thought, would be to get used to seeing dry leaves around in the season when they fall. Beautiful though they look, I thought, accepting them lying around would require a considerable change of attitude—from one of regarding dry leaves as garbage to one of looking at them with pleasure and compassion. The woman who must sweep and burn them as a matter of duty would likely be happy too if the change of attitude took place among the people she serves. Just now, we must find a way to calm our anguish over her routine act of burning the little piles she makes. Preferring burial to burning is like so many other things written in our textbooks—good to memorize, but much too vague for real life. No wonder they are ignored; even major things that should not be ignored get ignored because they are presented so vaguely. Take, for instance, the instruction that rainwater must not be allowed to stand in drains or pits. What good does this excellent idea do to anyone, I have often wondered. What it might mean for a child or a group of children, hopefully with their teacher, to allow the stagnant water in a blocked drain to flow has not been worked out in any detail by our textbook writers, or else they would have acknowledged the difficulties involved in the task. The simple mention they make of it, without an accompanying acknowledgement of the difficulties involved in it, indicates that they don't expect it to be taken seriously. No wonder our country is full of blocked drains and roadside pools of standing water.

Why textbooks alone, the national policy on education is also full of such ideas—correct and worthy of everyone's support, but much too general or vague to be followed up in action. I know from my

personal experience of attending policy-meetings how typical it is of senior civil servants like a secretary or joint secretary to say that we, the members, need only to decide the broad principles or plan, and that we need not worry about 'matters of detail'. A distinct odium is attached to those words—'matters of detail'. Lower level officials and clerks are supposed to look after them. It happens all the time. Major schemes failed to make a difference because matters of detail were not worked out by the same people who proposed the schemes. Despite repeated failure, we don't learn the point that matters of detail are the heart of educational reform, or for that matter, reform in any sphere. I recall a meeting I attended in the mid-eighties. It had been called to determine what supplies were to be made to rural primary schools under 'Operation Blackboard'. I suggested a globe to be included in the list. Some people wondered why a primary school needed a globe when the syllabus emphasized local and regional geography. After some discussion on the importance of nurturing children's natural curiosity, etc., the item 'globe' was entered in the list of supplies to be made. I wanted to ensure that the entry would specify 'wooden globe', for I was afraid that the finance committee would instinctively opt for the cheaper, plastic globe. I was told that this was a matter of detail, so it would be looked after at the relevant level. Years later when I visited a village primary school where the supplies of Operation Blackboard material had been made, I asked the headmaster how the globe was being used. He was reluctant to talk about it, even to show it. Finally when he brought it out, I saw that it was a plastic globe, torn and flattened, which was a natural thing to have happened to a plastic globe in a school for little children. A matter of detail had prevailed in the end.

Apart from dry leaves of roadside trees, the little burning pile in front of my house contains bits and pieces of garbage, consisting of paper, plastic, and plasticized paper. More specifically, the garbage contains potato chip bags, ice-cream wrappers, *pan parag* pouches, plastic carry bags or 'pinnis', peanut and corn peels, and pieces of greasy paper used for holding a *samosa* or *bhatoora*. All of these items are residues of the snacks that students, standing beside the vendors, eat during the day. Pieces of paper are also dropped by students who pass by on their way to one of the campus colleges or back home. During the student union election every year, little cards carrying the name of a candidate or pamphlets naming a slate of candidates are

handed out in thousands. The morning after the election these cards and pamphlets cover large patches of road all over the campus, waiting for sweepers to gather and burn them. It would be nice to imagine the elected student union being asked to pay for the extra work that the sweepers have to do; even more nice would be to imagine the newly elected members sweeping the roads themselves. I can well imagine one of them answering back, reminding us that the members of the Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly were never asked to pay for refurbishing the assembly house after it had been ransacked by the members themselves when they were hitting each other with whatever they could lay their hands on, including microphones. A retributive measure taken with an eye on teaching a lesson seems to have no place in our civic life.

Under the prevailing circumstances, it cannot be imagined that my university can persuade or instruct the students not to throw garbage around. Throwing bits and pieces of things around is treated as a special kind of right. At the beautiful flower show we have every spring, the *shamyana* gate gets littered with torn entry tickets soon after the opening ceremony. Perhaps some of the students who eat snacks on the roadside do want to throw garbage into a bin, but where are the bins? The city of Delhi has rather few garbage bins; they are so few I can visualise them. Yet, all children are taught in schools, starting with grade four, that garbage must be thrown into a bin. I have sat in at least fifty lessons where this topic was being taught in the late elementary classes. I cannot remember a single occasion when a child said, 'M'am, there are no garbage bins in our locality, so how can we use them?' Apparently, children learn early in their school career that what they learn from their teachers and textbooks need not have a relation with reality or behaviour. The students who attend my university do, of course, know well that it is a good idea to keep roads and sidewalks clean, that garbage disposal is a big problem in modern living, that filth is linked to serious diseases. They study all this before coming to college. These things are so elementary that they cannot figure in the university syllabus. Not even the B.Ed syllabus of my institute includes such things, for it is assumed that our trainees know them well, and indeed they do. When I ask them in my tutorial class why there is so much dirt on the street, or why our own institute is so unkempt, they inevitably say, 'The sweepers don't work properly.'

Some always add that sweepers have become lazy and smug because of the reservation policy.

To end with a summary of sorts, I have written this short account of a train of thought out of love for my profession, not out of a desire to hurt anyone, least of all those who have tried to improve education in their official capacities or independently. The list of people who have tried to change Indian education in this century starts with Tagore and Gandhi. I feel we have not paid enough attention to the details required to put their ideas into practice; in fact, we discarded them much too early. We must ponder on these and other failures deeply to identify better ways to use new ideas in future. Objectives and principles are important, but they are somewhat meaningless if they are not accompanied by smaller thoughts, about things that occur to you when you start working with a group of children or even a single child. Details strike you if you look intently at a problem, keeping in mind the context in which the problem must be faced. What must happen in a classroom full of children from morning to afternoon is a question of the highest order for national reconstruction. If we approach this question without focusing our attention on the faces of the children, the state of the classroom, the personality and preparedness of the teacher, and the quality of the textbooks and other material available to the teacher, then we are likely to do no better in the near future than we are doing at present. Small details, if ignored, tend to destroy big plans. □