

## COMMENT

# A modern story of Ekalavya



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## The education system continues to exclude many people's histories, world views and cultures

It is difficult being a teacher these days. The dismantling of institutions, which seems to be the prime concern of this government, began with education. The attack on premier public universities through motivated hiring, questioning reservation, and creating a climate of fear and intimidation has continued. This is a time when many teachers are forced to rethink the meaning of teaching.

## The place of the teacher

This has also led to a climate of suspicion about teachers in general, in schools, colleges and universities. Teachers are constantly under attack by systems which want to protect students (especially because students are nowadays seen as paying ‘consumers’), by parents who decide what and how a teacher should teach, by a government which humiliates and uses teachers, and by private managements which see teachers as a necessary ‘evil’ to put up with. Our colleges and schools even today are places of feudal authority and oppressive labour conditions. In such a climate, for the first time in my life, I am beginning to ask whether it is worth teaching at all.

It was not easy being a teacher earlier too. The pay was quite abysmal and the work that it entailed, particularly the grading of hundreds of exam papers, was not necessarily enjoyable. But there was something different; there was a sense of service and commitment to the act of teaching, somewhat similar to the medical profession then. There was an underlying notion of respect for teachers, even from students.

In India, there are many stories of teachers who sacrificed much in order to teach. Teaching meant inspiring students, making them better human beings, and enabling them to go up in life. A good mathematics teacher always taught more than mathematics. What students learnt with every good teacher was not just subject matter but ways of being in the world.

The first disintegration of this world of teaching came when teaching became equivalent to ‘giving tuition’. And then came other major problems that have contributed to this suspicion of teaching. In a digital world, the role of a teacher is more and more unclear. There is a lack of clarity on what exactly a teacher is supposed to teach: the content, or diverse ways of thinking, or learning together with others?

Related to this issue is the continued lack of equal access to education. We have spent more money and effort keeping people out of the education system than trying to bring them in – much of this is done through dubious concepts called intelligence and merit, operationalised by examinations. It is not a surprise then that our gross enrolment ratios for all levels of education are quite low, because the aim of the system right from the beginning was to find ways to control who would enter the portals of education. This is a continuation of the Ekalavya complex, and it is possible because we have created a system in which the excluded find little representation of their lives, their world views and their articulations in what is taught.

## A story of caste and learning

In the midst of this existential crisis, I watched a new Tamil movie called Sarvam Thaala Mayam. It is a movie which has been criticised for its avoidance of caste issues even though it is primarily about Carnatic music's relation with caste. While that may be true, here I am more interested in what it says about the nature of teaching and learning. It is a modern Ekalavya story in a Tamil mainstream idiom and, like Ekalavya's story, which is about caste and privilege, at its core it is about the processes of teaching and learning.

The story of Ekalavya is well known and has been used as a powerful metaphor to highlight problems of exclusion in education – about how the privileged monopolise learning even though others may be far better. This movie makes us ask: What would Ekalavya do today if Drona refuses to teach him?

The modern Ekalavya, Peter Johnson, is the son of a mridangam maker. He is very talented. When he accidentally listens to a mridangam vidwan, Vembu Iyer, he is mesmerised. But this Chennai Ekalavya cannot easily become a student of this vidwan and much of the obstacle is related to their caste differences. These differences are most tellingly articulated by the boy's father who creates these instruments but also seems resigned to the fact that he will not be allowed to play them.

However, the modern Ekalavya does not give up when Vembu Iyer refuses to take him as his student. He persists and is finally taken as Iyer's student because Iyer sees Peter's passion and genuine commitment. Peter is like Ekalavya in his complete devotion to his guru, but due to a misunderstanding, the teacher banishes Peter for no fault of his. Their reconciliation is really the heart of the story, for it is not just a negotiation between people of different caste hierarchies but also between the hierarchy of teacher and student.

If Arjuna was the counterpart to Ekalavya in the original story, there is an equally powerful counterpart in this modern version. This is in the form of a fair-skinned, Tamil Brahmin NRI, who has been admitted to a PhD programme at Harvard University. He comes with more privilege than Arjuna! But Peter is unfazed. He takes on the traditionalists in their own game. In the climax of the movie, his strength is shown to lie in his own historical and cultural consciousness. Peter changes due to his encounter with his guru but he also changes the instrument and the classical music tradition which uses it.

Vembu Iyer epitomises all the struggles of a teacher, one who belongs to an exclusive tradition but with an ideal of learning that transcends that exclusion. A teacher is one who is able to go beyond his or her tradition and comfort zone for the sake of a true seeker. The

film reminds us that a teacher is incomplete without good students, but good is not intellectual competence alone; it is something more. The last scene of the film, when the teacher accepts the student as someone who can not only carry on the tradition but also bring his own modifications to it, captures one of the central ethical principles of teaching.

## **Need for an inclusive system**

What this movie reminds us is that the present-day education system is based on the qualities, attributes and desires of a dominant community. It is not inclusive, since it does not have space for truth, knowledge and the qualities of learning based on the diverse strengths of different cultures and histories like those of Peter. But Peter's struggle should remind teachers that teaching is a service, not a transaction. Our society is filled with countless such committed teachers, but they are all silenced by the powers that run education as a handmaiden for their personal and political ambitions.

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