

Empathetic education: India 2025

Indian aspirations for shaping the global discourse and developmental trajectory are becoming more pronounced as its economic growth is picking up. Recent agreement between two of the super powers, USA and China on curbing their pollution levels for arresting the climate change impacts has increased expectations from the third largest contributor to the matter. Cleaner cities and greener areas are in India's own interest. These have a direct measurable impact on the health expenditure of common people whose ability to insulate themselves from these effects is limited.

How can children play a role in shaping Indian policies, institutional design and mindset? In the last issue, I discussed that children shouldn't be treated as a 'sink' of sermons. I want to explore now whether they can become the 'source' of an empathetic transformation of our society. The creative ideas of children awarded under the IGNITE competition of NIF at the hands of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, indicate a considerable empathetic incline towards addressing the unmet social needs. Can we amplify this bias even more? Can we engage our children at an early age with the challenges confronting India today and in the future so that their imagination becomes the motive force of a transformative nation building process?

When Chhaya, a student of class seven thought about an inclined pipe fitted with water taps in a primary school, she questioned seven decades of inertia in not providing drinking water taps in the school at different heights for the shorter and the taller children. Ram Nikash from Kanyakumari does not like the habit of adults for getting down from or climbing into a moving train at railway platforms. He suggested retractable railings which will prevent such hazardous carelessness. Modifying a bicycle for physically challenged riders with one leg occurred as something very obvious to ShubDholakia. Adharsh, class ten, Bihar, had noticed the wastage of energy and accumulation of anger when people get caught up in traffic jams. He suggested in addition to the red, yellow and green lights at crossroads, an additional *blue* light to indicate traffic jam ahead. People can change their course without accentuating the problem for them and others. Imagine if the traffic police worldwide accept this suggestion, a small idea from Katihar, Bihar, would have changed the way traffic jams are managed world over. This is an indication of how children's ideas can influence not just local problems but even global problems. Bio-fertilizer from cockroaches might appear strange and annoying to some. But we should not forget the fact that these insects have probably survived the longest on the earth. Why not harness their sturdiness for meeting an important need for rejuvenating soil and other production systems thought Ananya from Chandigarh. Swanapnil from Assam was bothered that people without hands have difficulties in turning the pages of books and he designed a machine for the purpose. Similarly, Preyansh and Karan may not have visited any mine but were saddened

by the plight of workers trapped in damaged mines. If their location could be accurately mapped from outside, the relief measures could be targeted more accurately. On November 19, 2014 Dr. Kalam inspired and encouraged many kids like these to make India a developed and empathetic nation.

There are certain fundamental changes required to make a society *samvedhansheel* [empathetic]: a) I don't have to personally suffer from a problem to experience the pain that somebody else suffer from; b) The increasing uncertainty in the world can put me in a situation when I may be even more vulnerable than the people whose pain I may ignore today. God forbid, if there is a train accident in a remote area, the question of who lives and dies will depend upon how well the nearby primary health centre works and how much voluntary spirit the communities in the nearby villagers have to save life; c) I have received so much help from strangers in my life to whom I have no way to reciprocate. I am not the only one; d) We have all enjoyed resources, the shade of an old tree on the roadside or other services for which we have not paid anything and in creation of which, we have no contribution; e) Creative ideas and innovations are seldom completely original. Any new building needs a lot of bricks, many of which were not baked by me, or for me, or based on my ideas. Open source sharing of ideas has helped society to solve so many of its problems; and f) We can balance or compare our personal ambitions, desires and aspirations with the unmet needs and desires of those who may seldom be able to dream a flight in an open sky of freedom.

Our children can do wonders. They should not be tutored too much, trained too tightly and must be allowed to develop. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan decided to set up a working group to develop an educational plan for the country. They sent delegations to different parts of the world to understand how children are educated. After a year and half when the delegations came back, they wrote a 200 year perspective plan for education in Japan. It is not surprising therefore that Japan was the first Asian country to become 100 per cent literate at the turn of the century. The mandarins in Education Ministry have to realize that our children deserve much more than what they are getting and they will be surprised by the playful, irreverent and spontaneous ways in which our children will rise to the occasion. We should stop sermonizing them. I hope that our educational system will not remain committed to age-old theories of learning without responsibility, inducing love without empathy and showing a dream of life, which lacks long term vision. India or for that matter, this world will transform only with the help of its children.



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