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THE SCHOOLMASTER'S TEST

BY

V. S. SRINIVASA SASTRI

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FOREWORD

"The Schoolmaster's Test", written by the late Rt. Hon. V. S. Srinivasa Sastriar and published in the Educational Review, Madras, in two instalments in its issues of February and March of 1896 will be read with interest even today. Sastriar was then the English Assistant in the Pachaiyappa's High School in Madras.

The Madras Educational Review was started in 1895 by Srinivasa Varadhachari & Co., One Mr. J. Denham was its first Editor. All the well known educationists of those days both Indian and European like Prof. M. Rangachariar, Prof. K. B. Ramanathan, Prof. Lakshmi Narasu, Sri S. Vasudevachariar, Rev. Leith, Rev. Kellett and Dr. Miller were the honoured contributors to its columns, Sastriar himself was its Honorary Editor for many years.

This article of Sastriar on 'The Schoolmaster's Test' throws light on the managers of educational institutions, the pupils, the teachers, parents, the public and the Government of those days.

My sincere thanks are due to Mr. K. Ranga Raghavan, brother of the late K. Srinivasa Raghavan an admirer of Sastriar, for helping me with the text of the article and Prof. M. R. Sampathkumaran, the present proprietor of the Educational Review for permission to publish this article, in the Sastriana series.

Servants of India Society,
MADRAS-14,
22nd September, 1968

S. R. VENKATARAMAN,
Secretary.

THE SCHOOLMASTER'S TEST. *

The question "What is the test by which a schoolmaster is commonly tried?" is one of considerable importance. Its answer will practically be a measure of the function that the public expects the schoolmaster to discharge; and according to the nature of that function will the status of the schoolmaster in society be regulated, respected and maintained at a high level of efficiency if the function be high, disregarded and allowed to deteriorate if it be low. And speaking broadly it may be asserted that the measure of esteem that the public in general accords to the profession of teaching is a fair test of its own stage of progress and capacity for progress. For no self-conscious society can ever progress unless it creates those conditions that will not only secure whatever has been achieved in previous generations and is being achieved in the current generation, but also ensure the achievement of further social good in the appropriate manner and in the appropriate directions by coming generations. In adjusting social arrangements therefore the leaders of every community should, so far as social arrangements lie within their power, see that the rising generation is so brought up and carry on the work of advancing the community with effect and without blundering. Every community, having its own particular constitution and its own

* From the Educational Review, February & March, 1896.

particular atmosphere of beliefs, customs, memories, hopes and struggles, and handing down its successors that constitution and that atmosphere, does in large measure supply this bringing-up. But this bringing up being undesigned and unregulated, must necessarily be haphazard, uncertain and of various degrees of efficacy. A more thorough, systematic, and, as far as possible, uniform agency for the rearing-up of youth is quite essential. Such an agency is to be found in the profession to which we belong. Thus regarded, the schoolmaster is a factor, by no means unimportant, of the progress of his community, a colleague, therefore of all those that may be engaged in the work of social, political and other reform. In the vast army of people marching forward, he is no mere camp-follower, but the very mainstay and support of the whole, supplying competent and well trained soldiers in the place of those that must necessarily succumb in the struggle, and thus giving at every stage in a truer sense than even the doctor or surgeon fresh life and fresh strength.

The above consideration, which sound mere platitudes in the saying, are, however, so grossly neglected in practice even by the men of light and leading that I have considered it well to preface my paper with them. For it is only when the high calling of the schoolmaster is clearly and earnestly recognised that the public will insist upon a high standard of efficiency and a severe test of fitness for the profession of teaching. Now what is the test by which we are commonly tried by our public?

The Manager of an Institution, when he wants a master; inquires whether the candidate has been a "successful teacher" before, the expression "successful teacher" meaning only one that has produced a certain standard percentage of passes in the subjects that he has taught. When a teacher applies for a place or for promotion, he lays some stress upon his University honours, if he has any, and more stress upon the length of his experience as teacher: but the circumstance of which he is most proud, and which he puts forward as his best claim to recognition, is the results of public examinations for which year after year he has been responsible. To carry conviction home to the mind of the manager, the applicant often appends a formidable tabular statement showing the year, the subjects taught by him, the number sent up, the number of passes, the number of passes in the first class, &c., &c., The Inspector, who finds it impossible to devote more than a few hours to the inspection of every school, and who is therefore hard put to it to find some tangible measure of the efficiency of the school and its staff, fastens upon the results upon the public examinations and writes 'up' or writes 'down' according as he considers them creditable or discreditable. The Director, who can look only through the eyes, and hear only through the ears, of his Inspectors, reviews the work of each school in the same terms. As for the public, we have only to remember that boys flock in the largest numbers to the schools that have produced the best results in the recent examinations to convince ourselves that its notion of a successful school master is not far different: To conclude, nearly all people

Interested in education,—the manager, the teacher himself, the Inspector, the Director, the pupil and the parent—are agreed in regarding Examination results as the only suitable test of a schoolmaster.

I shall presently urge that this test is by no means consonant with the high calling previously mentioned. Before doing so, I desire to make it clear that, even so far as it goes, it is an extremely inaccurate and untrustworthy test. The great fallacy underlying it is that the teacher is considered solely responsible for the results of public examinations, and must exclusively enjoy the credit and exclusively suffer the discredit, of them. Now there are at least three factors concerned in the production of these results, the teacher, the pupils and the examiners. Taking the last factor first, it is readily seen that they introduce into the calculation of the final product of a very uncertain element consisting in a more or less sudden and considerable variation of the standard of the questions, and in greater or less strictness in the valuation of the answers. One is tempted to add in this connection that professors in First-Grade colleges, who mostly draw up our question-papers, being absolutely ignorant of the actual, average attainments of High school classes, seldom hit off the right standard, but err considerably one way or the other, thus causing an amount of fluctuation in the results, which only the teacher fully realises, as he is compelled to watch with anxious minuteness the rise and fall of the examination-standard year after, because all the same he is made responsible. The force of this remark is amply attested by the alarmingly large number of failures in

the single subject of science in the Matriculation examination during the last two years: Coming now to pupils, it is self-evident that, being the direct agents engaged in the examination, they are far the most potent of the causes that determine the nature of the results. How liable to fluctuations of greater or less intensity their influence must be, can be easily realised by remembering that the general attainments of pupils presented for examinations vary considerably from year to year according to the class or community from which they are mostly drawn, their average fitness for the studies they entered upon at the beginning of the year, the discipline to which they may have been accustomed, their earnestness, and general teachableness. If a certain number of pupils pass in the first class, it does not follow of necessity that the teacher has taught them admirably. Without doubt much depends on the teacher. The average student can no more pass his examination without help from the teacher than the teacher can turn out good results with a lot of numskulls. The point here insisted on is that it will be unsafe to argue in every case that good results indicate great capacity in the teacher, or bad results, his deficiency therein. Other evidence has to be taken before a just verdict can be pronounced.

Nobody knows this better than the teacher. If he is young and has yet to make reputation, he welcomes nothing so much as a 'good set' of pupils and dreads nothing so much as a 'bad set'. He knows that the one will bring him credit as surely as the other will bring discredit, though in his heart he fully

believes that, as he himself undergoes no change, he is not justly entitled to either. Why then does every master in recounting his qualifications lay stress upon the excellent results he has turned out for such-and-such a number of years? For my own part this can do nothing more than create a general presumption in his favour; but if it is offered as a piece of conclusive evidence, I must put down the teacher either for a very ignorant man or for a sort of hypocrite who takes more than he knows to be his due. Such hypocrisy would be altogether without palliation were it not that he often receives unjust condemnation for bad results.

Having thus argued that this examination - results test is by itself insufficient, inaccurate, and untrustworthy even with respect to mere teaching power, I shall next proceed to consider how singularly inadequate it is for the high calling of the school master. And first let me consider him as a mere Instructor. Every teacher that has not allowed the monotonous routine of his life to swallow up his sense of utility and proportion will acknowledge that he is under an irresistible temptation to impart, not such knowledge and in such manner, as will be truly useful and educative, but such knowledge and in such manner as will make most show and tell best in public examinations. Take for instance the subject of English in High schools. Those that teach English to F. A.* Classes must know how ill-equipped with

*First Examination in Arts of two years duration a pass in which alone will entitle a pupil to enter the University for Degree courses.

sound knowledge of English most pupils are when entering college. This is not to be wondered at considering that in the Matriculation class no Text book written in good English is taught earnestly and examined upon along with other subjects. Micklejohn Grammar and Sheppard's General English are now the main study of pupils. If they want any extra books they go to K. Subrahmanya Aiyar's Hand book of English. Murison and Adam's Composition, and Walton's Synthesis. No questions are asked at the Matriculation that cannot be answered by one that has worked at a fair proportion of the exercises given in these books. So it happens that to some extent in the fourth and in the fifth forms, and to a very large extent in the sixth, pupils are kept occupied with any amount of ingenious manipulation of forms of sentences, changing the Active into the Passive, the Simple into the Complex kind of sentence, the Direct to the Indirect form of narration etc., etc., Now every one that had had experience of this will grant how fatally easy such exercises become after a certain amount of drilling, how in fact they can be performed mechanically even upon sentences whose meaning the candidate does not at all understand. Thus the sense of a passage is rarely thought of by the pupil who confines himself to its external form, and is absorbed in finding out what mechanical rules he has to apply in particular cases. But supposing this divorce of sense and form did not come about, and the teacher took care always to make the meaning plain before beginning to teach tricks to the form, even then the separate passages selected for these exercises will be haphazard, discontinuous, and absolutely valueless as

a means of creating ideas or stimulating thought. Nothing like teaching a large quantity of good prose and good poetry. It is quite easy to teach all the grammatical involutions and evolutions in the world in reference to that prose and poetry; and it is a well-known fact that, other things being equal, greater reading means greater knowledge, greater command of language, and greater culture. But the University having abolished Text books, pupils and, I grieve to say, too many teachers neglect it. It was only the other day that a certain student asked me in open class, "why do you bother us with this Text book, Sir, while we have none for the Examination?" and I dare say there was many another that thought like him but had not the pluck to second him. It is no doubt with difficulty that students can be driven to the study of any books other than General English Manuals and Hand books; and most teachers shrink from that difficulty, partly because they fear to stretch their discipline too far, partly also because text book teaching is so much more taxing to themselves than General English work. Again several most important branches of English teaching are absolutely neglected, because they are such as the University cannot possibly examine speaking, reading and recitation. Reading particularly suffers to a most shameful extent in the High school classes, and when in the senior college classes, the scholar discovers that his pronounciation is outrageous, he finds it too late to begin to learn and resigns himself to the most, irritating singsong monotone, which in all probability he has modelled on that of some one of his junior masters.

English, however, is not the only subject to the teaching of which this University-Examination test is disastrous; History and Geography, science, the Optional Languages, all are affected by it in the same manner. But though this topic is so tempting, I must now hasten to the consideration of the greatest evil wrought by this test.

This is the great falling off of the average teacher from his ideal. Extremely few masters are now capable of performing their high function, fashioning men, by the influence of example no less than by precept and guidance, fitted to take their place in their time as useful members of a progressive community. Extremely few indeed are able to bring their personal influence to bear upon their pupils, to mould their character, guide their temper, or direct their conduct. This aspect of teacher's function is forgotten, he is not expected to do anything in that line. He is regarded and trusted as a mere supplier of information; no, even that requires a modification, as a supplier of such information as will bear the greatest quantity of fruit in the University Examination. For, be it remembered this information seed is not sown by the teacher in the pupil's mind to root there and grow into his nature and bear good fruit in the fulness of time: but the pupils receive it and hold it in a sort of mechanical suspension on the surface of their memory until the proper examination-season arrives, when they transmit it more or less disfigured by means of a steel implement on to a white paper soil, and water it plentifully with a dirty black liquid, and then

await the 'result' with feverish anxiety, and lo! in about a couple of months comes out the fruit in the shape of another white paper dotted over with the same black liquid, and bearing like-wise a black ring to give it the taste of authority, and these earnest young folk hug it to their bosoms, and thank God for the price-less treasure. This is the kind of work we are doing year in and year out in our schools, and we have time for nothing else. Our personality and the pupils' have thus no intimate intercourse; they have only a single point of contact, and, as if jealous of the single point of contact, the University comes in there to restrict all freedom of movement and interaction. Off that single point, we diverge hopelessly never to meet again through the ends of the world. Thus it has come about that no manager of a school, when he is about to appoint a master to his school, inquires, "What is the character of this man? Will he set a good example to my boys? Will he lead them aright?" On the contrary, I have heard it said by people who ought to know better, "where is the harm in appointing Mr. So-and-So? True, he is not always sober or steady; once or twice he has nearly got put into prison; but what does it matter? He will teach none the worse for that, and his results at the examinations will be far better than those of the saintliest teacher you may mention". I generally have no reply for such reasoning, it fills my mind with despair. The difference seems to be too much at the very root to be easily settled by argument. Besides I am by no means sure that I am not in a hopeless minority; for are there not at present too many in the ranks of our profession that have no business there? In the opinion of the great majority of

managers of schools, and in the opinion likewise of many worthy people who do not manage schools, character in a schoolmaster is of no moment. With your leave and, I hope, with your full assent I protest against such a notion.

What then shall be a schoolmaster's test?

I shall now proceed to answer this question.

But first a few introductory remarks. I do not intend to enlarge upon all the virtues and all the vices of mankind, or upon the numerous qualifications of a teacher which are duly catalogued and appropriately recommended in Method - books. Not all of these are equally important at all times. Certain times require certain qualities in men. Society changes from time to time; and though all virtues and all vices are found in it at all times, there are some that are peculiar to every age, and give it its characteristic tone. To sustain and purify those virtues to diminish and soften those vices, to strengthen those forces that make for progress, and weaken those that make against it - this is the function of the schoolmaster no less than it is the function of the moralist, the legislator, or the man of letters. And just as different ages require different types of statesmen, so also in a far less measure perhaps, but no less peremptorily, schoolmasters must alter with the times. In other words there are certain attributes which require to be very strongly developed by the teacher in each varying age. My purpose in the remaining part of this paper

is to point out a few characteristics in which it seems to me needful that schoolmasters of this day should be strong; and I must, therefore, refer briefly to what I consider grave defects of character among us.

One of these is an unreasonable conservatism of the mind that takes hold of us all at too early an age. Our minds like our bodies seem to lose elasticity and pliability all too soon, and refuse to receive new improvements. A horror of all new ideas, a disposition to avoid and shirk even an unprejudiced discussion of new modes of thought and new courses of life, a tendency to fall in contentedly and cheerfully with the accustomed routine of life, and look upon every suggestion of departure therefrom with suspicion and alarm, a habit of saying on every occasion, great or small; "We have never had it before, why need we have it now? At all events, let *me* be, I leave it to those behind," these are some of the most irritatingly repulsive forms that this mental conservatism assumes in a large majority of cases. It is never understood, rather it is always lazily forgotten, that intelligent and unrestricted discussion is the necessary antecedent of all sure and wise action in great matters, that there fore there is no harm but much good in entertaining and fairly considering all proposals of change made in an earnest spirit, and that it will be time enough to slam the door and retreat precipitately to the inward security of the mind when any proposal threatens to translate itself violently into action. The superstition of fatalism is not dead, it survives in the more degraded though more plausible form of the superstition of

'Time' and serves as a uniform plea not for refusing to act, (there is much reason in that), but for refusing to speak and think as reason may guide. How often have I not heard it said by people that are not without a certain kind and measure of wisdom, "Time will cure all; what is the use of you and I troubling about it? as though time were a personal being whose occasional interposition in the affairs of men was absolutely independent of, and obviated the necessity for, human preparation and human effort.

This mental conservatism has another side to it. All conservatism, striving to make the best of the present, is at bottom a love of ease and security, and will therefore set its face against all thoughts and aspirations that, not being immediately gratified, are apt to rouse a sense of dissatisfaction, and thus entail the necessity for earnest effort, serious sacrifice, or sustained enthusiasm. It thus becomes another name for apathy in respect of all such matters as the self is not concerned in immediately and in a tangible manner. Now there is no surer sign of mental death, no more signal proof of a complete cessation of real usefulness than that a man should cease to take interest in, and feel enthusiasm for, some large and generous cause outside his self. Special endowments and special facilities of circumstance apart, I should esteem a man just in proportion to the amount of such disinterested enthusiasm he displays; and judged by that standard, I fear the largest majority of us will fail ignominiously. And have I known a large number of educated gentlemen whose cold calculation and self-seeking are so fortified

with a love of ease and an eye to consequences that they are proof against all warm emotion, all generous indignation, all outrushing of the whole soul to active sympathy with a wronged colleague, an ill-treated brother, or an out-raged community though it be their own. Thus it is that as a community we are powerless for purposes even of common defence; 'each for himself' seems to be the motto of most of us. Many evidences there are which make it indisputable that even our religious feelings which are supposed to be the strongest of our feelings are too weak for any effective self-defence, and that, if nothing be done, they must continue to grow weaker under the joint attacks of the enemy without and the enemy within.

Worse than all this, however, is the spirit of cynicism that is now so rampant. Every man has to efface his individuality, and approximate to a pattern of unnoticed mediocrity. No liberty of thought or action is allowed. There is a dead level above which no one shall rise on pain of being marked and pointed at for an eccentric man. 'Enthusiast', 'faddist', 'Hobby-driver', are the opprobrious epithets which are applied to those darling men that think and possess ideas. It is wrong to think feelingly of any subject and have views of your own not acceptable to Mrs. Grundy*; it is a sin to express them and try to give them currency; and if you venture to translate them into action even though it relate only to the minutest detail

* Mrs. Grundy in Sir Thomas Morton's play: *Speed the plough*. She was a stickler to conventional prudery.

of your dress, you will be put out of the rule of associability, respectability, and decency; you will be called a dangerous innovator; you will be railed at, pitied, suspected of lunacy. It is this potent cause that has brought about the total extinction of individuality and originality among us, the poverty of ideas, the scarcity of enthusiasts, the profound apathy, and the refined self-seeking that are so lamentably perceptible in our society. Where there is some activity seen, it will be found to be the result of the efforts of a few philanthropic Europeans. Within our own society there is but little cohesive power, little solicitude for general welfare.

Another blot on our national character is an almost instinctive aversion to athletic sports. This is a national disgrace, nothing less. It is at the root of all our weakness, and until we wipe it off, there is no hope for us. Young and old, educated and uneducated, schoolmasters and vakils, landlords and officials, we have all yet to realise the supreme exhilaration of spirits that awaits those that unharness themselves, so to speak, of evenings after the day's work, and for getting the cares, conventionalities, and distinctions of life, yield themselves upto the excitement of the play-ground. Some have a lurking feeling that it is not quite dignified to be found actively engaged in sports; and it must be admitted that the teaching profession is not in general above this lofty contempt for physical exercise. Private tuition, newspaper-reading, paying visits to friends and relations, shopping, correspondence, gossiping.

lounging tiredly in an easy chair, these are the healthy occupations to which we consecrate the evenings. I sometimes think whether it will not be desirable to get up a memorial to the Government of India praying for the enactment of a law closing all shops, offices, reading-rooms, and libraries, and prohibiting all meetings whatsoever between the hours of five and six; there are moods when I consider "State interference" quite justifiable in this matter, as otherwise we are not likely to move of our own accord any more than in matters of social reform. Things are not half so bad in Madras as they are in the moffusil; even Madras, however, leaves a very great deal to be desired. Half our conservatism, half our apathy, half our lack of public spirit and patriotism, half our cowardice, are the direct results of our physical degradation. Activity, nimbleness, and vigour of body does mean in some measure activity, nimbleness, and vigour, of mind, and increased physical strength and increased power of endurance will not fail to be accompanied by increased self-confidence, greater respect for self, and a livelier sense of personal dignity. Even the nineteenth century is not altogether one of moral worth or intellectual force. Are not the Mussalman, and the Sikh accorded greater respect and greater consideration by Englishmen than the Hindu?

Now in respect of all these and similar defects of character, all the hope rests with the coming generations. Very little can be done by the elders of our community; indeed we ought rather to expect of the " much discouragement, much repression of spirit,

much unwholesome snubbing. Youthful warmth is apt to be called rashness; independence will always be mistaken for insolence and insubordination; and fearless reasoning, however just, must bring down upon itself the charges of irreverence and irreligion. And truly, if I mistake not, one of the most alarming signs of the times is the growing jealousy and distrust with which the older generation as a whole looks upon the younger, and what is only to be expected from such want of sympathy, the growing disinclination and unfitness of the former to lead the latter in matters of national importance like social reforms for example. Of course I make liberal allowance for exceptions, my own small circle of acquaintance furnishing a greater number of them. But I hope if rightly viewed, it will not be regarded as much of a disparagement to say that it is impossible in the nature of things for the older generation to effect as much in this direction as may be effected by the younger. To make the latter realise the responsibilities of their position and to fit them by example, precept, and training for the discharge of those responsibilities, is the duty of the schoolmaster, and in the extent to which he fulfills that duty lies his test. I will not take up space in detailing what he should be and what he should do. I trust I have indicated it sufficiently. I shall therefore conclude with a few hints in the shape of directions to masters which arise naturally out of the foregoing considerations :-

Let not your discipline in class check oddities and eccentrics, unless they are outrageous and prejudicial to class-work.

2. Do not crush out spirit and pluck. Encourage the more spirited boys, and keep them in hand by the force of sympathy rather than by repression.

3. Encourage societies and Associations in the Senior classes, and keep an eye over them without actually interfering with their management.

4. Strive to get free expression of *all* ideas whatsoever without overmuch regard to their wisdom or practicalness.

5. Levy punctually and systematically subscriptions, however small.

6. Encourage and take part in sports and games. Let not any notion of false dignity keep you from them. Remember this is not the least important, though the most neglected, of your duties.

I am conscious I have covered only a narrow portion of the subject of my paper, but it is my conviction that it is the portion which is at present most ignored, and which has therefore to be thrust persistently upon the attention of the public. It is impossible to over-estimate the injury done to the cause of sound education in the widest sense of the word by this examination-results test. The profession of teaching in particular has suffered most grievously.

It has fallen from its high ideal. It has lost dignity. It no longer commands respect. It does not reward merit, and does not attract capacity. We are unable to hold our own among the other noble professions. All this augurs very ill indeed for the future, and cries loudly for earnest and resolute effort on the part both of the leaders of the community in general and of ourselves of the teaching profession in particular. The profound ignorance and neglect of educational matters that prevails among the men of light and leading, the contemptuous and condescending manner they adopt towards their pedagogic brethren, and the all-too-common but most erroneous and pernicious notion that teaching is a work that requires no brains and no special training,—these are responsible for our degradation. If only the first men of every town took more genuine interest in the education of their children, if as far as possible they took into their own hands the management of local education, and if they regarded school-management as an art that like every other art requires serious study and experience, and *not* as a simple thing that comes to men unbidden, a play-thing that might serve as a good-natured recreation in the leisure of life, I have no doubt that educational progress would be a great deal more sound and satisfactory. Signs are not altogether wanting that of late our leading men have begun here and there to realise that this is one of their duties. But let us

remember also that a great deal depends on ourselves. We are playing to the gallery too much. We are the willing and cheerful instruments of our own downfall. If the public has a low test for us, that is no reason why we should forget our higher functions. Let us deserve well of our community by manfully striving towards our ideal and resisting every downward pull that the stress and ignoble worry of our profession inevitably exerts. Whoever does not do so, is an enemy alike to the community and to his profession.

‘V. S. Srinivasa Sastr.’