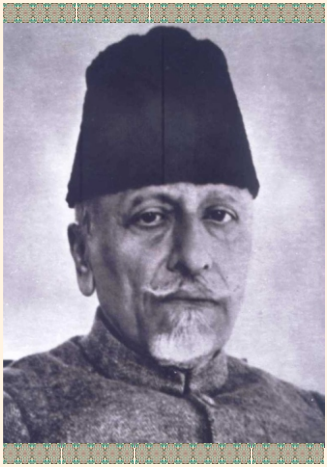
National Education Day 2022



Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture

on

On Dialogue and Art of Listening: Rethinking our Classrooms

by

Professor Avijit Pathak

Former Professor, School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND ADMINISTRATION
(Deemed to be University)
17-B, Sri Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi-110016

November 11, 2022

National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration

The National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration is the premier national institution engaged in all aspects of educational policy, planning, and administration. Originally established in 1962 as the Asian Centre for Educational Planners and Administrators, it is today conferred with the status of a university, and is fully funded by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. Over the last several decades, through its research, teaching, and capacity building activities with educational administrators at national, state, district, and sub-district levels, the organization has rightfully earned the status of being the apex national institution steering educational policy -planning as also in guiding on the ground change processes.

As a university, the NIEPA today has a multi-disciplinary faculty, and their scholarship contributes to broadening of the inter-disciplinary social science perspective, specially with respect to education. The NIEPA offers Post Graduate Diploma, M.Phil, and Doctoral programmes in educational policy and development. The institution hosts leading scholars of education globally, as also visiting delegations of educational administrators from the developing world, including an in-residence diploma programme for educational administrators.

On Dialogue and Art of Listening: Rethinking Our Classrooms

Professor Avijit Pathak
Former Professor, School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture
(11 November, 2022)

First published : 2022, (2H)

Published by the Registrar, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, 17-B, Sri Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi and printed at M/s. Viba Press, Pvt. Ltd. Okhla Industrial Area, Phase -II, New Delhi-110020.

On Dialogue and Art of Listening: Rethinking Our Classrooms*

Prof. Avijit Pathak#

Friends, colleagues and students,

I am grateful to Vice Chancellor, N. V. Varghese, for giving me the opportunity to deliver the 13th Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Memorial Lecture. Before I begin to share my views with you, let me invoke Maulana Azad. Yes, he was a leading figure in the freedom struggle; and he was closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose. He was the first Education Minister in Nehru's Cabinet. And of course, he was an extraordinary scholar, theologian and philosopher. He was an embodiment of what I love to regard as ideal Indianness — its cultural pluralism, its spiritual quest, its religious syncretism. He saw the turning point — India traumatised by the Partition and the psychology of the 'two nation theory,' and yet filled with the spirit of

* Thirteenth Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture, delivered on 11th November 2022 at NIEPA, New Delhi.

Former Professor, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

decolonisation and a new dream of progress and self-reliance. At this dark moment when all sorts of walls of separation have been erected, when our consciousness has been ghettoised, and religion has lost its religiosity or become just an 'identity marker' — a loud assertion of militant nationalism, or toxic fundamentalism — I invoke Azad with deep reverence and gratitude. He was carrying a lamp of illumination; we should not allow it to be extinguished.

Classrooms as Sites of Silent Revolution

As I reflect on the theme of the lecture I have chosen to deliver, I cannot negate my personal experience—the journey I have passed through as a teacher for more than three decades. Yes, I have enjoyed this journey, and I have celebrated the spirit of the vocation of teaching. If every morning as I walk through my classroom with the abundance of intellectual and creative life-energy, and find immense joy in seeing the curious eyes of young students, the reason is my firm conviction in the possibility of the pedagogy of hope. To me, a vibrant classroom is free from the pain of disenchantment and alienation. Instead, it is a realm of possibilities; it is a garland of relationships; and in a dialogic

classroom, students and teachers as co-travellers walk together, and make sense of the world. It is this realisation or hope which, as I introspect, enabled me to enter my classroom for more than three decades without the slightest trace of boredom and nausea. In a way, the classroom was my temple.

However, this is not just my personal story. The reason why I have chosen to speak on this theme is that all those — from school teachers to university professors — who love this vocation and feel that the act of teaching need not remain confined to the delivery of diverse packages of information and knowledge capsules, I feel, would see my point. Yes, in a truly alive classroom youngsters learn not just physics and history, or geology and sociology; they learn something more; they learn the faculty of questioning and debating; they learn to value the worth of dialogue, compassion and mindful listening; and they acquire the courage to dream of, imagine and strive for a better world. Democracy dies if vibrant classrooms disappear. In other words, as educationists, we cannot escape from reflecting on classrooms.

I know some of you are wondering why as a university professor I am bothering about classrooms and pedagogy. A university faculty, you might think, should concentrate primarily on research, projects and publications. The primary identity of a university faculty, many believe, is that of a researcher. And it is assumed that schoolteachers alone need to bother about teaching and pedagogy. To me, this is a dangerous idea. In fact, I have no hesitation in saying that the art of engaged pedagogy in the classroom is deeply related to the spirit of meaningful research. If as a teacher, you are truly convinced that your task is not just to complete the syllabus, conduct exams, and give grades to students, you realize that you have a higher purpose; you are a catalyst; you arouse their curiosity; and you take them to the fascinating world of ideas. And this is impossible unless you are a researcher, and constantly expanding your horizon with new ideas, new questions, new debates and new possibilities. Likewise, if, for you, research, far from being reduced into the assembly line production of routinised 'academic papers,' is a genuine urge to raise new questions and expand the frontier of knowledge, your classroom becomes truly enabling. Because

when you are in dialogue with fresh/young minds, the questions they ask might inspire you to think differently, read new literature, and experiment with new ideas. I have always felt that there is a symmetrical and organic bond between teaching and research. Furthermore, how can you nurture good researchers if there is no meaningful teaching? After all, researchers do not come from a different planet. In fact, to take a simple illustration, when in a college/university, a teacher goes beyond the 'syllabus,' and encourages her students to watch and debate on , say, Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* or Bimal Roy's *Sujata*, she is possibly helping to create a new researcher probing into the caste question in Indian cinema.

Hence, I insist: Don't devalue the power of engaged pedagogy; don't undermine the role of the teacher in encouraging the cultivation of young minds who dare to think differently, raise new questions, interrogate the dominant commonsense of the age, and reimagine the world; and don't deny what a vibrant and dialogic classroom can do. Indeed, classrooms are sites of silent revolution.

Three Dangers

Even though I am a strong proponent of the idea of a living classroom filled with the spirit of a creatively nuanced critical pedagogy, I am equally aware of the socio-political context in which I am speaking. And I have no hesitation in saying that we are living in dangerous times, and the idea of emancipatory education is in deep crisis. In this context, I will draw your attention by referring to three constraints.

First, think of the global trend: the neoliberal assault on education. As the market with its purely instrumental rationality colonises the domain of education, techno-managers begin to dictate us what is worth teaching or worth learning. In a way, as Henry Giroux has been arguing with immense clarity and conviction, education seems to have been reduced into mere 'training,' or a set of 'skills' the corporate culture needs in order to sell its products. Instead of cultivating the moral imagination and critical capacities of students, the market-driven education seems to be promoting, to use Henry Giroux's words, 'technically trained docility.' The ideal of the university as a place to think, promote dialogue, and learn how to hold power

accountable is viewed as a threat to neoliberal modes of governance.

At this juncture, it would not be inappropriate to share with you the gorgeous ad of a private university in the country. The ad seeks to attract the potential consumers by narrating the 'success story' of the university — the 2 crore 'package' that a 'product' from the university has been offered by a big 'brand' — a leading multinational corporate house. No wonder, from television channels to newspapers, or from billboards to YouTube ads — we see this mythology of 'placement and salary package': the promise of information technology, business administration, hotel management, fashion designing, and all sorts of 'market-friendly' courses. As I see the increasing popularisation of this idea of education among the aspiring class, and subsequent devaluation of government schools and public universities, I see a great danger: the assault on critical pedagogy or on the idea of a university that sees beyond 'instrumental' thinking and cherishes the spirit of epistemological pluralism. As the newly emergent education shops function like training centres for producing the 'skilled' workforce for the

corporate, the classroom culture I am celebrating, I fear, is bound to experience severe threat. The reason is that once you internalise the neoliberal logic that what does not sell and bring money is useless, a student ceases to be a wanderer or a seeker; instead, he/she is transformed into a consumer in search of a 'product,' and proud of his/her purchasing power. Furthermore, for the traders who sell education and wine with the same logic of profit-making, the culture of learning is not about raising new questions, cultivating the hermeneutic art of understanding the world with its many layers, questioning the dominant discourse of power, and reimagining the world. Is it that in the age of marketisation, all these universities are looking like fancy 'show rooms' — almost like shopping malls — where all sorts of 'counsellors' seek to convince the students and their parents about the 'market value' of different degrees and diplomas? And a teacher is compelled to play the role of a 'service provider' whose only task, it seems, is to sell the 'skills' the market demands. In this purely instrumental and calculative transaction, there is no surplus of imagination, no ecstasy, no organic bond between teachers and students, and no classroom that seeks to touch the sky.

I feel like recalling Martha Nussbaum's reminder that not everything about education is for profit. If in the name of technical/ vocational education for economic growth, we neglect the entire domain of humanities, arts and social sciences, as Nussbaum argued passionately and convincingly, we would not be able to keep democracy alive. Without dialogue, compassion and education for human development and democratic global solidarity, as Nussbaum fears, it would be increasingly difficult to resist barbarism, irrationalism and narrow instrumentalism.

Second, the assertion of hyper nationalism in contemporary times poses a severe threat to the spirit of critical pedagogy; and it is by no means conducive to the growth of a free and dialogic classroom culture. As the dominant political class or the ruling regime defines what it means to be a 'nationalist,' it leads to a taboo on free thinking or enquiring spirit. In fact, in our times, any dissenting or critical voice is often castigated as 'anti-national.' Furthermore, as the religious identity of the majority community becomes a marker of this sort of hyper nationalism, it becomes exceedingly difficult to interrogate the normalisation of the ugly politics — often

legitimised in the name of 'saving' one's religion. Imagine in contemporary India Karl Marx saying that religion is the 'opium' of people or Friedrich Nietzsche declaring that 'God is dead.' In this toxic environment, when 'sentiments' are hurt so quickly, how can there be a culture of civilised debate and dialogue, or the courage to interrogate the 'taken-for-granted' world? The cacophony of the catchy slogans of religious nationalism tends to suppress the language of sanity. No wonder, we are witnessing some sort of reckless engineering with the curriculum, or, say, the act of deleting select portions from school textbooks. When the propaganda machinery adds a new word *tukde tukde gang* in the dictionary to categorise the entire bunch of students and teachers who think differently, you can imagine the intensity of the symbolic violence many of us as students and teachers have experienced in recent times. In fact, as a teacher, I feel the plight of a young Assistant Professor of Political Science in a private university in NOIDA who asked his students to enquire whether a relationship could be established between the assertive *Hindutva* and the politics of authoritarianism. The UGC intervened; the university administration set up an enquiry committee to find out the reason

for this 'lapse,' and the teacher was suspended. In other words, the message is conveyed to us: 'What you speak in your class, the way you teach, or what you write is observed and monitored. And never cross the boundaries as defined by hyper nationalists.' In other words, as the psychology of fear (the fear of being demonised as 'anti-national,' or the fear of being expelled or suspended from the job) enters the corridors of schools, colleges and universities, it becomes exceedingly difficult to celebrate the spirit of free enquiry. It is not easy to encourage the culture of debate, dialogue and listening in the classroom.

I am raising this issue because, as history has demonstrated, the discourse of hyper nationalism is inseparable from the cult of authoritarianism. And those who refuse to be restricted by the dogma of nationalism, dare to cross all sorts of walls of separation, embrace the world as a whole, and critique war, militarism and every form of injustice, are seen as the 'enemies' of the nation. Is it the reason why anti-intellectualism is inseparable from totalitarianism? It is sad that in the age of competitive discourses of 'deshbhakti curriculum' and demonstrative 'patriotism,' it may not be possible for a teacher to encourage

her students to broaden their consciousness, and, for instance, appreciate the Pakistani cricket team if it plays well, or understand the pain of a Muslim woman in Kashmir seeing her only son being killed in an 'encounter.'

The dogma of hyper nationalism — like any other form of orthodoxy — blocks the flow of creative life-energy; it restricts one's vision and thinking; and it causes the fear of the 'other.' It promotes the 'crowd behaviour': accept even immoral acts in the name of worshipping your nation. Possibly, Rabindranath Tagore was trying to remind us of this 'menace' in *Crisis in Civilisation*. And if you and I agree that the goal of education is to broaden one's consciousness and activate the critical faculty, we ought to see this danger: the assault on education and creative thinking in the name of hyper nationalism. Furthermore, the quest for knowledge transcends all boundaries. Will it be wrong on the part of a teacher if she encourages her students to sing the songs of John Lennon or Bob Dillon or Faiz Ahmad Faiz in the school assembly? Or, for that matter, will it be wrong on the part of a teacher to work with her students on a project on the aesthetics of Islamic architecture in India? Think of it.

Third, these days there is yet another kind of anxiety that has begun to haunt me. Will coaching centre strategists and 'gurus' eventually replace pedagogues and teachers with creative imagination? Or, will the one-dimensional emphasis on examinations and all sorts of standardised tests diminish the significance of emancipatory education? Sometimes, I wonder whether it would ever be possible for a child growing up in contemporary India to experience the joy and ecstasy of a living classroom — a teacher taking her to the world of science and poetry, or history and carpentry, and activating the faculties of learning: the reasoning of science, the imagination of art, and the vital/physical energy for doing things with hands and legs? Or, is it that for most of these children, physics and mathematics would be reduced into what branded coaching centres teach? Is it that they would read a poem by Kamala Das or Pablo Neruda only to memorise two/three quick points for the mythical success in board examinations? Is it that a teacher will be increasingly pressurised to deliver 'success manuals,' and teach in a way that sees nothing beyond weekly tests, monthly tests and mock tests? Is it that every town in India will like to become yet another Kota — the notorious

town in Rajasthan that sells the dreams of 'success,' hypnotises the aspiring class, enhances the lucrative business of all sorts of coaching centres, and causes acute stress and anxiety among the youth? Is it that in the age of Ed Tech companies, we will forget the earthly smell of a living classroom — its creative joy and garland of relationships? Or, is it that the mental landscape of young students will be increasingly invaded by guide books, or materials produced by coaching centres, and it will have no space to accommodate sunrise and sunset, Tagore and Premchand, and Satyajit Ray and Charlie Chaplin?

I want you to think of these issues. Even though this has become the dominant commonsense or the popular meaning of education, we ought to interrogate the normalisation of this pathology. Otherwise, it will be really difficult to save education, and reclaim our classrooms. And those who are engaged with university education too need to think about it. If meaningful school education — I mean education beyond the 'technique' of cracking the MCQ-centric standardised tests — is destroyed, how can we retain the spirit of university education? And particularly, in the domain of liberal arts and social sciences,

students need to sharpen the hermeneutic art of understanding the diverse ways of looking at a text, activate the power of listening and conversations, and the skill of rigorous reading and writing. If you find students — with inflated marks in board exams and the required score in the MCQ-based CUET (Common University Entrance Test), but devoid of creativity and critical thinking, it will be exceedingly difficult to invite them to a classroom that demands their active presence, and intellectual and artistic imagination. Or, is it that in the coming years the National Testing Agency will deprive us of our autonomy, and begin to formulate the pattern of examination and evaluation in colleges and universities? The point I am trying to state is that education is not just about examinations and testing; it is essentially about the cultivation of a mind that is sensitive and compassionate, dialogic and democratic, and creatively skilled and ethically responsible. And a living classroom is not for instructing the young minds how to enhance one's speed in ticking the 'correct' answer in the OMR sheet. Instead, it is a space that activates critical thinking, creative imagination, and power of empathy and listening.

The moot question is whether this idea of the classroom is in danger amid these three constraints I have just referred to.

Dialogue, Art of Listening and Engaged Pedagogy

Even though this harsh reality cannot be overlooked, you and I as students and teachers ought to resist this pathology through our experiments with the pedagogy of hope. We ought to renew our faith in the creative possibility implicit in a vibrant classroom. We should not allow the prevalent darkness to cripple the idea and practice of emancipatory education. Every positive effort, irrespective of its scale, has its significance. To use Antonio Gramsci's words, I regard it as the 'optimism of the will.' In this context, let me refer to two key components — dialogue and mindful listening — without which we cannot imagine a living/vibrant classroom culture.

For nurturing a dialogic culture in the classroom, a teacher is required to undergo an intense process of self-introspection. She too is a student — a wanderer learning and unlearning with her students. Her task is not to silence the voice of the young learner through her power — the power of knowledge and scholarship, or the power to discipline,

hierarchise and objectify the student. Quite often, it becomes exceedingly difficult to resist the temptation of this power. And then, the classroom becomes non-dialogic — almost like a celebration of the teacher's monologue. Paulo Freire was not wrong in characterising this culture as some sort of 'oppressor' vs. 'oppressed' relationship. Democracy is about dialogue; liberation is about the celebration of active and creative agency of people; and critical consciousness is about one's ability to problematise the uneven and exploitative world, and strive for emancipation. Hence, the pedagogy of the oppressed, as Freire said with great conviction, has to be dialogic; it must assure that students do not exist as just empty vessels; they too have their agency; their experiential knowledge and their understanding of the world matter, even though they have to continually grow, evolve, learn and unlearn. A dialogic teacher resists the cult of narcissism as her knowledge and experience become enabling. And together with her students, she reflects on the world and raises new questions. Yes, a democratic/ non-exploitative/egalitarian culture needs dialogic education: the kind of education that promotes critical questions, and activates the power of imagination.

You and I can engage in a dialogue only when we acknowledge the living presence of each other. If I negate your humanity or agency (think of the violence of casteism, patriarchy and racism), or if I objectify you, and see you as a 'thing' to be exploited (think of techno-bureaucratic capitalism), there cannot be any dialogic relationship. Dialogue is the negation of instrumental reasoning. Likewise, no dialogue is possible without humility — the moral and spiritual courage to acknowledge that my understanding need not necessarily be always perfect, and it is possible to alter, amend and correct my position, if I am open and elastic enough to learn from others. In other words, dialogue is the art of possibilities. Hence, dialogue is not like the typical 'debate competition' we see in schools and colleges. In this binary — 'for' or 'against' the motion — there is no meaningful conversation; there is no willingness to learn from others; instead, it is just an egotistic/ narcissistic urge to 'defeat' the opponent. Dialogue does not mean that we necessarily agree on every issue. You and I can engage in a dialogue, and yet differ. However, every act of dialogue leads to the possibility of the expansion or fusion of horizons. In a way, a meaningful dialogue is a transformative

process. You and I know the way Dr. B. R. Ambedkar interrogated Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on the caste question. Yet, these differences notwithstanding, any careful student of history would say, Gandhi's notion of caste didn't remain static. In fact, as Rajmohan Gandhi reminds us, it was becoming increasingly radical. In 1935, Gandhi wrote an article titled "Caste must Go" in the *Harijan*. Furthermore, the practice of inter-caste dinning in the inclusive ashrams Gandhi nurtured, or his constant plea for inter-caste marriages revealed the dynamics of a mind continually 'experimenting' with truth.

Furthermore, dialogue demands the ethic of civility. This means that even when I disagree with you, I do not demonise or castigate you. There is no 'hate campaign' in a dialogue. To take yet another illustration from our history, let us reflect on the engaged relationship between Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. They didn't agree on many issues — say, the politics and philosophy of 'non-cooperation.' Yet, as historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee has revealed, these differences did by no means affect their relationship: the way they loved and trusted each other. Not solely that. The differences

notwithstanding, they continually learned from each other. In fact, whenever I see the famous archival picture — the poet and the satyagrahi sitting under a tree at Shantiniketan, and conversing — I feel the grace and beauty of a civilised debate. And it looks so refreshing, particularly at this moment when the toxic troll army and 'prime time' television noise pollute our collective psyche.

As a university professor, I have realised that there cannot be any meaningful dialogue if the burden of 'certainty' conditions our minds, and makes us incapable of unlearning our dogmas. Yes, without deconditioning, openness and continual wonder, we cannot expand our horizons; we cannot receive the vibrations of a new idea or a new vision. Beyond reductionism, beyond the burden of certainty — truth, Jiddu Krishnamurti reminded us, is a 'pathless land.' At this juncture, it would not be inappropriate to refer to my own teaching/learning experience. I often urge my 'Marxist' students to read — and read with openness and mindfulness — Karl Popper's critique of Marxism as articulated in *Open Society and Its Enemies*. They are young; they are wanderers. Why

should they stop their enquiry, and exist with a dogma that there is nothing worth learning beyond Marxism? Likewise, I ask my 'Ambedkarite' students to engage with Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and *My Experiments with Truth*, instead of arriving at the final conclusion: 'Gandhi was a *savarna* casteist.' This is not the fetish of 'value neutrality,' nor am I asking my students to be 'apolitical' and live without any 'position.' Instead, I ask them not to be entirely paralysed by a fixed doctrine or ideology, particularly when as young learners, they are required to expand their mental landscape. A university, I tell them, is not a 'party school' and the goal of engaged pedagogy is not to breed dogmas. Instead, it is about wonder and quest; it is about reflexivity and dialogue; it is a wonderful play of learning and unlearning; and it is about the cultivation of a mind that is courageous, compassionate and dialogic. And once it is developed, you and I learn to resist the recurrence of injustice and inequality in our society. The culture of the classroom reveals the moral health of the society we live in.

And we can be dialogic only when we cultivate the art of listening. You can listen to me only if you generate trust, and succeed in

assuring me that you are genuinely interested in understanding me, and you are not using me, castigating me, condemning me. In other words, for truly meaningful listening, we need empathy and compassion. Take a simple illustration. You confess, and articulate your fear, anxiety and guilt in front of a good psychiatrist or counsellor because you feel that instead of moral condemnation, he is there to listen to you, and help you to be free from the psychic burden you are carrying, and move towards the process of healing.

In this context, it would not be inappropriate to refer to Thich Nhat Hanh — the Buddhist monk who sought to enchant us through his teaching of loving kindness and compassionate listening. The violence we see around is the breakdown of communication. With the inflated ego of the nation or the individual, we erect walls of separation. In a violent world, Thch Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism is a refreshing departure; it is about love and understanding, and art of listening and conflict resolution. In other words, without empathy, compassion and endurance, it is not possible to listen to others. The question is: Can a teacher listen to her students? Yes, she can, if she redefines power: the power of compassion rather than the

power of surveillance and moral policing. It is also important for her to redefine the meaning of 'discipline' — the discipline that emanates from inner realisation and concern for others, but not from the fear of authority. A truly dialogic classroom, as I am repeatedly emphasising, radiates the waves of love, understanding and active conversations and debates rather than the gestures of physical and symbolic violence. As students and teachers, we need to work ceaselessly on the art of listening. In this context, I derive my inspiration from "bell hooks" — the extraordinary thinker, teacher and pedagogue who was influenced by Paulo Freire as well as Thich Nhat Hanh. With her engaged pedagogy, she continually interrogated the practice of patriarchy and racism. And her classroom was a domain of possibilities. Far from reducing the academic enterprise into a soulless and abstract demonstration of the 'intellect,' she redefined scholarship and teaching. In a way, her classroom was truly a transformative process — a praxis of healing. Yes, in a white-dominated classroom, a black female student could acquire the courage to bring her own trauma, pain and experiences, find her voice and agency, and contribute to the process of critiquing 'white supremacist

capitalism.' It was possible because her teaching was therapeutic, and her scholarship was filled with the ecstasy of love and compassion.

Well, I know that in a society like ours that has not yet emancipated itself from caste/ patriarchal prejudice, and the violence of majoritarianism, it is not easy to find dialogic classrooms. Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiographical text *Joothan* has familiarised us with the violence he experienced as a Dalit child at his school. The way the 'forward caste' headmaster with his caste prejudice and brute instincts humiliated and physically assaulted him was not just a thing of the past. Even today, as many studies have shown, this violence has not withered away. How can we forget what happened to a nine-year-old Dalit child in Rajasthan's Jalore district in recent times when the nation was in a mood to celebrate *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*? The child didn't know that the earthen pot that he drank from had been kept separately for the forward caste teacher. The teacher abused him and physically assaulted him. It led to internal injuries; and eventually, the child died. Moreover, the recent Hijab row in Karnataka reveals how the act of humiliating and

stigmatising the minority community is polluting the culture of our educational institutions.

However, the fact that we confront these difficulties is the reason why, as educationists, we need to remind ourselves time and again of the redemptive power of dialogue and compassionate listening, and its ability to transform our classrooms into transformative spaces, and sharpen the practice of the pedagogy of hope. Yes, in a dark world, the striving for a teacher carrying the lamp of love to illumine young minds acquires special significance. Are you and I willing to transform this hope into a living practice?

How not to Fall into the Trap of Despair

I am equally aware of the structural constraints that often cause despair and hopelessness. The pedagogy of hope, or the possibility I am seeing in the role of a creative teacher, might sound utopian — a fantasy or a dream. You might allege that I am expecting the impossible from the teaching community. If the 'system' is not conducive, how can they teach meaningfully and intensely? Even some of my students who have just begun their journey as college/university teachers express

their despair. They remind me of the circumstances under which they work — the heavy load of courses to be taught; and the never-ending process of examining and evaluating tutorials, assignments and examination papers. Moreover, in the age of 'ranking,' 'branding and associated logic of concretely 'quantifiable and measurable data,' they are reminded time and again that what really matters is the number of publications or the mathematics of the 'citation index,' not the quality of meaningful teaching or engaged pedagogy (yes, as it is thought, since the qualitatively enriched experience of participating in an academically and ethically spirited dialogue initiated by a passionate teacher is beyond measurement; it need not be seen as important for the 'ranking' purpose). This sort of academic rationale — quite often internalised by even young teachers — tends to devalue what a sincere teacher with her engaged pedagogy can do in the classroom. Is it that in this age of demonstrative CVs, you have to be apologetic if you devote yourself to the silent act of teaching, or intensifying the spirit of what Martin Buber would have regarded as 'communion' with students? Likewise, see the pathetic state of the average schoolteacher in India. From the poor teacher-

taught ratio in noisy and overcrowded classrooms to the reduction of a teacher into a petty clerk managing the mid-day meal, or performing all sorts of official works like the election duty, or collecting the census data: we witness the devaluation of the vocation of teaching. Moreover, as we often come across all sorts of disturbing news like massive corruption in the recruitment of teachers or the political appointment of vice chancellors, it becomes exceedingly difficult to retain hope in the vocation of teaching. Indeed, there are reasons for falling into the trap of despair.

However, it is equally important for those who still love this vocation to realise that even under extremely difficult circumstances, one's creative agency is not altogether dead. It is possible to overcome the 'pessimism of the intellect' and, to use Antonio Gramsci's words, celebrate the 'optimism of the will.' Even if the structural constraints limit our possibilities, the exercise of our creative agency or the 'optimism of the will' initiates the process of structural transformation. Don't forget that the dark cell of Mussolini's prison could not prevent Gramsci from exercising the 'optimism of the will;' it gave us his brilliant commentaries on politics, culture, civil society,

intelligentsia and the praxis of counter-hegemonic struggle. In other words, the 'objectivity' of structural constraints is challenged and transcended by the radical praxis of creative subjects. And it is this creatively nuanced and dialectical interplay of 'structure' and 'agency' that can transform what appears to be 'impossible' into what educationist Ronald Barnett regarded as a 'feasible utopia.' Hence, as a teacher, I have always believed that classrooms are sites of silent revolution. And yes, even amid these difficult circumstances, we can find — provided our eyes are truly open — the kind of teachers Paulo Freire and bell hooks would have liked.

Think of the society we are living in. We witness the steady erosion of the democratic spirit amid the cult of narcissism. And then, there is techno-hallucination in the age of instantaneity — say, the belief that Internet, Wikipedia and YouTube can replace a living/vibrant/face-to-face/interactive learning community; or the instant messaging through WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter can replace the meditative and contemplative thought and language of, say, the likes of Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy. In the

age of seductive consumerism, the restless generation is ceaselessly striving for what Erich Fromm regarded as some sort of a 'having mode of existence.' As we ghettoise our consciousness and erect walls of separation in the name of caste, religion and nationality, we experience the all-pervading violence.

Friends, there are two options available to us. We can accept it as 'inevitable,' and we can entertain a fatalistic belief that 'there is no alternative.' Or, else, we can reimagine a just, compassionate and democratic world, and initiate a politico-cultural/economic/social movement for our collective emancipation. If you and I choose the second option, we have to play an important role as students/ teachers/educators. After all, it is the spirit of emancipatory education that enables us to critique the logic of domination, and give us the moral and intellectual capital to strive for a better world. And in the development of this art of resistance, democratic and dialogic classrooms, as this lecture emphasises, will play an important role.

Thank you once again for listening to me.

References

Barnett, Ronald (2011): *Being a University*, New York: Routledge

Buber, Martin (2002): *Between Man and Man*, London: Routledge

Freire, Paulo (1947/1972): *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Middlesex: Penguin Books

Fromm, Erich (1957/1985): *The Art of Loving*, London: Unwin Paperbacks

Gandhi, Rajmohan (2022): *India After 1947: Reflections and Recollections*, New Delhi: Aleph

Giroux, Henry A (2011) *On Critical Pedagogy*, New York/ London: Continuum

------- (2014): *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, Chicago: Haymarket Books

Gramsci, Antonio (1971): *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart

Hanh, Thich Nhat (2011): *Together We are One: Honouring Our Diversity, Celebrating Our Connection*, Mumbai, Jiaco Publishing House

Hooks, bell (1994): *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, New York: Routledge

------- (2001) *All About Love: New Visions*, New York: William Morrow

Krishnamurti, Jiddu (2002): *Why are You Being Educated?*, Chennai: Krishnamurti Foundation Trust

Mukherjee, Rudrangshu (2021): *Tagore and Gandhi: Walking Alone, Walking Together*, New Delhi: Aleph

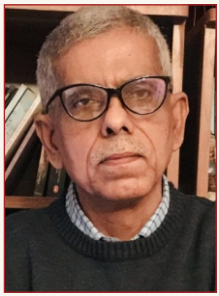
Nussbaum, Martha (2010) *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Pathak, Avijit (2015): *The Chaotic Order: An Unknown Teacher's Pedagogic Travelogue*, New Delhi: Aakar Books

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL PLANNING AND ADMINISTRATION

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Memorial Lectures

1. **Education Modernisation and Development**
   K. N. Pannikkar (2010)
2. **Maulana Azad and Mahatama Gandhi: A Comparative Study**
   Mushirul Hasan (2011)
3. **De-Centering European Liberalism in India's Democratic Struggles**
   Amiya K. Bagchi (2012)
4. **Recolonization of the Indian Mind**
   Peter Ronald de Souza (2013)
5. **Bridging the Divide: Democracy and Inequalities**
   Zoya Hasan (2014)
6. **Abul Kalam Azad: An Epitome of Culture**
   Kapila Vatsyayan (2015)
7. **Higher Education in India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow**
   Aparna Basu (2016)
8. **Essentials for Excellence in Higher Education: Why Should the Obvious be so Elusive?**
   Furqan Qamar (2017)
9. **Diversity Management under Indian Constitution**
   Faizan Mustafa (2018)
10. **Education and the Complex World of Culture**
    Neera Chandhoke (2019)
11. **The Future of Higher Education: Through the lens of the History and Philosophy of Science**
    Dhruv Raina (2020)
12. **Inter-Generational and Inter-Regional Differentials in Higher Level of Education in India**
    Abusaleh Shariff (2021)



Prof. Avijit Pathak

Professor Avijit Pathak taught sociology at JNU for more than three decades. He has written extensively on education, critical pedagogy, modernity and social theory. His major publications include Ten Lectures on Education; Recalling the Forgotten: Education and Moral Quest; Modernity, Globalization and Identity: Towards a Reflexive Quest; and The Chaotic Order: An Unknown Teacher's Pedagogic Travelogue. He is also a regular contributor in The Tribune, The Indian Express and The New Leam.