

Teachers' Day reminds us what it really means to teach

Teachers' Day should spark gratitude but also reflection on education's deeper purpose.



ACHARYA PRASHANT

This year, just like every year, classrooms across the country paused on September 5th to mark Teachers' Day. Students prepared tributes, teachers were greeted with gestures of respect, and for a day the focus shifted from lessons to gratitude. It is right that we remember the people who, often quietly and without recognition, carry the responsibility of shaping young lives.

But a day of celebration also calls for reflection. Beyond the ceremonies, what is it that we truly expect from education? And who, in the deepest sense, deserves to be called a teacher? Unless we ask these questions, our thanks remain incomplete.

WHY TEACHERS MATTER

Civilizations rise or fall on the strength of their teachers. A genuine teacher is not just an information-dispenser; she is one who awakens inquiry, nurtures clarity, and shapes character. Nations that gave teaching their highest respect advanced swiftly. Those that neglected it, regardless of wealth or size, decayed.

India has no shortage of talent. What it lacks is a system where real teachers can thrive and young minds are free to think.

THE PRESENT CRISIS

Today, teaching has come to be seen less as a calling and more as a safe career. In a conscious society, teaching is the highest vocation. Yet in ours, it too often becomes a refuge for mediocrity.

Across the country, posts lie vacant year after year, many teachers remain underprepared, and classrooms are left untended as teachers are diverted to election or survey duty. In higher education, faculty shortages run into tens of thousands, crippling research and leaving students without mentors. When classrooms function with temporary staff or none at all, the child learns a harsh lesson: that her growth does not matter to the system.

We have reduced teachers to clerks of the state: cheap labour for errands while young minds go without guidance. This is not negligence; it is betrayal. When the role of teaching is treated with such contempt, how can the young feel inspired?

THE DEEPER MALAISE

The failures are not just administrative; they reflect a deeper rot. Education has largely been reduced to rote learning, exam scores, and job placements. Universities are widely celebrated not for inquiry or research but for the packages their graduates secure.

The competitive exam culture has become an industry of its own. Children are herded into coaching centres where they are trained to learn specific



exam patterns rather than to think independently. Paper leaks and mass cheating corrode the very idea that effort matters. What lesson does this teach? That honesty is for fools, and that shortcuts are rewarded.

The result has been tragic. Campuses across the country have witnessed a disturbing number of student suicides. A young person is told that life is worthless unless she reaches the top one percent. Ninety-nine percent are then left with a crushing sense of failure. And when, at the same time, the system denies them the freedom to ask who they really are, the suffocation becomes unbearable. The fault is not in the student but in a system that withholds the education of the self.

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

Human beings are the only species that must be born twice. The first birth is biological; the second, truly human, is the birth of clarity. Schools and teachers exist for this second birth. Without it, we may produce skilled professionals, but leave them unclear and insecure as human beings.

Swami Vivekananda said that education must strengthen the mind, expand the intellect, form character, and make one stand on one's own feet. That vision remains unrealized. Instead of nurturing clarity, we train students to fit neatly into structures that may not even deserve their lives.

The second birth requires two streams of learning.

Knowledge of the world—language, mathematics, science, history, economics, technology—keeps life functional and protects us from superstition.

Knowledge of the self—to know why knowledge is needed, where it serves, and where it cannot. Without this, we produce cleverness without wisdom, achievement without fulfillment.

Vedanta calls these avidya and vidya. The first keeps life workable. The second makes life worth living. A system that invests only in the first produces engineers who sell fizzy drinks, researchers who become recruiters, and bright students who sometimes end their lives because they were never taught that existence has worth beyond achievement.

FOR TEACHERS: WHO YOU ARE IS WHAT YOU TEACH

Teaching and teacher are not separate. If I spend all my energy on lesson plans but neglect the quality of my own life, I pass on techniques, not transformation. Who you are speaks before what you say.

A student first senses the teacher's being, only then her words. The true relation between teacher and student is not of control but of care, not of marks but of seeing.

To be a good teacher, one must stop imagining that education and life are separate. If I watch my conduct only in the classroom but ignore the rest of my life, I pass on a divided message. Students will learn more from how I handle anger, honesty, or kindness in or-

dinary life than from what I write on the blackboard. The call is not for a stricter code of conduct but for deeper self-awareness. A teacher who cultivates clarity in her own life naturally radiates it in the classroom.

WHY WISDOM IS IGNORED

If this all sounds obvious, why is it absent from curricula?

First, because human beings are body-identified. The usual mind serves bodily survival, security, and pleasure. The real teacher unsettles this foundation by saying, "You are mistaken when you take yourself to be just the body." That threatens ordinary life. So we resist him.

Second, because education mirrors politics. Mass politics rewards promises of jobs and comforts, not inner clarity. Wisdom questions the very foundations on which power rests. It is easier to keep it outside the classroom.

WHO IS A TRUE TEACHER?

An instructor can fill the mind with information. A true teacher lightens it of its burdens. The instructor strengthens the ego with more possessions: concepts, labels, skills. The true teacher unsettles the ego, exposing its attachments and showing the futility of chasing fulfillment in what is borrowed.

He does not console; he awakens. His task is not to make the student dependent, but to free her so fully that even the teacher is no longer needed. To reduce such a one to garlands on a single day is self-deception.

The real teacher is not a person or a date on the calendar, but the call of truth that refuses to let us live narrowly.

THE REAL TRIBUTE

When we deny our children real teachers, we do not merely weaken their present; we betray the nation's future. Every vacant post, every exam leak, every hollow celebration of "success" tells the young that life has no value beyond borrowed templates. That message is lethal.

The real tribute on Teachers' Day is courage: courage to ensure qualified and supported teachers, courage to restore inquiry at the heart of classrooms, courage to give our children both aspects of education—external and internal. Without teachers of clarity, no nation can survive its own cleverness. We may produce engineers, doctors, and executives, but without wisdom they only build higher prisons for themselves.

Teachers' Day should not be about flowers on a desk. It should be about freeing the next generation from ignorance and fear. Without that, every day becomes a funeral of education.

Acharya Prashant, a philosopher and teacher of global wisdom literature, is the founder of the Prashant Advait Foundation. A bestselling author who brings timeless wisdom to urgent modern questions, he has been recognised for his contributions to thought and ethics—with honours from PETA ('Most Influential Vegan'), the Green Society of India ('Environmental Leadership'), and the IIT Delhi Alumni Association ('National Development').