

A Clear Conscience

A Teacher

Teaching is an arduous task indeed, especially teaching those students who are pushed to the tertiary level of education without ever learning to know elementary things about their subjects of study. The responsibility of managing a degree college in a rugged region of the country, somehow fell on my shoulders. I had previously had the experience of running a Boys Intermediate College but in a different cultural backdrop. The degree college the responsibility of which was assigned to me now had a long history of rowdy student behavior and insolent groupings.

Right from the day of taking over the charge of office, I set myself the task of ensuring that regular classes were held by the teaching staff; but the response was frustrating. It appeared that nobody was ready to accept what to me was rational advice. The first two or three months were so nerve-wrecking that I started thinking of quitting the job altogether.

Then I decided to change my strategy. Being a teacher of English, I arranged for engaging classes in the zero periods for those who wanted to have a grasp on English language skills. There were about 25 students present on the first day. On the second, their number doubled and by the third day, so many students were eagerly waiting that I had to engage the class in the main hall. The only key to success was that I brought my teaching to their level. Once I made the teaching relevant to them I managed to elicit responses from them.

From that day, the tension between the college administration and the students melted. The morning class had created a relationship of trust between us.

What did I actually do in the English class? I encouraged them to think and write very short pieces related to their own environment both at the college and at home. I asked them to

use words from their own language whenever they failed to find a proper word in English and, later, gave them the needed vocabulary in English. The students started communicating without feeling inhibited and without any sense of inadequacy in the language. I ignored their mistakes and always rewarded them with words of praise and encouragement for their responses. I had to help them a lot in framing their responses and warmly applauded when they finally managed to produce the correct sentences. It needed lots of patience and perseverance.

As the college was to be closed for vacations, I prepared to go for my hometown, leaving behind a junior colleague as officiating principal. The cashier of the college handed over an amount which was to be paid to a book-seller in my home town for library books that we had purchased. Another amount was also entrusted to me for payment to the furniture supplier. All this added up to eighty thousand. In the eighties, a sum of eighty thousand rupees was really a very huge amount. I boarded a coaster bus around midnight.

At about 2am, as the bus was passing through a narrow valley, there was a highway hold-up. About half a dozen masked gunmen forced the driver to stop and asked all the passengers to get down one by one holding their bags in hand. I was panic-stricken because I was carrying government money with me and would surely be expected to make good the loss.

The passengers started disembarking. A person standing outside near the exit frisked them hurriedly and then directed them to his companions who searched them thoroughly and deprived them of their watches, cash and other valuables. The victims were then directed to stand in another group which was guarded by two other armed men. As I stepped down the coaster, the masked man said, "Sir, you go to that group." directing me to the people who had been thoroughly searched and fleeced of cash and other belongings. I was stunned to hear those words but quietly followed his command and joined the group of cleansed passengers. After about an

hour, the armed men threatened the passengers of dire consequences if they raised an alarm, and disappeared in the darkness.

From the way the gunman addressed me I understood that he must have been a student of mine. It was not something to be proud of, yet I had taken one step to reform the students of the college and clearly a lot remained to be done.

We again boarded the coaster, reached the nearest police station and lodged a report of robbery. Obviously I was not amongst the complainants as I had been spared out of respect for a teacher. I had been so shaken by the prospect of the impending loss that I had not cared to remember the sound of voice or physical features of the highway men standing at the door of the coaster. But I was very sure that I had been spared the agony of losing Rs 80,000 because I had been a sincere teacher.

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