

## **Functions of a Teacher by Bertrand Russell**

### **Instilling in the Pupils the Habit of Impartial Inquiry**

According to Russell, it is the business of a teacher to instil what he can of knowledge and reasonableness into the process of forming public opinion. Thus Russell assigns a very weighty role to the teacher. Russell points out that organized party-spirit is one of the greatest dangers of our time.

This party-spirit takes the form of nationalism and it then leads to wars between nations; the same party-spirit within a country may lead to a civil war. It is the business of teachers, says Russell, to stand outside the conflicts between parties and to try to instil into their pupils the habit of impartial inquiry. A teacher has thus to develop in his pupils a capacity to judge different issues on their merits. The teacher cautions his pupils against accepting ex parte statements at their face value. The teacher should not be expected to flatter the prejudices either of the mob or of officials. His professional virtue should consist in a readiness to do justice to all sides. He should try to rise above controversy into a region of impartial scientific investigation. He should not lend himself to dishonest propaganda by spreading untruths. Society should protect the teacher against the resentment of those who feel offended by the conclusions which a teacher arrives at through his independent investigation.

### **Political Partisanship of Teachers in our Country**

Nobody can quarrel with Russell in the matter of responsibility which he entrusts to the teacher. What can be more sensible than the advice that the teacher should stand outside the strife of parties and should exercise his own independent judgment and also teach his pupils to develop in themselves a capacity for impartial inquiry? This advice is the urgent need of the hour in our own country. One of our great misfortunes in the sphere of education is that almost every teacher is a member of some political party or other. Even students nowadays fight their elections on the basis of their party affiliations. Both teachers and students are thus party spokesmen. If the views of some of the teachers and the views some of the students in the same institution are divergent in political matters, there is bound to be friction and bitterness between them. The freedom of education is thus being vitiated in our country on account of the political partisanship of both teachers and students. The habit of impartial inquiry is something completely alien to the minds of teachers in our country today.

### **Teachers, the Guardians of Civilization**

Russell assigns to the teachers an even greater responsibility when he says that they, more than members of any other class of people, are the guardians of civilization. Teachers should be intimately aware of what civilization is, and they should feel a strong desire to impart a civilized attitude to their pupils. The civilized man is one who either admires what is good and noble or aims at understanding what he cannot admire. The civilized man seeks rather to discover and remove the impersonal causes of evil than to hate

the men who are in the grip of that evil. The teacher should have all this in his mind, and he should be able to convey it to the young pupils under his charge.

### **Deficiencies in Our Teachers**

To say that teachers are, more than any other class, the guardians of civilization is to give them a higher status than is enjoyed by those who occupy positions of high official authority in a country, and even than those who control the press and other mass media. This, again, is an ideal very remote from the thoughts of the teachers in our own country. Our teachers should first of all themselves learn the meaning of civilization. Often their own behaviour and their dealings not only with students but also with one another are of a dubious nature. Most of the teachers in our country do not even have a sense of discipline which is an essential ingredient of civilization. Besides, most teachers here have a narrow outlook upon life; many of them suffer from communal bias or class bias or caste bias. A civilized mind is broad and catholic, not limited and short-sighted.

### **The Teacher and the Pursuit of Happiness**

It is also the business of the teacher, says Russell, to open the minds of his pupils to the possibility of activities which can be a source of both pleasure and profit. In other words, the teacher should instil among his pupils the desire to pursue delightful activities. He should also check the growth of a desire in the minds of his pupils to rob others of any kind of happiness which they themselves have missed. Many people are opposed to the pursuit of happiness as an end. Actually, happiness is one of the most desirable goals in life. Pupils should be taught to pursue happiness for themselves and to provide happiness to others. It should be the aim of the educator, says Russell, to train adults free from psychological aberrations so that they may not have any wish to rob others of whatever happiness may be available to them.

### **Happiness, a Laudable Goal**

Here again we agree with Russell. The ideal of happiness is certainly laudable. Happiness is one of the most cherished values in human life. Such obnoxious feelings as the desire to inflict pain upon oneself or upon others must be curbed and controlled, because such feelings do certainly exist in many people. We have all heard of “sadism” which consists in inflicting pain upon others and of “masochism” which consists in inflicting pain upon oneself. It is the function of a teacher to prevent the growth of such feelings in his pupils.

### **The Teacher Versus the Propagandist**

A teacher, says Russell, can be successful in his work only if he has feelings of warm affection towards his pupils and a genuine desire to impart to them what he himself believes to be valuable. Russell

distinguishes the true teacher from the propagandist. To the propagandist his pupils are potential soldiers in an army. They are to serve purposes that lie outside their own lives. The true teacher wants that his pupils should survey the world and freely choose a purpose which appears to them of value. But the propagandist tries to train and twist the growth of his pupils to suit his particular purpose. The propagandist thus thwarts their natural growth and in this way may even destroy their generous instincts, replacing them with envy, destructiveness, and cruelty. The true teacher knows that there is no need for men to be cruel; he, therefore, encourages the development of kind and humane feelings among his pupils.

### **A Valid Distinction**

In thus distinguishing between the true teacher and the propagandist, Russell shows his humanitarianism and his moral fervour. The true teacher is, indeed, an upholder of the ideal of mutual sympathy, mutual help, and mutual service. The propagandist is always a dogmatist; his mind is one-sided. For the true teacher, a sense of humanity overrides all other considerations, and his outlook is all-embracing. This distinction between the true teacher and the propagandist is thus a vital matter in any discussion of the aims of education.

### **The Teacher's Duty not to Conceal the Truth, and his Duty to Produce the Spirit of Tolerance**

Another requirement of a good teacher, according to Russell, is that he must never conceal the truth. There is no virtue in hiding even unpleasant facts from the pupils. The wickedness of rogues should, for instance, not be hidden from young students. It is said that the knowledge of such unpleasant facts may lead to young minds becoming cynical, But if such knowledge comes to the pupils, duly intermixed with a knowledge of what is good, and if it comes to them gradually, it will have no such effect. In any case, to tell lies to the young is morally indefensible. Furthermore, a teacher should try to produce in his pupils the spirit of tolerance. This spirit of tolerance is necessary if democracy is to survive. And the spirit of tolerance can be developed through an understanding of those who hold views different from our own. Ants and savages put strangers to death; but civilized men try to understand the point of view of those who differ with them; they do not try to strangle those who differ with them. The intolerance which results from the failure to understand other points of view than our own is the very opposite of a civilized outlook, and it is one of the most serious dangers to our world. The educational system should be designed to remove intolerance of this kind.

### **Russell's Moralism and his Internationalism**

Here we see Russell in the role of a moralist; he has something very ennobling and edifying to say. It is clear that the welfare or well-being of mankind is the most cherished ideal Russell has in mind. And it is the well-being of the world as a whole that he seeks, not of any particular part or region of it. He is a true internationalist, and is free from narrow nationalistic loyalties. He is also an admirer of democracy. Both these aims which a teacher should have in his mind-namely, the non-concealment of truth, and

encouraging the spirit of tolerance—are highly commendable; and we feel that all teachers everywhere should accept these aims and strive to give them a practical shape.

### **Difficulties and Hurdles in the Way of Teachers: The Denial of Freedom to the Teacher a Great Hurdle**

In Russell's opinion a teacher's path is nowadays beset with many difficulties and hurdles. The profession of teaching has a great and honourable tradition, but any teacher in the modern world is likely to be made sharply aware that his function is to teach not what he thinks he should teach, but to instil such beliefs and prejudices as are thought useful by his employers. The conditions in the modern world thus make it difficult for the teacher to perform his real functions. What the teacher needs more than anything else is the feeling of intellectual independence. But what has happened is that the teacher has become, in a large majority of cases, a civil servant compelled to carry out the instructions of the bureaucracy. Russell recognizes the fact that State education is necessary. But he thinks that there should be certain safeguards against the dangers which result from State education. These dangers were seen in their full magnitude in Nazi Germany and are still seen in Russia. In such countries, State education aims at instilling a dogmatic creed among the pupils. Now, people of a free intelligence will never sincerely accept a dogmatic creed. But in the countries named above, State education has led to the production of fanatical bigots, ignorant of the world outside their own country. These bigots have no notion of a free discussion of ideas. What is even more deplorable is that almost every totalitarian country has its own dogmatic creed to preach. This kind of thing leads to a cultural compartmentalism. As a result of the diversity of dogmatic creeds, the ideal of cultural internationalism has rapidly been declining since the First World War. Even in democratic countries like England and the U.S.A., ideas of nationalism have begun to exercise a stronger hold upon the minds of people. The dangers resulting from such attitudes can be averted if teachers are protected from intellectual bondage. Dogmatism in education has at any rate to be prevented somehow. It is wrong to say that the uniformity of opinion and the suppression of liberty can make a nation strong. It is also wrong to say that democracy weakens a country in war. The truth is that in every important war since the year 1700, the victory has gone to the more democratic side. Under these circumstances, the teacher should be allowed the freedom to teach what he wants to teach and in the manner he likes. The teacher can only perform his work adequately if he is an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority. In this respect, the teacher is like the artist, the philosopher, and the man of letters. The denial of freedom to the teacher therefore means the negation of education.

### **Full Freedom for the Teacher in Our Own Country**

We fully agree with Russell that the teacher can work satisfactorily only in an atmosphere of freedom. Nor is there any doubt that this atmosphere of freedom is totally wanting in totalitarian countries dominated by communism. In democratic countries, the teacher is independent enough. And in our own country, there are hardly any restrictions of any kind upon the teacher. Neither the central government nor the State governments in this country enforce any particular form of teaching; nor do they insist upon any

particular political ideology being taught except, perhaps, in a small number of institutions which are under the control of particular sects or communities.

Russell also points out, in connection with the freedom needful for the teacher, that in most countries certain opinions are recognized as “correct”, and others as dangerous. Teachers whose opinions are not “correct” have to keep silent about them. The result is that the inquiring young too often have to go outside the class-room to discover what is being taught by the most vigorous minds of their own time. In Russell’s opinion there has to be a great deal more freedom than there is for the teaching profession. This profession should have more opportunities of self-determination, and more independence from the interference of bureaucrats and bigots.

### **The Complaint of Over-work Not Valid in the Case of Our Teachers**

One other difficulty that Russell points out as obstructing the teacher’s performance is overwork. Most teachers, says Russell, are subjected to excessive work and are compelled to prepare their pupils for examinations rather than to give them a liberalizing mental training. The result is that many of them become harassed and nervous, and they get out of touch with recent work in the subjects that they teach. This complaint about overwork may be true in the case of teachers in Soviet Russia and even in some of the western democracies; but it is certainly not true in our own country. Here the school teacher gets ample time from his official duties to organize private coaching classes in order to add to his income while the college teacher gets ample time to indulge in institutional politics and in other objectionable activities. The teacher in India is completely devoid of that missionary spirit which is essential for the noble activity of educating the young. Of course, there are honourable exceptions but the majority of teachers are dominated by mercenary motives. The teachers in India can certainly not complain of a lack of leisure.

### **A Very Instructive and Illuminating Essay**

Russell’s views on the subject of education as stated in the essay, The Functions of a Teacher, are very instructive and illuminating. Although this essay was written nearly thirty years ago, its ideas have not lost their validity and value, at least for this country. If even five per cent of the teachers in India were to adopt the ideals proposed by Russell in this essay, the educational system will undergo a transformation the effects of which will be far-reaching. The majority of teachers will of course scoff at these ideas, but the earnest-minded ones can draw plenty of inspiration from them.