

IT'S THE POOR WHO HAVE VALUES

In 1989 we spent a year in Germany. I was baby sitting our 4 year old son and Sujata was on a Post Doctorate research fellowship. When we returned my then boss asked me what I had learnt living in a rich country. I replied that I realised that we knew how to live reasonably content with low incomes, but one realised that it takes a lot of doing to be rich and not destroy. So I hope we are not poor but we should not become rich. We do not have the cultural restraints in place.

Now, when one hears of a luxury car, driven by inebriated scions of the moneyed, ramming into hapless 2-wheelers and usually killing them, one is reminded of this insight.

Luckily, since most of us are not rich, our society survives.

At our institution all meritorious students are allowed access. Meritorious being defined as 75% marks and deserving defined as a family income of less than Rs 2 Lacs a year, an income bracket which covers 90% of our countrymen. There is a however a merit clause. To retain the support the student has to get a first class each year, with no backlog of subjects.

There was a student who was a recipient. In his first year he obtained 59% marks. That is not very different from 60% , and since we are an institution running on principles and not rules, we continued the support. The next year he scored 54%. At which point we communicated the discontinuation of support and if he wished he could see me.

In those days I was doing a weekly 3 day run from Pune and typically worked from 7 am to 9 pm. So he came after dark. He was a lean, ebony colored boy of medium height. He explained that in his 2nd year he had lost his father and was required to fend for his family. This he did by working at a caterer and his typical day ended at midnight. Leaving little energy for study.

You are getting a scholarship. Scholarships are for scholars. Are you a scholar?

No, said he.

So, is the decision to discontinue the scholarship correct ?

Yes, said he. By then tears were falling silently down his taut face, but he did not say anything else.

In the face of such integrity, what does one do. We continued his scholarship.

I hope and am sure he would have travelled far. He deserves to.

Last month another student came looking bedraggled and confused. He had 75% in his Diploma so wanted to do a Degree, but did not have the money. So, he took up a job and took a dummy admission, in which one does not attend classes but gives exams as do millions appearing for the IIT-JEE, in Engineering. He had by now consumed 2 years of Scholarship, had backlogs and resigned from his job to look after his father.

We discussed his predicament and I told him that wasting 2-3 years was not important. The trajectory of his future was. If he decided to pursue a full time course we would help out. His father is a watchman in a village 15 kms off Wardha and his mother cooks the mid-day meal in a school.

After 2 days he came back a changed man. With his hair cut and a beaming face. He has chosen to pursue Engineering.

The fee is Rs 1 Lac a year and his scholarship is gone so I thought he would seek full remission. But he paid up 40%. The balance we waived.

Time and again, in our work, we meet such students and people. The well off on the other hand are largely self absorbed and stingy.

It is a privilege to invest in the meritorious with low incomes. It is a matter of chance that we were born in well off households, with the right caste and religion. What if we were not? Any civilised society should ensure that accidents of birth not define lives. This is why ensuring good quality, publicly funded education is so important. But it is being destroyed by Governments, Teachers and Managements. More of that some other time.

There is another aspect. The poor in India have tolerated inequality. If they see a way out they will continue to do so. If not, there may be hell to pay.