

Rejuvenating villages by bringing children and women to the forefront

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Primepost, February 1, 2022

Ramanuja's Samata statue should be an inspiration



Ramanuja's statue near Shamshabad Outskirts of Hyderabad will have the "Samata" statue of the tallest social reformer of thousand years. Ramanuja guided the globe with fundamentals of life and showed the path for harmonious living of all. A couple of his principles remain eternal. These include that God is not of some but of every one and beyond caste and community, and larger societal interest should guide not individual and immediate interests. Temples built in nook and corner over these thousand years should once again rekindle inclusive idea with particular concern for children and women. This Samata statue should remind us the core of Ramanuja's principles.

Temple, library, school to be the means

Temple, library and school could be the means once again for rejuvenating the villages. They need to be revived as motivating places for the children. Women are a better bet. While temple is confined to rituals and outlet of power, library has become bureaucratic and limited to elders, schools on the other are suffering from certain slumber, apathy and are no longer inclusive and integrating. The focus in villages has shifted to winning elections of all kinds and at any cost and all the time with no lessons to draw upon. And, in that process, the laws and legislations have lost their punch, suffering from regimes which have become self-centred, discriminative and destabilising. They no longer motivate children and the youth. Earlier, there were number of good examples in most villages. Recalling and remembering them is worth for the sake of young and to revive futuristic concerns in them. The stories in many villages are telling and inspiring with examples they had set several years ago.

Three angels

A few decades ago I knew about three women in my village, who never went to any school and widowed, had thought of the village and its future. One of them, seven decades ago and a decade before a formal school has come to the village, built a spacious public library in the middle of the village. For years it ignited many minds,

young and old of the village. A few years later the other two women, also widowed and never been to a school, were responsible for the buildings of middle school and high school. The three women were self-motivated. It was their own farsightedness that made them to consider such a Nobel cause which continues to stand out as example. Undoubtedly they could be called 'gnaana daataas' of the village. That was when I wrote about "Mugguru Ammala Mudunuru (Muddunuru of three mothers)". In 1952, Kakani Venkaratnam on being elected to the District Board as president, came to our village and visited the houses of two rich landlords and tried his best to motivate them to donate land for the playground of high school and for a hospital. After three hours of persuasion, only one had agreed to donate half an acre for play ground. The other landlord with no children did not yield. He invested instead in a rice mill in nearby Gudivada and incurred considerable losses later. There after two other women donated land for village veterinary hospital. Then, of course, my mother who worked for years cleaning a dozen lanterns and fill them with kerosin every day to ensure that two informal adult class were held in the two harijanwadas of the village. And yet the contribution and potential of women is never amply acknowledged anywhere even with in the village as in the case of my village.

Library for children

I am now setting up in my newly built house in the village 'Nagulapalli Seetaramayya Pillala Grandhalayam' (in my father's name) with biographies of all kinds of people and social anthology books in Telugu to be handled by only women. In that process I discovered a couple of other women who donated their wealth for the cause of the village. I'm amazed about the role played by women in earlier years in enriching the village. When Mahatma Gandhi visited the village in 1942 it was women who donated on the spot whatever they were wearing. Later, it was women who volunteered to Gora's (Goparaju Ramachandra Rao, an atheist) experiments against blind beliefs. Even the pregnant women came forward. It is astonishing that today one does not see women playing such catalyst role. Of course, today people have become self-centred and the trend is becoming more visible. Despite women are far more community concerned and foresighted they are not locally active or involved even in the case of those panchayats with women functionaries thanks to an Act. Men continue to be vocal and dominant irrespective of educational levels. All this perhaps because confidence in government has declined and the governments and those in power strive to make people dependents, not voluntary participants. Self help groups have brought in women a new found consciousness and even identity overcoming

indulgence of political bosses. Despite reservation for women all across there is hardly any evidence of their role in public policy formation. Movement against alcohol several years ago in rural Andhra was lead by women and it fizzled out once they were eased out. Women can revive the grace of villages.

Dr Shiek Mehbuba Basha's new book, *Mahila Chitenyam* in Rayalaseema brings out the kind of role women activists played earlier. Kadapa Rama Subbamma, for example, who chaired in 1939 Andhra Mahila Sabha anniversary, emerged thereafter as a firebrand reformist and inspired many other women. Around the time so many women in many districts of Rayalaseema were in the forefront. What happened to all those women reformists and movements they led have no trace today. This makes me curious. I see a connection between these districts remaining aloof socially depressed and disappearance of women from the forefront in these villages.

Books are the best bet

My experiment with television and computer in class room of middle school, each for one year, made me to go for "children books" in schools. At the end of third year I had come to believe that reading books, which have nothing to do with class syllabus, is a game changer of the young. If only if we can make children read specially selected books before they go out of high school, it could change the mind set of children towards future and prepare them for a more responsible lifestyle and active citizenry role which schools and temples are not able to inculcate. During my child hood Sivalayam and Ramalayam in the village were play places for children and adolescents. The temple premises were open. Only the inner idol room was kept locked for the Pujari to open every day for certain hours. Library was taken over by an Authority with prescribed hours, clashing with those of school such a way that no school going children can avail the library. And there are hardly any books which those of around 12 years would be interested. That is why I'm opening a children library in our house with books that children could choose from any time of the day.

They have to be liberated from the stranglehold of politicians, bureaucrats

Villages cannot be rejuvenated without making temples, libraries and schools liberated from political clutches and bureaucratic bungling. Temple premises should be open to children to play games. They become sensitive to rituals. Temples should have illustrated displays about significance of gods, nature and linkage to lifestyles. They should create inquisitiveness in children. Public libraries should attract children and become places of open interaction between children and elders in no holds barred

way. School library too should become a sought after place for school children. Schools should be inclusive and involve parents as much, and children should have opportunities to interact or engage in community concerns and services. School premises should be saved from political interests, engagements and encroachments. These are minimum but essential initiatives to unleash the potential of children of the village and this is also a sure way of rejuvenating villages.

Campuses should be open to children

The campuses of the three institutes of temple, library and schools in the village should be open for even young children to play and engage on their own. This opportunity should be totally their own, on their own, with no parents, teachers or village elders interfering but engage with them in occasional discussions on random topics. Open, indoor games should inculcate in children freewheeling thinking, explore some connection to environment, understand relationships. (A list of such games could be made available). At the same time children should get exposed to the atmosphere and sanctity of those places on their own. The campuses of these three institutes should not be taken over by the state govt. for some other activity or dominated by local political dadas.

Covid times, when schools are closed or uncertain, should be availed to make children engage in playing indoor games and reading books of their choice. Biographies are likely to be more interesting and inspiring.

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