

On being a teacher

by Suchita Malik

THE scene is the inside of a college staff-room during a supposedly free period. For a casual passerby, it is the rapturous sound of laughter, audacity of the jokes cracked by teachers or the aroma of coffee brewing and the casual invitations for a hot cup of tea since the class has been skipped – an opportunity always welcome. On going in, one comes across a leisurely, chirpy atmosphere, bordering on even frivolous merry-making where a “take-it-easy” attitude reigns supreme. Teachers barge in and out with folded attendance registers and shabby looking books in their hands, feigning the impression of being busy.

The conversation of the “sitting members” hinges on a range of subjects of current interest – the popular songs and movies, the running seasonal sales in the city, the exhibition of sarees, the coming fashion show by famous models and the common problems regarding children, their frightening unit-tests, not to forget their jarring food habits, and the ways of outsmarting dear hubbies in ego hang-ups and petty skirmishes.

Enters a smart woman of about 30, looking chic in fabulous silk saree, sporting a trendy, hanging wallet on one shoulder, innocuous looking books in the other hand, a mischievous glint in the eyes and a naughty smile on the lips. She happens to be in a good mood as the students have not turned up for the class. She can relax in the staff-room enjoying

her customary “cup of tea”.

Suddenly, aware of her presence, Arti calls out to her. “Hey! are you back already? Another bunk, I suppose. How lucky”.

“Yes, yaar! The students were more interested in ‘Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?’ even otherwise, teaching becomes so boring in the morning in those dingy, drab-looking classrooms sans electricity, sans the right mood and the atmosphere,” Asha went on with her list of complaints as usual!

“You are right. It can be really jarring. You see! After all, we have to rush in hastily after finishing all the domestic work, packing tiffins and despatching children and hubby to their schools and office. By the time we reach the college, we are tired and as lethargic and dreamy as Tennyson’s ‘Lotus-Eaters’. I am not left even with the strength for standing for the full period, let alone teaching and that too shivering in cold”, Arti went on non-stop, munching a bread pakora and enjoying a sip of tea simultaneously.

By now, the conversation picks up and many others join in, voicing their innermost constraints and fears. A general discussion on our “faulty” education system ensues, the topic being a most favourite pastime.

The discussion almost comes to a standstill as a group of students are seen entering the staff-room. They probably want to have a word with their English teacher. The teacher

concerned goes out to satisfy their curiosity and comes back soon, looking desolate. “What’s the matter with you, Anjali?” Why do you look so desperate?” called out Madhu from a corner, pretending to be busy with her Plan Register.

“Oh! look at these nincompoops! What will they do in their exams! They don’t understand a word of what I speak in the class. On top of it, they want me to teach Julius Caesar in Punjabi. It’s ludicrous, isn’t it? What do they think I am!”

For once, I seem to be in agreement with her. Communicating with students and stepping down to the level of their understanding is laudable as a concept and agreeable to a point, but paraphrasing Julius Caesar in the local dialect in rather stretching it to an extremity.

“Was it necessary to impose on them a language they do not feel at home with and had absolutely no interest in?” I pondered. Or, perhaps, our system of higher education is too lax and general, and our students do not really think seriously before making a choice. Like the common rap and rhymes, the choice of subjects too has become trendy and fashionable; the students prefer largely what is in vogue these days. With casualness becoming more and more pronounced among the students as well as their teachers, one can only exclaim: “India, thou have a bright future!”