**[Equal education](https://www.dawn.com/news/1597161/equal-education)**

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THE 2020 Global Teacher Prize, sponsored by the Varkey Foundation and Unesco, and worth a million dollars, has been awarded to Ranjitsinh Disale, a primary school teacher in a village in Maharashtra where he teaches girls from tribal communities. There were more than 12,000 contenders from over 140 countries.

Two things stand out about the winner. First, Ranjitsinh learnt the local language to translate class textbooks into his pupils’ mother tongue. Just this confirms that he is wiser than all our ministers of education and policymakers put together which makes him deserving of the highest recognition.

Second, Ranjitsinh belongs to the rare category of those who think beyond themselves. There were 10 teachers on the shortlist from which he was declared the winner. Ranjitsinh gave away half the million-dollar prize to the other nine on the list because “Their incredible work is still worthy... If I share the prize money with the rest of the teachers they will get a chance to continue their work... and we can reach out and lighten the lives of as many students as we can.”

One cannot admire Ranjitsinh enough for his wisdom as a teacher and vision as a reformer, and he has been lauded the world over. The Dalai Lama appreciated his sharing the prize and remarked that “Educating young children, especially from poor and needy backgrounds is perhaps the best way to help them as individuals, and actively contributes to creating a better world.”

One cannot admire Ranjitsinh enough for his wisdom and vision.

Much as I appreciate individuals like Ranjitsinh, it is the unquestioned scaling up of their initiatives to the presumed creation of a better world that leaves me unconvinced. I wonder why the Dalai Lama, and others with his credibility, do not use the occasion to question a world in which millions of poor and needy children are dependent for their education on charity. What would have been the fate of the village children if Ranjitsinh had chosen some other career? And how many Ranjitsinhs would we need to create a better world by educating all the children from poor and needy backgrounds? As Maulana Rumi said centuries ago: “If you pour the sea into a jug, how much will it contain? Just one day’s portion.”

Should we accept a world in which the majority of children are beggars, seeking someone to help them, instead of choosers who can claim education as a right? Something is amiss if the way to making the world better is charity and not entitlement. Something is wrong if the better world is dependent on heroes like Ranjitsinh to repair the inequity for which their collective efforts can never suffice. The only real question is whether we are deceiving ourselves knowingly or unknowingly.

We know a right to education exists in the Constitution which says, “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law” and that “The State shall remove illiteracy and provide free and compulsory primary and secondary education within minimum possible period.”

We are also aware of the huge gap between promise and provision with 44 per cent of school-age children out of school. But the real issue goes beyond that: what is the quality of education being received by the majority of children in school? And should there be variation in the quality of education received by different children in the same country?

The focus on access needs to be moderated by a greater emphasis on quality. As things exist, one is not sure who is more fortunate — those who are out of school or those who are in it yet subjected to poor and misguided teaching.

Even when access is provided, the issues of quality of education and discrimination in access to quality will not go away. We would be forced to ask if every child is entitled to the same quality of basic education or whether that should be a function of parental wealth.

Should education be a marketable commodity in which some can buy a much better service while others can buy nothing at all and are dependent on charity, if they are lucky? Who will argue that this is how the world ought to be?

It should be obvious that an initiative like the Single National Curriculum cannot yield parity in access to quality education, much more a function of the ability of teachers which is allocated in the market by what a school can pay as salary, which itself is a function of what it charges as fees.

We will never arrive at a better world unless we address this question. Our genuine celebration at the award to Ranjitsinh should be tempered with genuine concern at the kind of world we have created that needs heroes like him.

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