

SOCRATES AND THE SCHOOL MASTER

(This passage is based on actual conversations between the Author, who calls himself 'Socrates', and some Gurgaon villagers. Socrates was a wise man of ancient Greece.)

VILLAGER: Socrates, you are trying to turn my village upside down and change everything.

SOCRATES: No, I am not, Zamindar, but when I see obvious evils and cruelties they make my blood hot and I must speak out.

VILLAGER: But you are forever complaining and scolding.

SOCRATES: Yes, I do complain a lot, but then I see a lot of evil.

VILLAGER: Don't you ever see any good.

SOCRATES: Yes, plenty of good, but there is no need to talk about the good. It is good and it is going on, and I am very pleased to see it. After all, the doctor is a stranger to the strong and healthy; his work is with the sick and the weak.

VILLAGER: Yes, but if you don't occasionally keep an eye on the healthy and strong, perhaps they will become ill one day.

SOCRATES: Yes, I admit that too, and it reminds me that you people are beginning to forget your good customs and are dropping them, and are sticking only to the bad ones. You are quick enough, too, to pick a bad custom, but very slow to pick up a good one. You took to smoking cigarettes like a duck takes to water, but what a job we had to make you dig pits for your refuse!

VILLAGER: Yes, good habits are difficult both to introduce and to stick to. Evil habits come almost instinctively, and the good old habits we are dropping very rapidly.

SOCRATES: Yes, in the old days the villager had good habits. But nowadays, what with motors and trains and education, I think he is beginning to lose his old virtues and not only keeps his old vices, but is finding a lot of new ones too. Just then the schoolmaster came up.

SOCRATES: Now, masterji, this is your job.

SCHOOL MASTER: What is this, Socrates? I am overworked enough already with my monthly returns and all the new things I am expected to know and teach.

SOCRATES: Masterji, you are the guardian of the good old customs.

SCHOOL MASTER: Yet another job for me. Shall I be paid an allowance for this?

SOCRATES: No, Masterji; but in your hands lies the future of the village. As you mould the character of these little boys and girls

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Quite a number of girls are now attending your village school, I am glad to see

—

So will be the future character of your village.

SCHOOL MASTER: My job is to teach reading, writing and arithmetic, with history and geography

SOCRATES: Never mind history and geography, masterji, your job is to educate, to train the character as well as to teach the brain.

SCHOOL MASTER: How can I Socrates, with all I have to do?

SOCRATES: You are a good man yourself, and you believe in preserving the good old customs and in weeding out the bad ones?

SCHOOL MASTER: Yes, I hope so.

SOCRATES: And you don't want your boys to pick up bad, new customs, do you?

SCHOOL MASTER: I hope not.

SOCRATES: Well, by your character and your actions, and by a little said here and said there, and by your attitude in always supporting the good and opposing the bad, you have to set a good example to your pupils and lead them into good ways.

SCHOOL MASTER: I can do that, Socrates, of course.

SOCRATES: Well, do it. It takes no time and costs nothing. You are a lamp of culture shining in the darkness of your village and you have got to keep your lamp bright.

SCHOOL MASTER: That is a great ideal for a poor village schoolmaster, but I will do my best.

SOCRATES: And your village will bless you in the days to come. These children are entrusted to you; see that you don't fail. Set a good example. That reminds me; yesterday, when I passed your school, I saw a lot of boys and girls wearing jewellery, and their hands and faces were so dirty I could hardly believe they had ever been washed since they were born. Why, some of the girls had so many wires and things in their ears that I thought they'd got some sort of machine over there.

SCHOOL MASTER: Yes, they always come like that.

SOCRATES: But, isn't it very silly putting jewellery on children, wasting money in this way, instead of spending it on soap and quinine, mosquito nets and so on ?

SCHOOL MASTER: Yes, it is very silly.

SOCRATES: Then what is the use of teaching them to read and write when they are in this condition?

SCHOOL MASTER: Well, they come to school to learn, and it is my job to teach them. These other things are none of my concern.

SOCRATES: Your job is to educate, and what is education without health and cleanliness?

SCHOOL MASTER: It is not much good, I agree, but it is not my job.

SOCRATES: Then whose is it?

SCHOOL MASTER: I don't know; not mine, anyway. Perhaps it's the parents' job.

SOCRATES: Yes, certainly; but they were only brought up as you propose to bring up these children. So they don't know. Who is to make a beginning, masterji?

SCHOOL MASTER: I don't know; it's not down in any of my school textbooks.

SOCRATES: Perhaps these books were written by people who didn't know village life and ways.

SCHOOL MASTER: Very likely, indeed.

SOCRATES: Well, what is the object of your school education?

SCHOOL MASTER: To teach reading and writing.

SOCRATES: And what is the object of reading and writing?

SCHOOL MASTER: I don't know, to make children able to read and write, I suppose.

SOCRATES: But there must be some final object of it all?

SCHOOL MASTER: I can't see any, unless it is to enable them to earn their living.

SOCRATES: But if they learn to waste their money on jewellery, where will their living be? And if they live in dirt, most of them will die of disease before they grow up.

SCHOOL MASTER: You confuse me, Socrates, with all your questions and theories.

SOCRATES: Well, I suggest that the object of education is to make the boys and girls better, and better able to live good, healthy, happy lives. They learn to read to enable them to learn how to improve their homes and farms.

SCHOOL MASTER: Yes, that must be the real object of education in the end, I suppose.

SOCRATES: Then surely the first lesson at school is not A B C, but to wash faces and eyes and hands; and not tower jewellery, but to use quinine and mosquito nets instead.

SCHOOL MASTER: These are excellent lessons certainly.

SOCRATES: Can you think of any better?

SCHOOL MASTER: No, certainly not.

SOCRATES: Then why not teach them?

SCHOOL MASTER: Then I shall fail to pass them through the classes and so lose my promotion.

SOCRATES: No, you won't masterji. This is practical education, and your boys and girls will never let you down if you teach them in this way. Their intelligence and keenness will increase so much that they will pass all the more quickly, and you will at last be giving them some real education, preparing the children for the great battle of life when they grow up. Just then a mother was heard scolding her

child and using language which made Socrates jump with horror. No one else took any notice.

SOCRATES: There's a horrible custom.

SCHOOL MASTER: What? I noticed nothing.

SOCRATES: Didn't you hear that filthy language?

SCHOOL MASTER: Oh, that's nothing. I use that to my pupils as terms of affection, and everyone uses it, both to children and to cattle. No one means any harm by it.

SOCRATES: But do you really think it is right to use these filthy words?

SCHOOL MASTER: No, I suppose I don't; but we mean nothing by it, and no one minds and it does no harm, I daresay.

SOCRATES: Of course it does harm and you know it perfectly well, masterji.

SCHOOL MASTER: Well, I suppose it does when you come to think of it.

SOCRATES: Then stop it and teach your pupils to avoid filthy language. How can you ever command respect and how can your children ever respect their sisters and mothers, when you all use such disgusting words?

SCHOOL MASTER: You are very particular, Socrates, but you are really right. This habit of using filthy language is most deplorable.

SOCRATES: Then set yourself to kill it, at any rate in your village. Why, when I was a boy, if I said anything dirty, my mother took soap and a brush and scrubbed my tongue to clean it. I can tell you I soon learnt to avoid using nasty words!

SCHOOL MASTER: I think if we used that method here, we should soon scrub away the whole of the tongues, not only of our children but of ourselves too.

SOCRATES: Well, make a beginning, anyway. It is wonderful what power you schoolmasters have if you will only use it properly.F.L. Brayne [Adopted from Socrates in an Indian village]

Glossary

1. Instinctively: Naturally; without thinking.
2. Quinine: A medicine which is used against malaria.
3. Disgusting: Very unpleasant.
4. Deplorable: Very bad.

QUESTIONS:

1. By what example does Socrates show that the villagers do not pick up good customs quickly?
2. Why has the schoolmaster a great responsibility?
3. How should the school master set an example to pupils?
4. What expression does Socrates use to suggest this example?
5. Why does Socrates complain about jewellery?
6. Why can parents not look after their children's health and Cleanliness?
7. What is the object of reading and writing?
8. What do you understand by 'Practical education'?
9. Why did Socrates 'jump with horror'?

10. What happened to Socrates in his youth if he used bad language?