

The Return of the One-Room Schoolhouse

By Urmila Devi Dasi

"SO MANY COMPUTERS!" That's usually the first comment from someone visiting my classroom for the first time. Then, "Do you teach all ages at the same time in this one room?"

Like most children being educated in Krsna consciousness today, our students here in North Carolina have a one-room schoolhouse. Even in Krsna conscious schools with several classrooms, students at different grades or levels are generally taught together.

Because most parents, at least in the West, feel that one-room schooling is outdated, even primitive, you might wonder whether a teacher who teaches children of different grades in a one-room schoolhouse could do as well as teachers in a huge modern school complex.

To understand the value of one-room schooling, we need to look at history. When most people lived in villages, each school had so few children that students couldn't be divided by age. So teaching them together was a convenience. But parents, students, and communities also understood that the main curriculum was the teacher rather than the syllabus or the textbook. The teacher's personality permeated the school. The teacher gave each student personal attention. And the students were expected to learn character and behavior by working under a moral and self-controlled teacher, rather than by attending a "values clarification" course.

But industrialization pulled together large numbers of people to work in factories. So instead of a village school with twenty or fifty children, suddenly you had a town or city school with five hundred. How to teach them?

Apart from that, most students in a one-room school did chores at home. But when father and even mother shifted from the farm into the office or factory, life at home changed. No longer were there cows to milk, fields to tend, or corn to harvest.

Before, children not only learned adult duties but brought in money. A family could count its wealth by the number of children, as each child added to prosperity and security. Later, in the industrial era, families still needed their children to help with money, so the children too went to the factory. But gradually people realized that factory labor wasn't right for children, and countries passed laws to keep children in school. This not only made for more children in each school; it changed the makeup of the class. In the rural one-room schoolhouse, children mainly interested in crafts or farm work had left school after a little education. But now these children were forced to stay in school until their sixteenth birthday.

The present Western school system, therefore, has not come about because we've found a better way to teach. Rather, it has grown from cities and factories. And like so many adjustments to the industrial revolution, it has simply created more problems.

With the crowding of many students into one school, the concept of master and pupil is practically gone. The student is no longer expected to serve and emulate his teacher, because

education now aims at a set of "learning objectives" decided by a committee of parents and union workers. Modern schooling is built on textbooks, not teachers. And even if a teacher has high moral and spiritual character, for him to put across his ideals to the students might offend some of the hundreds of families involved. After all, the school a child attends is not the one parents choose because of the teacher they admire but the one that falls in the school district where the parents live and work.

Schools responded to having large numbers of students by grouping them by age and then teaching all students of the same age the same things at the same time. But children learn at different speeds. So in a modern class of thirty students, maybe two can follow what the teacher is saying. The rest are either frustrated or bored. The students who can't follow become discipline problems, the frustrated ones often falling behind, later to become society's misfits.

In the days of the one-room schoolhouse, no one heard of a "generation gap." But today's fifteen-year-old student can avoid contact with most adults and with most young children. So we now have subcultures of children and teenagers with their own music, language, customs, and styles of clothing and hair. Denied an opportunity to mingle with all ages, children and young people lose a sense of responsibility and of their own place in life. For example, instead of helping adults, teenagers see them as being almost a different species.

Forcing children who aren't book lovers to stay in school brings the level of the whole school down. In an agrarian society, the upper levels of schooling were intellectually challenging. Any student who wasn't academically inclined would leave school to farm or take up a trade. But to keep students from the factory, the curriculum now has to "dumb down" to match the students. This is a matter of public record. In the United States the reading books used in 1900 for the eighth grade are now rated for twelfth grade; those used in 1900 for twelfth grade are now rated upper college. The subjects taught have also changed. How many modern schools teach logic and rhetoric?

Far from holding children back, a Krsna conscious one-room school revives much of what was healthy in a simpler society and gives you graduates better educated from every point of view. Students form a close bond with their teacher, whom they see as a model, and form friendships and a way of life based on higher values, rather than on what their peers are doing. Students learn at their own pace, with solid understanding. And if they have the aptitude, they can enter into deep spiritual and intellectual realms without being held back by students less interested.

So we shouldn't be surprised when we read what kind of teaching Srila Prabhupada wanted for ISKCON's first school, in Dallas. As related in *Srila Prabhupada-lilamrta* by Satsvarupa Dasa Goswami: "The best system of education ... was as he had known it as a child: one teacher in a room with up to fifty students of various ages and aptitudes. One at a time the students would come to the teacher's desk, receive guidance and a further assignment, and then return to work."

Yet we are not entirely going back to a former age: in our one-room schoolhouse we keep up the tradition of personal tutoring, while practically every student learns devotional and academic subjects with the aid of a computer.

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