



Good morning!

Mr. Ayaaz Khan Sir, Principal Mr. Yash Saxena, ORA President, Yogesh Wadhwana, fellow RKCians, ladies and gentlemen!

Thank you very much Ayaaz Sir for the very generous & unconventional introduction.

Some time, I feel, the Universe bestows unexpected honours. My dearest friend, Shahid Siddiqui was undoubtedly Madam's all time favourite student, and like a godson to her. Sid was an engaging speaker and a versatile actor, & if he were with us today, he'd have been today's ideal, unanimous choice for the first memorial lecture. Another great choice would have been Bharat Avalani, our global Old RKCians roving ambassador, who stayed in closest touch with Madam through the years. But he decided that he wanted to bring the house down with the curtain call. And then Yogesh, Kiran and my NCR ORA friends decided, in my absence, that I should be the designated speaker for this inaugural event. So, pretty much, by chance and circumstance, the Universe conspired & here we are – it is an absolute honour bestowed on me to deliver the Inaugural Keynote Rati Cooper Memorial Lecture on "Teachers as Role Models – Attributes of the

Great Ones!”

So, how do I start to talk about the larger than life persona of Madame Rati Cooper, whose physical reality was of this gentle, diminutive, charismatic being, who loved wearing black sarees with a paisley pattern, who could coax the most incredible symphonies from her piano, who had studied music in London and USA and yet loved her life in Lahore, Bombay and Rajkot, who enjoyed wearing different fragrances, enjoyed hot rus-chawal Parsi cuisine, eaten with a genteel flair using a fork and knife always, and yet someone who left an indelible impression on our lives. How did she do this?

It set me thinking about what were the attributes of a great teacher?

In that context, I came across a small video recently which I'd like to share...

**Can we have the video please? ....**

Powerful? That was just a 4 minute example of how a teacher impacts students, and inculcates values that students will live by, and never forget!

Madam was one of those who lived by her values. I reflected, dug into my memories, and also asked Perin about Madam's top 5 values, which she lived by and demonstrated in simple behaviors.

These were:

Honesty, Truth, Humility, Generosity, and Respect & caring in her inter-personal relations.

For example:

- She would always insist on paying for her Mother's and Perin's stay at the College when they visited Rajkot.
- She always articulated what was in her mind, and expected truth from all around her.
- Her humility & modesty: There was nothing over the top in her dress pattern, her jewellery, her demeanour – none of the "I am the Principal sort of standoffishness".
- She would laugh and joke with her staff at the College – as if they were part of her family. Never talked down to anyone.
- Generosity and compassion – She would give her last penny (and was often broke herself), to anyone in a hard luck situation, give her fan or cooler to comfort someone's elderly mother, move heaven and earth to get a deserving person admission into a good institution, or persuade powerful people to give to the needy.
- Always looking to bring out the best in her students, Madame would give generously of herself and her time. I remember her preparing us for the English Recitations for the annual Prize Day. She would work

with us tirelessly, rest periods, late evenings, after dinner and also share her fish and tartar sauce to satiate our ever-hungry stomachs.

- She named the school magazine, Endeavour, to embody quite rightly what she expected from each one of us.
  
- Madam would do a host of little things which would show that you mattered as a person. She had an amazing memory and could recall details about her students from decades ago. At one lunch we, the NCR Old RKCians, had hosted for her in Delhi, it was mindboggling to see how she remembered each person's name, even though she was meeting many of us after decades. (I am sure many of us in this audience have witnessed that!)
  
- When we were building our home in the hills, she thoughtfully sent us, all the way from Lahore, an elegantly engraved name plate for our home, seeds for our garden, and a beautifully embroidered Welcome sign.
  
- Her ability to establish trusting relationships was remarkable, due to her very caring nature, and genuine interest in people, which she demonstrated by being there, in many different ways. When my dearest friend, Shahid Siddiqui, was discovered with terminal cancer, she repeatedly visited Bangalore, and was there for him and his family till the end.

- Besides these values, her love for the English language was passionate and infectious. She made sure our pronunciation was perfect, and that we continually learnt new words!...simple methods...she gave us all a small pocket notebook, and our weekly challenge was to learn three new words, use them in sentences and share them in class.
- Madam's creativity is legendary - she made magic with plays like Hiawatha and Dick Turpin, having limited resources, yet using her creativity to use the various backdrops of the school – the big peepul tree, or creating a small stream from the old well opposite the gymnasium, or using the steps and arches of the tennis courts - to bring these stories to life! Years later, when we founded Theater Action Group – TAG, in Delhi, or I had to make 3 corporate films for Hewlett-Packard, with limited budgets, I always got inspiration from thinking about how Madam would have handled those creative challenges! I believe the Rati Cooper bust, at the front of the Kala Bhavan named after her, is a befitting tribute to these special qualities she enshrined.

Besides Madam, allow me to share about the attributes of two other role models from school, who, I am sure, have had a significant impact on many of us, in terms of what we grew up to be and achieve:

- Mr. Peter Rogerson, our late principal from 1963-1991. [L]  
[S]  
[E]  
[P] Rogy, as we affectionately called him, was every student's idol! And why wouldn't he be?! An ex Army Captain, handsome, strong, fit, who

could beat us at any game - be it cricket, hockey or football. An aficionado of Western Classical Music, and the creator of the famous Torchlight Tattoo, which transported us to another realm! A versatile pianist, who could play any tune after hearing it just once! And what a lovely wry sense of humour!

I remember, that once I yawned in his English class. He threw a small piece of chalk at me, and remarked with a smile..."Well done Himanshu!...only half a tonsil was visible!" Another time, when Anil Patel and I had raided his larder, and messily used his Marmite paste, he called us out on it the next morning, taught us how it should actually be eaten, and also, of course, punished us with fatigue parade after lights out.

- And then there was KS Lavkumar of Jasdan.<sup>[SEP]</sup> Lavbha, as he was affectionately called by us boys, besides being later recognised as one of India's leading ornithologists, was one of the most maverick and unorthodox housemasters in the history of our school! Who else, would think of taking a bunch of boys up to the roof at 1am in the morning, to lie on their backs, and marvel at the stars and learn about the Milky Way? <sup>[SEP]</sup> Who else would think of removing the fear of the dark from young minds, by waking us up at midnight, and challenging us to run, one at a time, to the darkest corner of the grounds and get back a peepul leaf? This dealing with fear, the unknown, and mustering courage to face fear turned out to be a hidden boon when, as a Human resources Manager, I had to manage violent trade union strikes and situations.

Friends, how fortunate were we, to have had teachers who were influential role models. Madame, with all the incredible values and attributes I have described earlier, Rogerson Sir, a visionary and an inspiration to develop multiple facets of our personality, Lavkumar Sahib and his knowledge of environment, our culture and heritage, and encouraging us to stand up and make a difference. There are many other teachers too, who a number of us have written about in our alumni exchanges, most recently Tejas Vakil about Ms. Badheka & the value of D-E-A. Not to forget, we have a live role model amongst us today, Ayaaz Sir, who's been is an RKCian and an outstanding teacher.

Well, what is common about all of them is that they possessed the unique ability to shape our minds, inculcate qualities that we would grow up introjecting in our behaviours, qualities we emulate consciously or which have possibly become second nature, which affected us in a way that made us want to be and continue to aspire to be better people. I believe these role models exemplified dedication and passion, fostered positive attitudes, respect, and values which showed us how to live with integrity, hope, determination, empathy and compassion. They encouraged us to explore our interests, discover our strengths, pursue lifelong learning modeling a growth mindset, and imparted life skills such as effective communication, teamwork, how to navigate challenges and make a positive contribution to society.

As we recognize and appreciate the significant impact our teachers had on us, let's dwell on this for a few minutes and look at whether this vital core support exists in shaping our next generation.

Three of the most striking challenges impacting the current education scenario , the educator-teachers, in our country are:

- 1. The prolific widespread use of mobile internet services**
- 2. The commoditization of education**
- 3. The evolution and accessibility of Artificial Intelligence Applications, e.g. Chat GPT.**

**1.The widespread availability and use of the internet**, while having its blessing of immediate access to data, connectivity & communication with people, also has its disadvantages of information overload, misinformation, privacy risks, addiction, social isolation, and negative health impacts, to name a few. Also, sites like Wikipedia, Google, tools like Siri & Alexa raise the challenge for teachers to establish their knowledge credibility and hold the attention of their students. Not just teachers then, but also we as parents need to role model usage of the internet responsibly, fact check and not be conveniently dependent.

**2. The commoditization of education** has both constructive as well as depressing impacts on education and educator-teachers.

70% of India's population is under 25 years old. It is obvious that ensuring good education can ensure a fruitful workforce leading to a prosperous economy. And there being a huge gap between supply and demand for education, the commoditization of education was a natural outcome.

However, this commoditization has lessened the real spirit of education, weakened the student-teacher relationship, weakened the rationale for education, and provided shortcuts of capsule learning, as opposed to the curiosity of being.

There appear to be three significant problems with the commoditization of education:

- The first and the most obvious is that an education leading to the grandeur of ideas, is replaced by education as a means of money-making, thereby leading to small mindscapes.
- Secondly, a commodity by its very nature is a finished, packaged thing. Commoditized education therefore entails handing over packaged things called “learning” to the students, which necessarily precludes their asking any questions, being critical, or engaging with the received ideas, or being creative and original.
- The third obvious problem with commoditized education is that it ignores the role of education in inculcating the values underlying the essence of our nation - democracy, secularism, social and economic equality, gender equality.

### **3.The third challenge for today’s teachers is The evolution and accessibility of AI Applications, e.g. Chat GPT:**

While AI has multiple advantages yet to be discovered, as in the breakthroughs in the field of medicine and health diagnosis and cures, apps such Chat GPT(Generative Pre-trained Transformer) used in the field of education have opened new possibilities, and offer advantages in terms

of conversational assistance, language comprehension, and learning facilitation. One click and the class lesson plan is prepared! One click and a supposed learned thesis is created! One click and a piece of verse is created. Here is what was generated in seconds, when I entered ‘verse on teachers as role models’...

“In the realm of knowledge, they stand tall,  
Guiding us through life’s winding hall.  
Teachers, role models, with hearts so kind,  
Their wisdom and compassion intertwined.”

“In classrooms, where greatness takes flight.  
There dwell teachers, shining bright.  
With passion, they impart,  
Knowledge straight from the heart,  
Great teachers, beacons of light!”

Quite brilliant, huh? One click, and I become a creative poet! One click & the homework is done! Just shows that AI Apps, such as Chat GPT, also present certain perils. Care has to be exercised to mitigate the risks associated with misinformation, bias, lack of contextual understanding and ethical concerns. It diminishes the need for human interaction, critical evaluation and challenges responsible usage. It undermines the Educators Autonomy and Professionalism. Also, it could lead to easy, superficial learning, scamming studies, laziness, and the false pretense of intellectual development – as those two verses fraudulently could make me out to be a poet!

My friends, as we navigate the complexities of an ever-changing world, it is imperative to safeguard the true essence of education from the perils of the internet, of commoditization and the irresponsible usage of AI, while being enlightened enough to use them for the true advantage that they can provide. This entails new learning and a new mindset for teachers too – the need to understand the new tools available, their advantages, and their shortcomings, and the discernment to know when they can actually benefit the learner, or when a more human interaction is needed.

By valuing the holistic development of our next generation, promoting inclusivity, nurturing intellectual curiosity, and respecting the contribution and autonomy of educators-teachers, we can reclaim their transformative power and ensure that our teachers remain beacons of enlightenment and empowerment for generations to come. Just as Madam Rati Cooper was for us – a superlative role model!

As I thought of these great beacons of light, I was reminded of the last verse of one of my favourite poems - Henry Newbolt's **Vitae Lampada – The Torch of Life!**

“This is the word that year by year  
While in her place the School is set  
Every one of her sons must hear  
And none that hears it dare forget.  
This they all with a joyful mind  
Bear through life like a torch in flame  
And falling fling to the host behind –

‘Play up! Play up! And Play the game!’

And so I do hope, that each one of us, in whichever way we can, will continue to “Play up! Play up! And Play the Game” and uphold our school moto:

‘Yashya Buddhi Balam Tasya!’

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