

Role modeling and idolization

When people in their forties, go on a nostalgic trip they invariably talk of giant personalities that towered the social, educational & political life of their times. Then they lament about the ill fate of today's generation, since they have no ideal role models to look up to.

One may tend to agree with the elders on one count, that there is dearth of such colossal personalities on our horizon today. But if one scrutinizes the psyche of generation apparently harping of the influences of these role models, then two facts come out. One, the process of role modeling in pre-independence India had a solid basis of unflinching devotion and thus the role model was more often that not "THE IDEAL". If you were a Gandhian then you would not dare to be a Leninist. If Veer Sawarkar was your role model then it could only be him. This necessarily restricted the 'range' of models for the youth then. Even if they secretly adored other role models out of purview of the chalked path by their 'ideal man'; they would keep this adoration buried deep down their self.

The second fact is, the followers i.e. people who modeled themselves on their 'role models' did not scrutinize their role models with candid probing. Such questioning always worked against the very idea of 'group acceptance'. Such questioning attitudes hardly emerged as voices of dissidence, partly because the personalities concerned were undoubtedly great if not faultless. (Contrast this with today's leaders in political life and you may get a partial answer, why discontent quickly escalates to dissidence.)

Today's complexities of social & cultural life have in a way made the old concepts of 'role models' obsolete. Because, this concept meant, idolizing a ideal personality. What may be message of the changing world is; 'role model' on a given asset of one's personality rather than idolizing the entire personality. We may find ten enchanting qualities in ten individuals and therefore all ten can be our 'role models' without any commitment on our part towards them as individuals. Our commitment is towards the virtues that these people have.

If you do go by this logic then there is no shortage of personalities who excel in either one or more fields of human endeavor. In fact, Nelson Mandela (statesman), Michael Crichton (author), Kamala Hasan & Vishwanathan Anand can all be my role models. Only I have to be sure of what qualities I am looking for in them. Today I can have a global range of role models.

In fact I have my own doubts, based on my theoretical construct that the age of 'Giants amongst men' with its traditional meaning is over. I doubt whether we now will ever have a Gandhi or a Freud again. I also doubt if they will get those many devoted followers even if they are reborn.

One may say, that in reality, in the spiritual & religious field the teachers are getting many many followers that too apparently devoted and committed ones. Is this not in contrast with what I have said before?

Study these cult followers with some deft probing and you will find that very few are actually using the process of role modeling. Then what is the crux of role modeling?

It means, you identify a desired quality or set of qualities in a person and try to internalize it with its value structure. You accept this value structure after close scrutiny and once you get it, you need not idolize the teacher, although you would maintain reverence and respect for him. Most of our spiritual teachers today are made into demigods and idols. This therefore is not role modeling.

In fact, role modeling goes against idolization. Idolization has been an easy escape for human society, throughout the world, when it becomes difficult to confront the value -structure, that individual stood for. With idolization the 'lip-service & ritualization' (read, ceremonies, seminars - statues - stamps) both become the order of the day. We have done this in our social life gloriously for leaders like Gandhiji.

Adolescents and youth at the turn of this century should better inculcate the real meaning behind role modeling before they start searching for that illusive species. Getting into the trap of idolization leaves ugly scars on their minds, when they discover that most idols have clay feet like the rest of us.