

Self-education

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THE time that we live in is marked by so many conflicts and contradictions that it is difficult, to say the least, to arrive at a consensus as to what may be considered education in the true sense of the term. You and I may have diametrically opposed views on the subject and yet may end up in the same educational institution, pursuing the same discipline of study, graduating from the institution with the same degree. As we enter the job market, we often realize, more than ever before, how irreconcilably different our views are regarding the most basic values of life and of education. Therefore, at the work place, we often have to get introduced to each other in a completely different light all over again. Why this gaping chasm between two people who went to the same school or institution to study? Why don't we have a common ideological ground that will make us comrades at work and not rivals trying to outshine and outdo each other? If we can't answer this simple question, I don't think we have earned the right to deliver lectures, hold seminars, and publish books on education. As it is, thanks to science and technology, we already have volumes of words, information piled upon the poor subject education!

But what do we really mean when we use the word "education"? More often than not, you'll hear people argue, in an age of mindless materialism and shameless commercialism, that education is a means to an end, not an end in itself. What they mean is, it's ok to use education as the most powerful tool to dominate, suppress and oppress others. And we have plenty of evidence all around us to prove that this is the case. No wonder the American novelist Saul Bellow wrote, "Intellectuals are the worst offenders in society." (Seize the Day)

This concept of education being merely a means to an end is then the "dark side of the Moon". Because there are always people, and they happen to be the majority in any society, who are not academically gifted or even academically inclined, for that matter. Does

that mean they are meant to be puppets in the hands of people who happen to have read more books, amassed more information regarding the "ways of the world"? The yawning gap between the "educated" and the "uneducated" in our country is an intimation that there is something fundamentally wrong in our approach to education. Where should we then look to see the "bright side of the Moon"?

Well, we can save ourselves the pain of digging deep as far as finding a workable definition is concerned, thanks to people like Rabindranath Tagore! Having mentioned his name, I find myself blushing. No, not because I am in love with his music and his poetry. But because looking back to my school, college and university days I shudder to think how ridiculously inadequate our academic encounter has been with people of his stature, how precious little we have been told about a man who shook the whole world with his radical views on education. In each class we have been thrown mere morsels from the grand feast of ideas and ideologies that this extraordinary man gave shape to.

Perhaps, before cooking up new theories on education or borrowing the western views and imitating their pedagogical practices wholesale, we would do well to listen to what the gifted sons of our own soil had to say about education and its true aim. One truly wonders why these wise pathfinders of humanity have been relegated so irreverently to the obscure corners of a few book stores, and to a few whimsical cultural gatherings. The answer is way more political than we are willing to admit. But paradoxically enough, it is these apolitical minds that can see through the endless twists and turns of politics to point toward the crux of the matter: education and its transformational powers.

What is this transformational power? Well, according to Rabindranath Tagore, as many of us can recall, education draws its strength from a whole range of Bhavarasas. It can be translated into English as the "metaphysical roots" of our being. To put it in less academic terms, our knowledge has to be

based on three things: our relationship with Nature, our relationship with each other, and both our and Nature's relationship with God, or the Transcendent Reality. Keeping this in mind the ancient India came up with the concept of 'Tapobon'. It is a sacred space, cradled in Nature, where students and teachers meet in due humility and reverence for Nature and everything around them. Education, in this type of setting is indistinguishable from Satsang or a gathering of sadhus who aspire to self-perfection and finally Self-realization.

How can we revive the concept of 'Tapobon' without being atavistic? We have to keep up with the times and be mindful of its manifold demands. But at the same time, we need strong foundation beneath our feet. Education, when pursued as a means to an end becomes a mirage which never delivers what it promises. In other words, we become more efficient, more skilled to compete with each other in a mad dash to reach the Moon, as it were. But where is our joy of knowing the world, where is our sense of fulfillment that comes from serving Nature and being in tune with her? Where is our humility that springs from service to our fellow brothers and sisters? If we are clueless, while we possess so many degrees and certificates from big institutions at home or abroad, and can't answer these simple questions, then certainly we are in dire need of questioning the very foundation on which our educational institutions are being built.

Education points to Self. The reason it is spelled with a capital "S" is because it is not the same as the petty amalgam of ego-induced thoughts and instincts that we call the "self". Self is everything the ego is not although the Self subsumes it. And here is the catch! Ego, not tempered by the light of the Self is simply a fragment, dissociated from the whole, divisive and ultimately self-destructive. So, an education that does nothing to promote this seeking cannot lead to Self-realisation.

What is this Self? This then is "the million-dollar question" for us before we invest millions of dollars trying to educate others. Ego wants to be exclu-



sive, Self is all-inclusive; ego wants to show off, Self wants to share; ego always reacts, Self responds sincerely to every situation and person and that's why its ways are often unpredictable.

With due humility, let me admit that I only have intimations, traces, subtle hints of this transcendent entity. That is to say, I have seen the laddoo but have not savoured its taste like a connoisseur and therefore I don't have a sweet aftertaste in my mouth as I write. I am every bit as confused, frustrated and helpless as most of my kindred souls. But at least after years of digging into different spiritual teachings and practices, I know where to look for the answer. No mean achievement, huh?

Jokes apart, like I said earlier, we still can fall back on the wise words of our illustrious ancestors when the going gets tough. And the going is getting tougher and tougher each day with corruption, failures in governance and leadership, widespread social unrest.

Where do we go from here? Rabindranath comes to our aid at this point with his piercing vision and says, "Ananda Tirtha is a place where knowledge (Gyan), work (Karma) and love (Prem) converge in divine harmony." ("Shakti", Shantinetan, vol. I-10). These volumes, and there are 17 of these, which encapsulate his thoughts on our metaphysical roots very poetically. I excerpted this line from one of his early-morning "Dharma talks," addressed to the students of Shantinetan.

What is this meeting place of Gyan, Karma and Prem? Karma that is selfless and in tune with our Gyan and Prem give birth to this Ananda Tirtha. Alas! we seem to keep coming back to square one again and again! For these terms have been so distorted through wrong use that even they are no longer self-explanatory. They have to be defined and re-defined if we are to make any headway on our path of education.

Gyan or knowledge is best

retained when it is pursued for the sheer pleasure of it. Everyone knows best about the person or thing they love the most, provided it is true love, not some sort of psychological dependence on others masquerading as love. Knowledge that is so intimate can point to Self.

Karma is a natural flow of Gyan in that it never yearns like a "cry baby" for attention or approval. It has its own justification. However, the last statement is like a double-edged sword: a weapon for destruction for those who are disconnected from the life-current of Gyan, or a powerful tool for creation in the hands of the knowing fellows. In other words, armed with Gyan Yoga, one can create as well as destroy. As for me, I shuttle between the two all the time. Rare are those moments of perfect balance!

And when that rare moment arrives, it lifts one way, way above all banalities and pettiness of the self. Prem is born

then. When your knowledge and your work coincide, in the sense that they are not contradictory anymore, a sacred space is created in you which is the still centre of all your knowledge and work. That is the innermost core of your Self. In that space, poetry, music and dance never lose their luster; they are eternally new, "ever green". But this is a place that is hermetically sealed for many of us. Why? Because we don't have the right kind of knowledge and the right kind of action that can qualify us for the "Big Party"; you can call the venue Brindaban, Boikunthaloy, Tao, Heaven or whatever your imagination wishes to call it. But you get the drift, don't you?

So after 32 years of my life, this is the Ananda Tirtha I have conjured up in my mind like a crazy sorceress. What about you? What kind of Ananda Tirtha does your Self point to?

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Patches on my identity

ELITA KARIM

SCENE 1:

IT was daytime partying for the teens in Dhaka. The little area in front of the small auditorium was packed with expensive cars, blaring loud music and young people of all shapes, sizes and

colours. It was a Thursday night concert where school students had gathered to hoot for their favourite bands. Though a very common scene for any other Dhakaite, these kids speaking a strange blend of English and Bangla, with ornaments pierced all over themselves, hair shaded in colours of pur-

ple and blue and clothes with tears and bizarre messages would definitely shock an outsider.

Scene 2: The country bursts with colour and hyperactivity. Dhaka is garlanded, as well, with the Pahela Baishakh frenzy. Speakers blare out

Bangla music, clusters of sari-adorned women stop by the bangle seller, men wearing Punjabi, dhoti and other traditional clothes linger around as well. Somewhere in the Dhanmondi, Gulshan and Uttara areas, the same groups of teens are now adorned in traditional clothes. Along with

their friends, they now wear a bindi, a freshly ironed kurta on top their tattered jeans, of course a patch of green and red tattooed on their arms with the help of paintbrushes.

Parents and elders are very familiar with the scenes mentioned above. Though the details being very minute, it is a wonder sometimes just observing these youngsters blending in and out, camouflaging accordingly; though somewhere down the line, maintaining a certain signature over their national identity.

Seventeen years old Samira Haque is a private A-level candidate and lives in Dhanmondi. Her daily routine includes going out to the popular eateries or the lake after coaching classes to meet her friends. She belongs to the young breed of people who seem to speak a strange version of Bangla, with occasional tit-bits in English, or sometimes the other way around. "We speak a mixture of English and Bangla, simply because we grew up in an environment where there was an existence of bilingualism," she says. "We go to a school where the medium of communication is English, whereas the rest of the time we communicate in Bangla, at home, on the streets, while shopping. With friends

around, you don't have to really think as to in which language I have to speak for better communication. We can speak in any of the two languages fluently. However, blending the languages does not mean that we are mixing up our identities. We know our history and are proud of the fact that the country fought for our Bangla language."

Shams Raiyan Khan, 21, says that the feeling of patriotism lies within oneself and there is no way to prove it by wearing the right kind of clothes, speaking the right version of the language and listening to the right music. "Ideas blend and change as generations come and go," he says. "This is an age when people are more into developing their personalities, careers and a global atmosphere around. We have to blend in with the international market, speak their language and sometimes even think like them. However, that in no way proves that we are letting go of our national identity."

Syed Rumman Jamil, a 23-year old, is a final year BBA student at a private university. As the General Secretary of his Culture Club, he and his executive body members are often on the run looking for new ways to present their programmes with touches of

culture and identity in them. For the occasion of Victory Day, their club plans to organise an exclusive show with music, colour and stories to tell about the history of the auspicious day. "The hardest part is looking for the right music," he says. "Surprisingly enough, original patriotic numbers like Ora amaar mukher kotha kayra nite chay, O amaar aat koti phul and Teer hara have just disappeared from the market. All we find are the re-made versions of the songs, which are definitely not always good enough for our presentations."

The young mind is like a sponge which takes in anything it sees, hears and feels. In the name of preserving our national identity, building a better country and patriotism, people today slit throats and police vans run over pickets on the street. There was a time when young students would stand hand in hand, holding their chests up for the bullets, protect their homes from the oppressors. There may come a time when the young mind will find it safer to just sit at home, shield themselves from the hypocrisy they see around them and take the next flight away from home.

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