Reading for Pleasure Reading for Knowledge

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MY ever enthusiastic and philosopher cum poet colleague Kamrul Hassan just returned from Bandung, Indonesia where he lead a four member team from our University to compete in the Asian Universities Debating Championship. Kamrul was not very happy as our team did not make it to the second round in the sixty team competition. We were the only university from the sub-continent. Attenue University of the Philippines took the championship trophy for the third time.

In a competitive situation I always try to know the causes of failure and the secrets of the winners. It was no exception here. Kamrul was of the opinion that our competitors were good in English and presentation but lacked the depth of the subject matter. I could not agree more. Over my more than three decades of experience in teaching and spending some wonderful moments with young people I have the feeling that the reading habit of young learners is in constant decline. Only sufficient reading can enhance ones depth of knowledge. There is no short cut. When my generation was growing up we did more of reading for pleasure which later on turned to the most dependable source of knowledge. Sometime I meet students who come to me to know what is the best way of gathering knowledge out side the text book. I instantly recommend that I cannot prescribe anything else other than reading. It could be any reading material, story books, magazines or news papers. I also tell them that they also have a very good additional source these days, i.e. many interesting educational TV channels like History Channel, National Geographic or Discovery and the like. I tell my student on regular basis one should watch and listen to BBC, CNN or Al-Jazeera. This will widen their horizon of vision; enrich their focus, vocabulary and depth of knowledge. So far the result has not been very encouraging. Young generation these days finds it more rewarding pushing the cell phone buttons or watching the trash Hindi serials. Sometimes I have a feeling that the cell phone culture is killing the creative faculty of our young generation. It has managed to promote the culture of 'talk more work less.'

In my days we neither had the cell phones nor the trash Hindi serials. Our only means of recreation was reading story books and playing out door games. We found quite possible to divide our time between school, games and reading for pleasure and reading for knowledge.

My school had a very rich library of story and reference books. Most of the schools did. In my text book of geography there was the story of the great discoverer Magellan. Our geography teacher one day brought a copy of Encyclopedia Britannica and read out from there about Magellan. That was my first encounter with Britannica. I still relish the time I spent with Britannica in my school library. Every class had a library period each week. This was the time when students would spend time in the library. The 'Nody. Boys" and the 'Hardy Boys' series were very popular amongst us. The later one was full of thrills and mysteries. Nody Boys were stories of some mischievous kids. Sure they were harmless.

In 1958 came our new Bengali teacher with handle bar moustache and a khaki jacket. Mr. Armand Roy just retired from the army and took up teaching. He saw action in Burma front during the great war he claims. The first day in class ends with his story of how they were busy fighting more with the menacing mosquitoes of the jungles of Arakan than the advancing Japanese. Next day the General Montgomery looking Armand Roy sir brought a copy of Tagore's Gitanjali in the class and started reciting from there. We were too young to understand anything from Gitanjali. Moreover this was an English medium school. But Mr. Roy made his recitation and explanation of the poem 'Bipode more rokka koro' so simple and interesting that I wanted a copy of Gitanjali of my own. My father got it for me. My father was a remarkable man. Though he never got much of education himself he always wanted his children to get good education. May his soul rest in peace. I still have the copy of the Gitanjali in my possession. The pages have become brittle. It is a treasure for me. Forty years on my love for Tagore always kept on getting stronger.

My city (in those days a town) Chittagong always had some very good public libraries. Talking about libraries you must start with British Council. British Council was British Information Service (BIS) those days. Tucked in a verandah of a two stored building owned by Chittagong Municipality in the southern side of Laldighi, BIS had a very rich Children's Section and had all the major English classics in retold form. We could borrow two books for a month. I would come back within a week as reading was fast. My math teacher once made me do the fag exercise because he found I was concentrating more on Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice' than my math in the class.