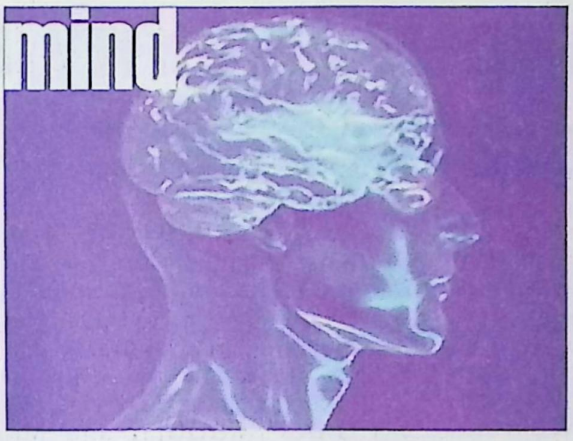
Mystery of mind



Dr Binoy Barman

PHILOSOPHERS often talk of mind as being independent of human body. Greek philosopher Plato preached his 'philosophy of idea', taking mind as real and brushing aside the visible world as mere illusion. Many other European photospheres like Descartes and Berkeley declared the supremacy of mind over body for its supposed importance in acquiring knowledge and playing greater role in projecting existence. This stream of argumentation is often termed as mentalism and the proponents as mentalists. The theory that is diametrically opposed to mentalism is referred to as behaviourism whose supporters are known as behaviourists. The mentalists lay utmost importance on the abstract concept of mind while the behaviourists peep inside the brain for explaining mental activities. Behaviourism is nearer to body while mentalism is poles apart from it. Mentalism is intimately associated with rationalism which puts life to reason while behaviourism holds an affinity with materialism which says only physical matter exists. The mind/body dualism is still a matter of great debate in science and philosophy.

Sometimes mind is equated with soul and sometimes differentiated. Spiritualists bring life down to soul. According to them, a creature is lifeless without soul. Soul resides in the body, which is its temporary house. It enters the body during birth and leaves it during death. It is not clear where it comes from and where it goes. Different religions tackle the problem differently. Some have made a permanent stock of souls in some unknown place of the universe while some have kept provision of their new creation. In any version of the scripture, soul is different from body and may be extracted from it. It is as abstract as mind. It cannot be explained mechanically. But we have the other story, fortunately, at our disposal, which comes out of scientific investigation.

Brain science and/or neurology says that there is a physical foundation of mind i.e., mind somehow hinges on body. Mind, which is mostly realised through consciousness, is closely connected to brain functions. All the neurons in the brain together create a network and give rise to consciousness, thought, desire, imagination and other mental phenomena. There cannot be any existence of mind, in fact, without the existence of brain and its neurons. Mind is expressed through the brain. No brain, no mind. With the cessation of the brain function, you also cease to think and feel. With the brain off your shoulder, you are only a 'mindless' entity!

We can look at the structure of the brain for understanding the mental activities. The brain has a lower part (brainstem) whose task is to keep human alive and higher part (cerebrum) which integrates humans with their environment. Cerebrum is involved with thought, decision, emotion and character. Specifically, frontal lobe is the seat of conscious ideas -- it draws images and memories together to form thoughts and plans. The cerebrum is divided into two hemispheres -- left hemisphere and right hemisphere. Left hemisphere is responsible for the tasks of language, poetry and mathematics, while the right hemisphere for music, art and visual capacity. The left hemisphere is specialised for intellectual, logical and analytical functions while the right hemisphere is more adapted for emotional, holistic and synthetic functions.

The deeply folded outer layer of the brain is called cerebral cortex. Prefrontal cortex supports higher human faculties such as planning and creativity. Motor cortex controls movement of organs and somatosensory cortex receives sensory information from all parts of the body. In the inner layer, thalamus directs attention and modulates levels of awareness; hypothalamus controls temperature, hunger and sexual urge; and hippocampus lays down memories. This is how different areas of the brain control our physical and mental activities. These constitute the physical basis of mind. Mind is no more an abstract entity. Even if, it is branded so, it is rooted in the labyrinth of brain. It is the centre of all unconscious reflexes and conscious efforts, misleadingly attributed to mind.

Human brain which is capable of producing a feeling of mind with self-identity or ego has taken its shape through long evolutionary process, of billion of years, making a journey from the unicellular to the multicellular structure, growing through gradual complexity. The more mass the brain has amassed, the more complex it has been in form and function. The greater complexity has given the brain power to solve more difficult problems. Solving problems one by one in existential struggle, the human brain has been transformed into a unique thinking machine now being centre of consciousness and other mental traits. The mystery of brain and mind is hidden in the survival history of the species.

Scientists inform us that the human brain is composed of about ten billion neurons. One loses about 1,00,000 neurons daily! But new neurons always take place of the lost ones. Ordinary people usually use 10% of the total brain. The greatest scientist of all time, Albert Einstein, is said to have used 15% of his brain. The great thinkers get their mind power from the power of brain, the grey matter. The more capable the brain, the better the mental work. Therefore when we fuss about the battle of mind, we in fact mean the battle of brain.

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