



The existing education system in Bangladesh does not allow children to learn independently and instead focuses on rote memorisation. PHOTO: ANDREW BIRAJ/REUTERS

Revisiting Vivekananda's philosophy on education

SUDEB KUMAR BISWAS

SWAMI Vivekananda insightfully defined education as “the manifestation of the perfection already in man.” Here, “perfection” refers to a range of abilities and talents that exist within us and “manifestation” refers to bringing those out.

According to Vivekananda’s philosophy of education, knowledge comes from within as it resides within us and our education system has to be able to discover it. So, it clearly differs from the idea of acquiring knowledge from the outside which is exactly what has been going on in the current education system.

If we take a deeper look at the existing education system in Bangladesh, we would see a rather discouraging scenario because we are not allowing our children to learn independently; instead we are teaching them by mostly feeding chunks of information through a mechanical process. Thus, we are making our children information banks and we believe that the more they can memorise, the more meritorious they are. Vivekananda had said, “Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life.” Therefore, education must provide “life-building, man-making and character-making assimilation of ideas.”

The four pillars of education, according to Unesco, are: (i) learning to know; (ii) learning to do; (iii) learning to live together; and (iv) learning to be. Learning to know refers broadly to general knowledge on various subject areas as well as lifelong learning. But when you look at our education system, you’ll see that this first pillar of education is not what learners are being familiarised with. They are kept away from practical exposure, i.e. to real-life situations, and they thus miss out on experiences that they can then apply and analyse and which they can use to create new knowledge. If we consider Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation), we will see that the current education system is mainly limited to knowledge and comprehension (to prepare students for examinations) which is considered as the most crucial for students to get

promoted to the next grade. The higher order cognitive skills are kept beyond their reach though our curriculum is meant to be competency-based; we have now introduced “creative questions” which ultimately go in vain as students end up memorising even creative answers beforehand.

Vivekananda has said, “Real education is that which enables one to stand on one’s own feet.” He strictly holds a view on the practical use of knowledge: “If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library.”

Swami Vivekananda is better known as a Hindu Indian monk and little known as an educationist though his philosophy of education is insightful and remains as relevant as ever. Long before Vivekananda put forward his views on education, “blank slate” was a popular term as theorised by John Locke (1632–1704). By this Locke meant that our children are born as blank slates and they then go on to

There remains a struggle to define the role of a teacher. Some sophisticated ideas are unfortunately still only in theory and far from being practised. Lots of efforts have been made to create child-centred classrooms to ensure learners’ autonomy and explore the individual potential of each child. Vivekananda clearly defines the teacher’s role and that is to remove the impediments to let children grow gradually in their own way. It’s like digging soil, watering plants and putting up a fence around to protect the plants from external threats so as to let them grow at their own pace. Vivekananda wanted to see teachers in close interaction with their students: “The only true teacher is he who can immediately come down to the level of the student, and transfer his soul to the student’s soul and see through the student’s eyes and hear through his ears and understand through his mind. Such a teacher can really teach and none else.”

Vivekananda viewed education as the most powerful means of social change that can lead us to self-

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learn behaviours from the environment that they live in. BF Skinner (1904–1990), American psychologist and behaviourist, argued that learning happens through the consequences of both reinforcements and punishments. According to this theory, the more children repeat, the better they learn and it does not make any special distinction between the learning of human beings and that of other animals. Vivekananda, however, without any laboratory experiments, proclaimed, “The external world is simply the suggestion, the occasion, which sets you to study your own mind, but the object of your study is always your own mind.”

realisation for being able to offer selfless services. His views couldn’t be more fitting for the existing education system. It is vital to perceive education in a more comprehensive manner to guide our future educational reforms and necessary policy change. Extracting lessons from the philosophy of education of Swami Vivekananda would benefit our next generation by making education more meaningful that would make each individual a “complete human being.”

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Delhi's psychedelic face masks

When fiction becomes our reality

ANINDITA ROY

I was in Delhi last month, partly for work and partly to devour the winter delicacies. Lately this city has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. One of them is air pollution—both the print and electronic media emphasising once more that it had again reached hazardous levels. Well, the poor air quality during winter months in Delhi and other large South Asian cities is not a new phenomenon. While the health impact is magnified due to atmospheric factors, humankind remains the main contributor. What was interesting for me was seeing the way people were getting ready for the air pollution; a variety of face masks came out as we landed in Delhi. The masks were of different shapes, sizes and colours. Some were paper thin, some were more sophisticated, looking like they were not only ready to combat the air pollution, but support the colonisation of Mars or defend the Siachen. I was wondering if the paper-thin masks would work beyond having a placebo effect. The holes in the thin paper masks perhaps do not do anything to reduce the exposure to the fine particles.

While waiting in the immigration queue, I noted that some women were carrying masks colour-coordinated with their shoes or shawls. It could be quite coincidental or maybe I imagined it because of the lack of oxygen in my brain due to the long flight.

After completing the formalities and leaving the airport, I observed people putting on their masks while waiting to be picked up. Inside the airport I was more amused by people’s preparation for dealing with the air pollution. The amusement diminished and bewilderment sipped in when I saw the number of people wearing masks outside. Where were we heading?

The masked faces reminded me of the famous short story “The Machine Stops” by E. M. Forster published in 1909. It is a chilling science fiction describing our role in a technology-dependent environment. In the story, humankind had lost the ability to live on the earth’s surface, and so individuals had to live underground, in boxes. People were given equipment to fulfil the basic requirements of life. The story is definitely more relevant today than it was when first published.

“Imagine, if you can, a small room, hexagonal in shape, like the cell of a bee. It is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. There are no apertures for ventilation, yet the air is fresh. There are no musical instruments, and yet, at the moment that my meditation opens, this room is throbbing with melodious sounds. An armchair is in the centre, by its side a

reading-desk—that is all the furniture. And in the armchair there sits a swaddled lump of flesh—a woman, about five feet high, with a face as white as a fungus. It is to her that the little room belongs.” (“The Machine Stops”, Chapter one).

A chill ran down my spine. I am not sure if it was due to the north Indian winter or due to the thought that in the near future we will live in cubicles and think: “this is our world”. We already rely on bottled water—will we carry cylinders to breath pure air? Spending time outdoors in the toxic atmosphere will be discouraged, unless absolutely required. We will fear taking off our masks, any human contact will be dreaded. Our medium of communication will be buttons. Our brains and muscles will be weak. We will live exclusively through “electronic devices”.

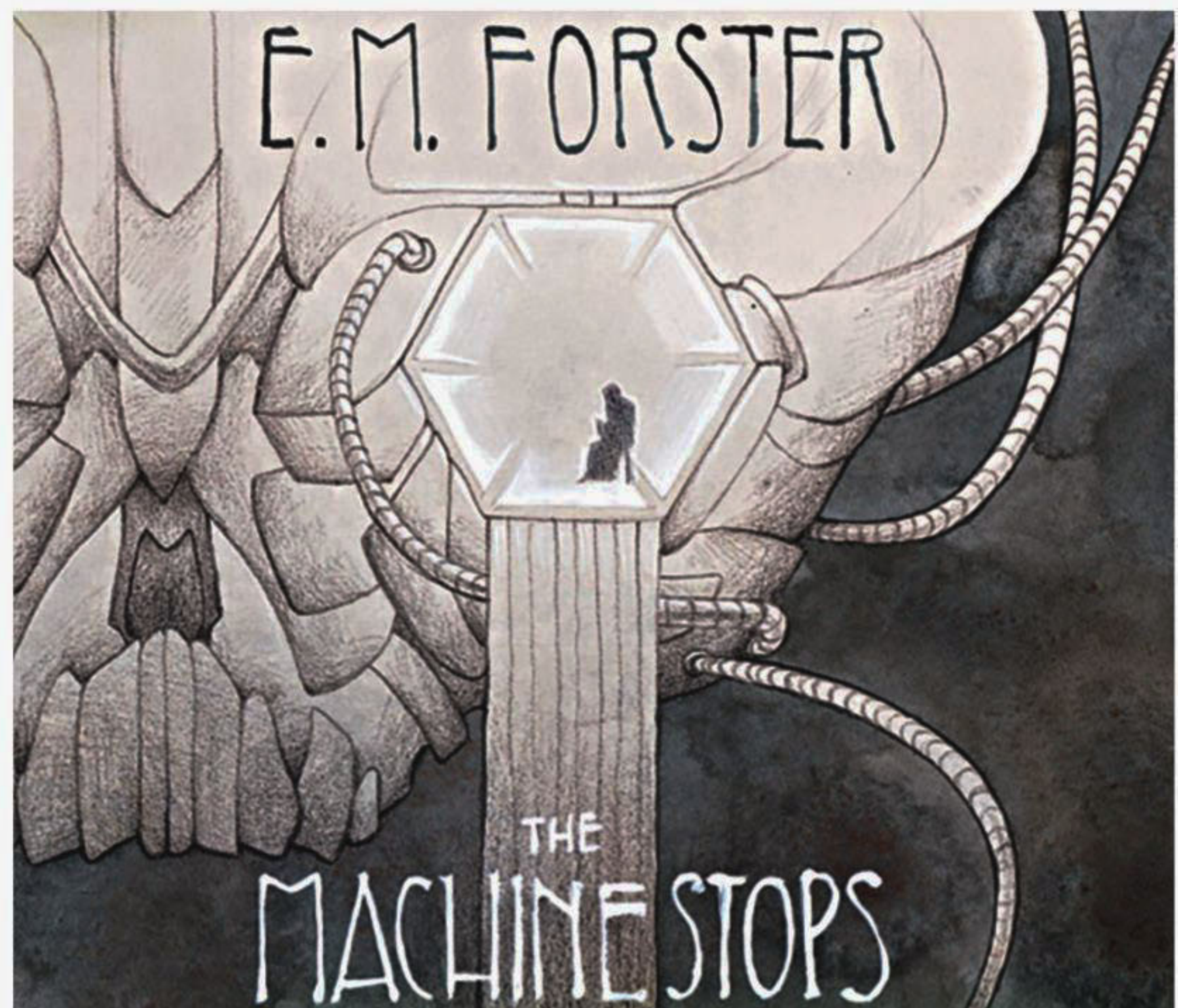
In the story E. M. Forster writes: “... then she

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generated the light, and the sight of her room, flooded with radiance and studded with electric buttons, revived her. There were buttons and switches everywhere—buttons to call for food for music, for clothing. There was the hot-bath button, by pressure of which a basin of (imitation) marble rose out of the floor, filled to the brim with a warm deodorised liquid. There was the cold-bath button. There was the button that produced literature. And there were of course the buttons by which she communicated with her friends. The room, though it contained nothing, was in touch with all that she cared for in the world.”

I shivered, again feeling the chill in my spine. I desperately hoped that it was due to the nippy air.

Anindita Roy is a public health specialist, working with an international organisation in Geneva, Switzerland.



Book jacket for the 1909 short story, "The Machine Stops", by E. M. Forster.

ART: KELLY AIRO

ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

JANUARY 9, 2007
APPLE INTRODUCED THE IPHONE

Apple CEO Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone for the first time during his keynote address at the Macworld Conference and Expo in San Francisco. The introduction of the iPhone fundamentally changed the traditional smartphone business, ending the dominance of Nokia.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | offshoot | 8 Impulse senders |
| 1 Skin art, slangily | 32 Cavalry soldier | 9 Market |
| 5 Monk's music | 36 Pleasantly lazy | movements |
| 10 Did galley work | 39 Brewpub order | 11 Takes out |
| 12 Cruise ship | 40 Inventor Howe | 17 Stir |
| 13 Peace goddess | 41 Words of | 19 Singer |
| 14 Debate | surrender | Shannon |
| 15 Had something | 43 Spree | 22 Like bedouins |
| 16 Old North | 44 Gave a hoot | 24 Neighbor of |
| Church sight | 45 Long stories | Ethiopia |
| 18 Like the gentry | 46 Head honcho | 25 Lent effort |
| 20 Piston | | 27 Cub's cave |
| connector | DOWN | 28 Stars |
| 21 Harrow rival | 1 Court event | 30 Boxing great |
| 23 Print units | 2 Main artery | 33 City on the Nile |
| 24 Store come-on | 3 Eleven-year-old, | 34 Legolas and |
| 26 Casino figure | e.g. | Elrond |
| 28 Barracks bed | 4 D.C. VIP | 35 Marsh plants |
| 29 Matching | 5 Large family | 37 Dotty |
| 31 Punk rock | 6 Trumpeter Al | 38 Wields |
| | 7 Ticked off | 42 Yak it up |

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott