



Focus on the Verb

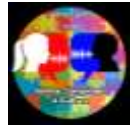
Dr. Gargi Talapatra

Focus on the verb, and the noun will fall in place. She would always say this as a part of the language classes – a teacher in one of the millions of schools in our country, teaching elementary grammar with hardly a publication to her credit.

The line seems to acquire increasing importance in the context of education in India with each passing day. Divided into a three-tier structure, the education sector comprises primary education, secondary education and higher education. As per statistical records, the education sector in India has shown considerable progress over the last two decades, with more and more children acquiring primary education, and greater numbers of youth enrolling for higher education. The irony of the situation lies in the simultaneous increase in crime rates reflecting a gradually increasing trend of intolerance. According to the reports published by the National Crime Records Bureau comparing the rates of crime in India in 1953 and 2006, there has been a gradual and consistent rise in the rate of cognizable crimes in India, mainly rape, murder and kidnapping, over the last five decades.

There have been debates and contestations, as also the classic blame-game, where all speak, none listens and it is unanimously concluded that a certain monstrous obscurity called the system is to be blamed. This said system is an intriguing entity – omnipresent, omnipotent and forever at the threshold of martyrdom. It is identified as the culprit with each incident, slandered, interrogated and chastised from every possible intellectual angle and then laid to rest until the next incident. However, the recurrence of incidents does not cease.

Crime increases, expanding in its degree of hideousness, and across age groups. Nothing shocks us any further. There is a strange sense of anaesthetized numbness. It has become perfectly possible to assimilate within our individual systems all sort and degrees of crimes, read about them on newspapers, condemn such crimes as responsible representatives of the civil society, and discuss them at public gatherings

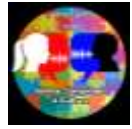


and on social media, quite forgetting that these magnanimous activities as part of self-cleansing and projected or perhaps, felt solidarity, have a very short-lived impact, if any, except a feeble feeling of self re-assurance and self-gratification.

What then has been our weakness and the root of this collective social myopia? Is there an intrinsic flaw in our self-assessment as a society? Maxims on the wonders of an educated mind have been innumerable. Nelson Mandela remarked that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. What happens to the output of the burgeoning education sector in our country? Where does it all go? It is perhaps time that we investigate the education wing of our social machinery and identify the break of link which enables a discontinuity of the professed effects of education on our social scenario.

While it is true that the education sector in India has been steadily expanding, it is also true that we have confined the meaning of education successfully to degrees, medals, marksheets and certificates. When we teach, the focus is seldom on the verb. Our policies in education focus upon the nouns, namely, the qualifications of the teacher and the achievements of the student. The embellishments and the ornaments the individual is bestowed with determine their worth as teachers and students.

There is a structured syllabus and an organized system of examinations which determine the worth of the student. The result is the transformation of the education scenario into parallel racing tracks where both the teacher and the student must keep running till they achieve. Human history would testify that personal achievements have seldom motivated social wellbeing. While it is ideally true that teachers are lifelong learners and their growth as scholars needs to be ensured, equally true is the fact that the present policies ensuring the same are not quite up to the mark. To evaluate the worth of a teacher in terms of completion of certain predetermined markers of performance is almost akin to evaluating parents by markers of performance. Imagine the plight of the children if the parents had to go through a compulsory criterion of determining the worth of their parenthood by standards of socially and institutionally designed performance indicators!

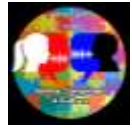


Regarding education, it was Aristotle who observed that “educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all”. That is, unfortunately perhaps, *the* direction we are heading in. At the primary level, the question is not whether the child has scored a ninety percent, but whether the child has been nurtured enough to assimilate basic human values. The focus being misplaced and the entire system of reward and punishment being directed towards academic performance, it sadly takes an Amir Khan and *Taare Zameen Par* to convey the message that children who do not perform properly in academics need love and care instead of rebuke. And yet, once the film is gone, the crowd in front of private tuitions remains at a constant rise.

At the secondary level, similarly, the point of discussion is not whether Tagore’s ‘Where the mind is without fear’ should remain in the syllabus or be removed from it. The focus, instead, needs to be shifted upon the purpose of retaining the piece in the syllabus. If the purpose is to merely ensure that the student can answer short and long questions from the poem and recite it by heart, then the removal or retention of the poem in the syllabus hardly makes a difference. Dangerously, the not-so-distant trend of breaking statues of visionaries and philosophers across the nation is reflective of the large-scale outcome of this useless exercise.

The scenario is even more precarious at the higher education level. More often than not, a thoughtless ritualistic step after schooling in the lives of most students, higher education comprises entirely young adults – those bestowed with the right to vote and thus participate actively in the act of nation-building in a democracy; those let loose into riotous exposure of global information through touch-screen phones as mandatory indicators of being a proud part of the progress of human civilization. It is here that the entire procedure of education that the child has received so long stands to be challenged.

The child, who is now a constitutional adult, theoretically knows everything, while technically his/ her mind is a blank sheet, or worse, recycled plastic – moulded and re-moulded by media – the shapers of public opinion. Ask him/her about basic history, s/he will draw a blank. Talk about the fundamental rights in the Constitution of India

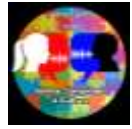


- most of them have only read of it in their secondary level text books but retain no memories of having come across something of the kind. Directive Principles of State Policy – “Who? What?” How about Public Interest Litigation Cases? “Oh please! That’s complex stuff from generic subject syllabus!” The only thing that most of the educated young adults remember or know how to do with complete efficiency is to sign their names – and accordingly, a considerable section of contemporary lives are spent signing petitions.

Having celebrated Independence Day and Republic Day as mostly national holidays with parade and flag hoisting, and having learnt history by rote to secure good marks in examination so as to pursue a promising career, the child, who is now a voter, stands as an individual with lot of knowledge, but completely ignorant of its processing and application. It is almost like being told about one’s basic anatomical structure and identifying hands and legs, without knowing the use of either.

The process of higher education continues nonetheless, on the same pedestal, without quite acknowledging the fact that the participants, namely, the teachers and the students, are running on parallel tracks of personal careerist requirements and aspirations. Throughout the educational history of an individual’s life, there are seldom moments of learning which build a bridge between the student and the teacher except calendar dates like Teachers’ Day and Children’s Day. A good teacher becomes the one who has ensured that the syllabus is complete and the child has acquired the skill of securing a good percentage in examinations, while a good student is one who has diligently learnt to prove himself or herself on the marksheet.

In the course of accomplishing the act of education, the student attends seminars, conferences and talks as part of academic requirements, but theories and concepts hardly enlighten the minds which do not know how to assimilate and put knowledge to practice. As a result, by the time education is complete, national devastation is also complete. Generation after generation, we end up with large-scale products of education as a sector, who do not know how to think, as the ability to think or to initiate thinking-learning has never been a part of academic or professional evaluation



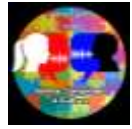
of either the student or the teacher. The basic *mantra* of existence becomes a general trend in anti-Cartesian rationality – ‘I *do not* think, therefore I am”.

The end product is an aggressive crowd – self-centered, manipulative as well as vulnerable, prone to being misled and all too easily convinced. With a rising sense of personal insecurities and ambitions, the human tendency to belong somewhere results in ghettoized pockets of fragmented identities formed on the basis of regions, localities, languages and religions. The only way to assert visible existence seems to be rooted in identification of the self through dominance over the Other.

Education, especially higher education with its rising statistics, therefore, becomes little more than what is known as disguised unemployment, comprising huge numbers of youth of the nation who know everything, think nothing and are formally trained into narrow unidimensional sensitivity which leaves no space for accepting differences or accommodating diversity. Education, in the process, comes to stand as defined by Mark Twain, “the path from cocky ignorance to miserable uncertainty”.

In the view of the society that we live in today, it is extremely essential to brainstorm and ideate new measures to ensure that the education sector of the nation is more productively and practicably engaged in the construction of a better tomorrow. Though the act of self- assessment may begin in being able to detect the flaws, it does not quite end there. The question which stares us in the face at the moment is what can be done. Policies undoubtedly need revision and individuals, introspection, but more importantly, perhaps we need to act upon the procedure of making learning a process linked to thought, assimilation and application.

Perhaps, the student when being taught about colours needs to be made to understand that colours are beautiful because they are different. Perhaps that realization that difference is beautiful would breed a greater tolerance of mutual differences as natural and harmless. Perhaps, biology lessons while teaching the blood circulation system need to also initiate a line of philosophical thought that blood is essential within the body and must not be shed outside. Perhaps, mathematics lessons in profit and loss need to add a line of moral speculation where the children are told that human interactions are not to be evaluated on the basis of gain or loss.



Interdisciplinary nature of education would perhaps bear fruit only when it involves inculcation of a thinking pattern right from the tender ages and becomes a part of acculturation. Imposed interdisciplinary structures only tend to consolidate the divide between science, commerce and arts – all misunderstood as entities independent of one another. Environmental education, in the process, belonging to neither of three dominant streams distinctly, remains the most neglected. The solution to global warming and the unbearably rising temperatures during summers does not lie in getting schools and colleges air-conditioned or shutting them down for a period of time. A more humane method with an ascertained long-term impact would lie in creating consciousness among the learners about the regular damage which seemingly harmless habits cause to the environment and lessons in behavioural modification to control the same.

The institutional question that arises next from the point of view of education as a sector, is what happens to the indicators of assessment for the students and the teachers? Is education to be handed over entirely to such lines of insane, impractical and romantic notions as stated here? For the first question, the social change would evaluate the adequacy of the education sector, for all sectors are not industries to be evaluated by their immediate production. Even a tuberose plant needs three months to show signs of life, and education as a sector of social functionality must be given some time to yield a new pattern of performance indicator.

As for the second, the first individual to dream of landing on the moon must have been identified as insane and impractical till the goal was eventually realized. But one thing is for certain, if we do not as a society still learn to shift our focus from the noun to the verb and differentiate between education and other sectors of the nation, there is no point in grieving over fresh crimes each day. As far as teaching is concerned, it will remain a noble profession forever – the challenge is just to ensure that it does not finally yield a fitting replacement for “Brutus is an honorable man”.