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Between Anxiety and Hope: Education in Troubled Times

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"And we are here as on a darkling plain swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight where ignorant armies clash by night"

Mathew Arnold leaves us with these grim thoughts, in ending thus his poem 'Dover Beach'. When he penned these lines, in the mid-19th century, Arnold may have been alluding to the ideological battles and social unrest that cast a shadow over Europe in his time. Or he may have had a foreboding of worse things to come. We do not know for sure. What we can surmise is that the spectre of destructive ignorance loomed large for him. Arnold, however, was far from being an avowed pessimist. As both a poet and an educator, he bore the hope of culture ultimately standing triumphant over anarchy. We, who have witnessed the cultured barbarisms of the 20th century, view that hope warily today.

The anxiety of reactionary ignorance setting ablaze civil and moral order has intensified in recent times. So too has the hope that this fatal illiteracy will somehow be educated before calamity befalls us all. We encounter these impulses today, for example, in the political mission of liberal secularism to enlighten 'retarded tradition'. We also find equivalent resonances in the use of ideologised Islam to redeem 'modern *jahiliyya*'.[1]

For our generation, these anxieties and hopes are not empty refrains but all too palpable experiences. We are confronted starkly with our present and sorry predicament, our own 'darkling plain', where the fatal conjugation of the forces of violence and ignorance threaten to lay waste human life as never before. Many of us find it difficult to fathom this state of affairs. In an age of global communication, it beggars belief that one part of humanity can so misread the spirit and character of the other half. The ignorance is by no means one-sided — it is mutual and

[1] *Jahiliyya* — the state of affairs in Arabia before the mission of Prophet Muhammad; paganism. (Lewis, Pellat and Schacht (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. II, Brill, 1965).

counterpoised. The clash of ignorance, moreover, is not simply between, but also within and across, societies.

And in these trying times, we instinctively seek refuge in education as a means of our common salvation. We solicit, with a measure of urgency, forms of education that can cure humanity of the cultural illiteracies that pervade the globe. In a consumerist age where education has become a commodity, we are not short of variety here. On offer is a panoply of 'solutions', from modes which essentialise cultures to those which relativise them, from those in which one's culture stands supreme to those which celebrate an eclectic arcadia. We find approaches that, unable to reconcile opposing demands, gravitate toward the individual or society, the state or the community, the local or the global. The problem of which form of education will best serve our collective wellbeing presses hard upon us in the new century.

Education being an arena of deep divides as well as of high ideals, it would be naive to assume an easy resolution to this problem. We witness a struggle in public education between securing a sense of identity, on the one hand, and celebrating diversity, on the other. We see attempts to transcend the segregations of race, class and gender, and to assess the implications of the barriers between public and private schooling, between secular and religious education. We sense the need for education to go beyond narrow regionalisms to the commonalities that bind cultures together. We note the quest for models of education that, by forging relations of trust between communities and the state, will help realise the civic society. How these dilemmas are ultimately resolved will be of consequence to the outlooks that youths develop — on how they view themselves, those around them, and those many others whom they will never encounter.

Most of us would agree here that formal schooling, whatever shape it takes, constitutes only the outer trappings of education — that there has to be something more to education. How can we understand what this 'more' is? Perhaps we can say with the sages of the past that it is to do with discovering our humanity — education being that which makes us human. However, we know that this goal cannot be some abstract ideal in a plural world. Education, I believe, occurs when the particular in us engages with the universal we share with others, and in doing so, leads us to discover the universal in the essence of our particularity.

We would not expect this awakening to take place in a social vacuum. When Ibn Tufayl casts Hayy ibn Yaqzan onto a remote island, and portrays him growing up to instruct himself, without another human soul to intervene, we need to ask what Hayy loses in not having been educated by a community or society. While Hayy achieves self-realisation, we sense that his education is, in some ways, impoverished. In his isolated condition, he is denied an invitation to share the treasure trove of collective wisdom, both that of his particular community and of humanity at large, which is rightfully the privilege of every child born into human society to claim.

This process of laying claim to inherited tradition and collective accomplishment, however, cannot be passive. Education is not archaeology. It is not simply a question of excavating the past and laying it before the child to assimilate through some kind of miraculous osmosis. There is labour involved in it, of an intellectual kind. We know that the past has to be learned, which requires patience and perseverance, perhaps also some degree of humility. It calls forth a posture of mind that does not assume, unquestioningly, our modern standpoint as being somehow a privileged way of perceiving the world.

However, we would still be falling short off the mark if education was simply about socialisation, about the transmission of heritage and tradition to the young. While this would maintain and reproduce society, it would not equip us to deal with change, which is integral to the human

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condition. Education, at its best, is a conversation between the generations, not a passive reception of inheritance. It is not only a matter of listening to the past with an attentive ear. In engaging with our histories, we are, in the same breath as it were, giving shape to our shared futures.

Were we to have attained this much, we would still be wanting in our ideal of the educated person. For our troubled times, an initiation into human achievement must, of necessity, be a transaction between generations with different, often conflicting, histories. Our modern education must encompass the particular, the specific and the unique entering into conversation with other specificities. In the circumstances in which we find ourselves today, public education can no longer afford to be parochial by indulging in any one monolithic canon, whether it be Western, Islamic or of some other culture or civilisation. A time must come when youngsters across the world can have the opportunity of assessing for themselves, as an intrinsic part of the tapestry of humanity, the accomplishments of Muslim societies, for instance, as much as Muslim children can learn to weigh, with an open mind, the excellences of other people.

The sanctum of the classroom invites these transactions. Here is a sacred space in which pupils of different backgrounds can encounter creativity and critique, without forced and polemical regard to the geographical or cultural origins of these expressions. It is here that dissent can be voiced, conflict played out, and understanding sought, in an atmosphere that fosters considered judgement. In the polarised climate of today, I concede the high idealism of this venture. Such an education, however, were it to be realised, would force us to examine our suppressed assumptions about the 'other'. We also need to believe and hope that it would edify and ennoble us.

…Please see copyright restrictions on page 1