



Vijay Padaki

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest artist this land has produced, was also a man of deep rational thought and a clear scientific temper. That Albert Einstein, often regarded as the “scientist of the century”, engaged in a discourse with Tagore and unhesitatingly admitted that he came away enlightened says something about the poet’s perspective to art and science. Many have thought of Tagore as the da Vinci of the sub-continent, another great mind that made no distinction between art and science and, indeed, constantly playfully explored the interface in all his pursuits. It was the most unhelpful great divide that mankind had ever invented for itself.

Two questions present themselves every time we confront the great divide:

- How did the divide come about?
- What can we do about it?

Education curricula and the accompanying pedagogy are, after all, man-made devices. Therefore, they are likely to be products of their time. Take the case of English literature as a curriculum subject in India. It is now known that the teaching of English literature in schools and colleges outside Britain was a creation of the colonisation process. It was not originally a curriculum “subject” to be taught like science, geography or mathematics. An excerpt from a play might be appropriate here. The conversation is between Jeet Mukherji, an Indian engineer in his ‘sixties, and Miss Alice Taylor, his teacher in a school in British India. He is ever grateful to her for the education he received in a British educational system. She, on the other hand, feels guilty of having corrupted young Indian minds

It has been my privilege to be associated with an international programme in the area of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The programme works in sev-

*ALICE : You can forgive and forget the wars and the massacres and the looting of the land. All of these will be made up. But you can never forgive the permanent damage done to the mind. It is not buried with you when you die. It is passed on. It will stick for generations.*

*JEET : You gave us science and technology. You gave us a language to speak to the world, and Shakespeare, and –*

*ALICE : That velvet-tongued opportunist? ! What do you say in Urdu for that? Matlabi, I think.*

*JEET : William Shakespeare, matlabi!*

*ALICE : The philanderer who oiled his way into the London aristocracy and charmed them with his verbosity to finance his pet projects, his adolescent fantasies.*

*JEET : The loquacious charm translated into a hundred languages around the world!*

*ALICE : Think about it, Jeet, would the name Shakespeare mean anything, anywhere, if it was not for the Empire?*

*JEET : It is great literature nevertheless.*

*ALICE : Because we taught you to believe that – that it is great. Did you know, Jeet, that English literature was never a subject for schooling before the Empire? Physics and mathematics and*

*geography, yes, they were subjects that could be taught. And studied. Literature was something you simply did. and enjoyed. You didn't teach it or study it. It was entirely in the interests of the Empire that English literature was brought in as a course of study.*

*JEET : Was it his fault that he stood out in history as a great writer?*

*ALICE : Is it their fault that hundreds like him, in every land, every bit the same in creative energy, never got to be known by the rest of the world?*

*(From: Gold and Silver. Bangalore Little Theatre, 1997. Written as part of an exchange project between Bangalore Little Theatre and the Royal National Theatre in London.)*

eral countries in Latin America, Africa and South Asia, documenting the empirical knowledge base of indigenous peoples in such fields as sustainable agriculture, community health, medical practice, building technologies, nutrition, water management, and so on. The “science” underlying the practices is often profound, although the communities themselves do not call it science. It might as well be the art of soil conservation or the art of herbal preparation. Indeed the concept of science as we know it does not exist in many communities. There is only one unifying consciousness of being one with nature.

Is it possible that the concepts of Art and Science operate at the super-ordinate level of a paradigm in our cognitive organisation? In other words, a belief system that determines what other belief systems we may hold? Consider the following two contrasting paradigms in history:

- The Ptolemaic model of a geocentric universe
- The Copernican model of a heliocentric universe

The first model, operating as a paradigm, determined what was good science and what was bad science. So did the second when it succeeded in replacing the first.

In the like manner it is possible that we have two widely contrasting paradigms to explain the difference between the science-technology world view of “civilised” peoples and the art-science worldview of “indigenous” peoples:

- The earth belongs to man
- Man belongs to the earth

It can be argued that from the point of view of a child’s purposeful cognitive development, the arts-science divide is not only unhelpful, but actually harmful. As Tagore believed, it is a man-made distinction and a problem of grown-ups. It should not be inflicted upon the child. In the early stages of concept formation, exploring the amazing array of stimuli and experiences all around oneself, the formation of “knowledge” and the estimation of “truth” benefit greatly from a diversity of perspectives. This appreciation of phenomena in the world in which one exists makes no distinction between art and science.

Embracing diversity of experience in this manner includes synaesthetic (cross-sense) experiences – for instance, seeing a sound, or hearing music when looking at a picture. Indeed, this can set the healthy learning habit of seeking multiple perspectives in later life. Pigeon hole categorisation of sense data actually retard the enrichment of appreciation. The distinction between the academic disciplines (and the needed rigour in pursuit) may make sense in later years, but in the early years in primary schooling they appear quite unwarranted.

This line of reasoning leads us to the practical question of what we may actually do to promote an inclusive approach to knowledge formation in early years. In Tagore’s scheme of things it was laughably simple: promote imagination. Tagore’s work for and



with young persons combined a child-like innocence in making up stories with a profundity of content. Never one to talk down to children, his idea of storytelling accepted that the child was capable of a far greater level of imagination (and comprehension) than the grown-ups around cared to recognise. It was a principal intuitively grasped by Tagore, later amply reinforced by cognitive science and child development studies. The capacity for imagination is seen as an end in itself, good in itself, as super-ordinate to the second order capacities for arts and science. The mantra of imagination appears again and again in a lot of Tagore's writing, including his autobiographical musings. For instance:

“ ... I found endless joy in nature's charms whenever I had the chance. Too much material possession makes the mind dull and lethargic. We forget that our delight comes from what is inside, not what is out there. That really is the first lesson in growing up. A child's possessions may be few and seemingly trivial, but they need nothing more for that delight from inside. When we load a child with toys, we make them wretched and spoil their sense of play.”

We can easily see the arts as one form of imaginative activity. Science, too, must be accepted as imagi-

native activity, in getting us to grasp abstract phenomena one does not necessarily see in conventional terms. The more imagination the child is capable of the more fertile the soil for knowledge formation. It is in actually nurturing the capacity for imagination that contemporary pedagogical methods in the arts can be of great value – largely facilitative in nature, rarely didactic.

Theatre activity in the school curriculum is known to be particularly effective in developing multiple intelligences and bridging left and right brain development because of its high reliance on experiential methodology. Out of this understanding of the value of Theatre Studies in schools comes the more specialised discipline of Theatre-in-Education, a specialisation in pedagogy (TIE).

Contrary to popular belief, TIE is not mere “enactment” of scenes supposedly depicting the “message” of the lesson being studied. Enactment offers a small fraction of the potential value of TIE. It does not utilise the available power of experiential methodology. Further, the novelty of such enactment wears off quickly, and it cannot be sustained. The field is poorly developed in India, mainly because the larger theatre institution is inadequately developed.



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