

“What is the use of learning history?” As a thirteen-year-old, I unobtrusively slipped this question into the question box, hoping to hear my teacher’s illuminating answer. (I hadn’t the temerity to ask such a question to her face.) I can still recall how I waited eagerly for her to pull my question out of the box.

There were a number of chits in the box that day.

She took her time: tantalisingly, and ran through a number of other questions before she arrived at it - at the very end of the period. To my disappointment, she laughed it off, saying: “And the last question here is: What is the use of learning history?” All joined in her laughter, but my teacher gave no answer as she rose to leave.

I was left to deal with my question on my own: something I did until the end of my school days, with no success. While I had demurely studied all the assigned subjects until the age of thirteen, I began to question their utility when a possible choice loomed ahead - in Class IX.

“When something is over and done with, why should we bother to memorise it in detail?” I wondered. The glamour of Science was so overpowering, that no one had to convince me of its utility. Indeed, I cannot recall a single one of my classmates asking this question of Science: “What is the use of studying Science?” Boring? Yes, many felt it was so. Tough? Sure, some agreed. But ‘useless’? No one would have said so.

Perhaps it was the very determined direction that the subject steered you to: a career as a doctor, or an engineer, or a scientist, or maybe it was just the ‘done thing’ to study it – whatever the case, no one had to convince my classmates (or me) about the need to study Science. Yes, some of us had our preferences, when we chose not to opt for Biology (in any case, I am not going to become a doctor, so why should I cut up frogs?), but Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics were part of our checked-in baggage. No doubt about that.

Geography was even less of a felt necessity: it didn’t even carry the names of powerful people to salvage it. Who cared, really, if the temperate zones had deciduous trees or there were gold mines elsewhere? From poring over maps and mastering the skill of drawing them, to memorising climatic zones and the crops that these yielded, here was yet

another subject that had few takers. I recall just one teacher advocating it as a ‘logical subject’: but she, too, could not convince me of its use.

In short, the periods devoted to the social sciences were the ones that drew the most yawns. We enlivened our classes by drawing moustaches and fierce eyebrows on the pictures of the Moghul queens, and bindis and mascaraed lashes for the imposing kings. Passing these reworked portraits to each other, under our desks, we elicited quiet giggles as our only means of entertainment in the boring history classes. The only historical persona to escape our mutilating pen was the devastatingly handsome Lord Mountbatten: for obvious reasons.



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Which brings me to what I perceive as the source of magnetism in a subject: what pulls a learner to it? This is my surmise: anything that is taught should be at least one of these three things: relevant, useful or beautiful (or, at least, appealing) from the point of view of the learner. Why, for instance, did science seem necessary to most of us? For one, it was extremely relevant. No one could deny that. Of course we needed to know about the laws of the Universe, the changes that could be wrought, the flora and fauna around

us. Contrast this to the dates of the Battle of Panipat or the changes brought about by King Ashoka...yawn! Wouldn't we do better to know the changes being effected by our present government, the cheekier amongst us felt tempted to ask.

And yes, Science was useful. It helped us figure out why milk soured, how plants grew and how to dress a wound. It inspired us to think more systematically and deductively. It made us enquire into the truth behind assumptions. It helped make our lives more comfortable. We needed it: even if we were unlucky enough to be taught the subject by a drone of a teacher.

And oh! Sometimes, Science was even beautiful: from my early fascination of high school Chemistry to an experience of utter awe in my MSc days – at the intricacies of the DNA in our bodies – to me, beauty and Science seldom seemed incompatible. (Some lucky fellows had this experience in Math, but of them – another time.) Often, beauty was an overriding quality in determining my love for a subject. Poetry was neither useful nor relevant in my eyes: but yes, it was often beautiful. Literature, indeed, was rich with beauty: I couldn't deny that. But gray was the colour I would have used to describe history and geography. (And colour just splashed in waves of bright purples and pinks all over Science, Literature and occasionally, even Math.)

Even if social science hadn't met these three criteria, I now tend to think that it would have somehow made it to our plates had it been just easy. Who doesn't recall the satisfaction of solving a mathematical problem, and getting it right? The unique satisfaction in knowing that you had, somehow, managed to crack a problem - made Math just that much more tolerable. But here, you were right only if your memory happened not to fail you. You couldn't think the answer through: or so we were led to believe.

There fell the last prop that this subject may have had: it demanded too remarkable a memory from me. So I couldn't wait to drop it: which I did, at the earliest available opportunity.

Thus, history and geography constituted for me a bunch of facts that one could live life pretty well without remembering. Where were the patterns here? The trends? The connection to our own lives? These were either non-existent or buried beneath the huge number of facts that we had to remember. It wasn't until my college years that it dawned on me that a study of the past could perhaps make one live the present

better. However, I continued to feel that this seemed to be a lame excuse for thrusting that boring subject down our throats - for I couldn't see a single person, community or nation around me making fewer mistakes (or living better lives) because they had learnt from their own history. That 'knowledge' - if you could term it so - stayed safely ensconced between the dusty covers of their history textbooks: no one bothered to bring it into their everyday lives. A fascination that developed during my college years for reading biographies (of famous people) did lead me unconsciously down the alley of what I would now call 'history': but this was so very different! For people inhabited the pages of these wonderful books, in place of lifeless dates and boring events! My school history books seemed to be utterly devoid of the human element.

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Decades later, when I was travelling in the Himalayas, and saw the numerous types of rock and stone, their varying textures and colours spoke eloquently to me of patterns in that terrain. Why had no one ever taught me this? I wondered. The terraced slopes in Uttarkashi, the unique cuisine of the mountainfolk and their preferred diets: these were as intriguing as they were relevant. By now, I was interested, you see, in knowing how these people lived. My excitement at walking down the cobbled streets of Pompeii – knowing that Roman emperors had trod these very stones – was palpable! Seeing the ruins of the Indus Valley Civilisation in Lothal was another time in my adult life when I saw the immense possibilities of learning history with excitement.

Alas! These were unrealised dreams: to date, the learning of history and geography has been amongst my most colourless experiences. The palette and brush that our teachers dipped

into - to teach us these subjects - were dry and without paint. Perhaps those dry deserts and pompous kings had drained out all the colour.

Neeraja Raghavan is Consultant, Academics and Pedagogy, Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore. She has been a freelance writer for many years with over seventy articles published in leading newspapers and magazines. In addition, she is the author of three books (CURIUSER AND CURIUSER, Full Circle 2004, I WONDER WHY and I WONDER HOW, Children's Book Trust 2005, 2006), co-editor of one (ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING IN INDIA, SAGE Publications 2007) and editor of a CD titled Understanding Religions (Jain Vishva Bharathi Institute, Ladnun, Rajasthan 2004). She can be contacted at neeraja@azimpremjifoundation.org

