

The Closing Bracket . . .

A Tale of Two Viruses

Shailesh Shirali

At a juncture of time when the coronavirus epidemic threatens to bring social and economic activity everywhere to a sudden, grinding halt, we find that human conflicts are continuing to proliferate all across the earth, their intensity, malevolence, and stupidity undimmed.

This is not a tale of two cities but a tale of two viruses. One is a tiny being, invisible to the eye, but with the capacity to strike terror. The other is a virus that we carry in the innermost recesses of our hearts – a virus of identity, and a virus of divisiveness. It is highly active all across the Earth, and it seems to be extraordinarily virulent right now in India.

There is no need to write about the first virus here (the coronavirus); there is enough written about it everywhere. What do we do about the second virus? After thousands of years of civilisation, with stunning advances in science and technology that boggle the imagination, why is it that this virus has stayed intact in us? Why is it that in our hearts, we remain as primitive as we have ever been?

This is a magazine for mathematics educators, and we – we who spend so many years teaching children so many different and wonderful things – must put this question to ourselves: what is our responsibility in such a matter? Is our responsibility merely that of turning out technicians, people who are technically proficient at solving equations and drawing graphs and solving all kinds of baffling problems, but in whom that virus remains as active as ever, because we teachers do not ever bother to address it?

The problem of identity has become one of the most serious in modern times. Unless we take responsibility for our lives and for our behaviour, and question the very desire for identity, we are going to perpetuate what is happening now. Unless we question the very roots of our desire for identity – whether religious identity, or nationalistic identity, or ethnic identity, or any other kind of identity – we will carry this urge with us to eternity. Unless we see for ourselves how poisonous and destructive the very notion of identity is, unless we see its divisiveness with the same intensity as the pain we feel when we step on a thorn with bare feet, we will never be free of this urge.

It is our responsibility as teachers to talk about these matters with children, with the same love and dedication that we show in teaching them how to write, how to pronounce words correctly, how to compute correctly, or how to use a pair of compasses correctly.

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