

Do you remember a time in your life when you wanted to do one thing, your family wanted you to do something else, and you fought bitterly, got sent to purgatory, rebelled again and thought balefully that the world was against you? Do you remember being told that what you wanted to do was of “no use”? Of course you do, for that practically defines teenage.

For many of my friends and me growing up in erstwhile Bombay in the 70s and 80s, the world we experienced was filled with all kinds of people and we learned to celebrate and sympathise with them. Vegetable vendors, maids, milkmen, dhobis came to our doorstep and brought with them worlds we could access through narratives, conversations and dialogue. We went by public transport to school and experienced other things en route, equally important to our negotiations with the world, especially as women. We thus had a different kind of education outside of school through such fiction, poetry, popular culture and the experience of diversity, long before they were conceptualised for us in institutions and disciplines under the various liberal art disciplines. It is through them that we established our first

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In such a world then, which increasingly isolates us from each other and from experiencing diversity, the liberal arts are even more critical. They help us negotiate between our selves as individuals and the larger world. They reveal to us other world-views, different perspectives. They also reiterate to us that at every moment of our lives as engineers, doctors, accountants, teachers, and indeed in every activity and profession, not the least as academics, there are continuities between ourselves and the world which we can ignore only at our peril.

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tenuous connections with our world as much as with our selves.

Unfortunately, separation of the ‘world of experience’ from the ‘world of knowledge’ increasingly

occurred as we went up the education ladder, until we were finally graduates and professionals with a knowledge base that had no connection with anything - so complete was the rupture between the world and the intellect. We were the possessors of knowledge that came from nowhere and therefore could go nowhere.

The past three decades have seen a meteoric rise in the numbers and ways the world has changed, not least because of the innovations and penetration of new technologies on the one hand, and the increased isolation of the middle class on the other. Even the mail comes to our desktops, not our doorsteps, and the postman nowhere delivers twice a day. The segregation of knowledge and experience has newer dimensions and manifold consequences. Compassion never approaches us; it certainly never crosses the threshold of our consciousness. Broken families, financial insecurity, poverty, migration, violence and strife are part of our daily vocabulary, yet we are indifferent to them qua experience; they are something to watch on TV. Even in moments of great solitude, we are busy on Facebook – aloneness seems so unbearable as we reach out in virtual time and space to a long list of people at a click but may have nothing to say to each other face to face. Thus, in as much as we keep “in touch,” virtually minute by minute through new technologies, we also lose touch - with our inner selves as well as the realities of the larger world. The poetry, literature, philosophy, art and yes, people, all of which kept us “whole” and in tune with something deep within ourselves even as they revealed to us different worlds to which we were inextricably linked, have all but disappeared. Our politics and solidarity have become sciences; our morality is nonexistent.

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to us that at every moment of our lives as engineers, doctors, accountants, teachers, and indeed in every activity and profession, not the least as academics, there are continuities between ourselves and the world which we can ignore only at our peril. Like every teenager who accessed ideas, understandings and experiences through fiction, poetry and art, it stands to reason that it is through the humanities that our sciences, as much as our lives, become genuinely social, deeply humanitarian.

The case for the larger liberal arts has been made, and made well, by others. Among these are that they cultivate well-rounded citizenry, encourage critical thinking and public discussion and make us understand motivations other than our own in the pursuit of living. Despite all these stellar qualities that an education in the liberal arts can cultivate, they are definitely being bullied out of our educational systems by the big brothers science and technology (and step brother management). Our youth are getting specialised education at an even younger age - the best example (or worst one, depending on your perspective) being that of an undergraduate degree being offered in Business Management, making a mockery of education itself. Yet it is the liberal arts which are being edged out in one way or the other from education when it is blatant that we need them more, not less.

While there are major benefits of including the social sciences in education, yet teaching of the social sciences is not a simple task. According to the National Curriculum Framework 2005, for instance, one of the major problems is that an utilitarian approach has been used in the teaching of the social sciences, whereby the individual is regarded as an instrument of development. It recommends a shift to a normative approach so that issues of equality, justice and dignity of society are emphasized in order to awaken a real concern for social justice among students. What the NCF does not address is how this is to be achieved. We need our sciences, including our social sciences, to more deeply embrace the humanities and regain the synergies lost between them. It is through the deeper engagement between the humanities and the social sciences that the liberal arts can become relevant again in education.

Surprisingly, this struggle between utilitarianism and egalitarianism seems to find echoes in the world of work, the “real world” if you will. Here though, the opposite is the case

and the liberal arts, which the curriculum considered too influenced by utilitarianism, are ironically deemed to be of largely no use. Thus, there are few jobs for even the best of such graduates, and almost no career paths in organisational life for them to grow in outside of academics and NGOs. The world of work still believes that the graduates they hire, (ironically even the S&T graduates, but somehow these are accommodated in organisations), are of little use to them.

Several arguments from other disciplinary backgrounds have also come to the defence of the liberal arts but listen to what one such well-intentioned but misguided commentator attempting to make a case for the humanities in no less than The New York Times tells us: “You will have enormous power if you are the person in the office who can write a clear and concise memo.” Leaving aside the fact that no one studies the humanities in order to possess a dubious skill like writing a memo well, by reducing the larger knowledge base on which the liberal arts rest to a set of “skills” (worse, “soft skills”) the world of work does us an enormous disservice. The world of work demands “skill sets” and the ability to “deliver” without realising that in order for these to be improved what we need is more, not less, liberal education for every one.

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Unfortunately, in an attempt to cater to the needs of world of work, the world of education (the world of ideas if you will, where knowledge is constructed) strives to improve itself through the imposition of an even more socially isolated curriculum and an uncritical pedagogy in an attempt to be efficacious. Thus, knowledge divorced from the world is as rampant in medicine, engineering, management, sciences

which produce professionals who certainly are "effective" in one way but whose knowledge is isolated and irrelevant in many others - irrelevant because they ignore the personhood of people and the social in society; irrelevant because they have received uncritically what has been taught to them; irrelevant because they have not understood the larger framework within which this knowledge has been constructed. They need more, not less liberal education.

Yet it is the ones who struggle to understand and engage with the world who are made out to be "skill sets" at best, "irrelevant" and "useless" at worst. The larger world of work needs to value the engagements that the liberal arts have made in order to understand society and our place in that society - individually, socially, aesthetically, ethically. They have to understand that society is a complex creature and reducing it to one or other thing may be simple, efficacious and profitable in the short run but detrimental in the long. Now more than ever before, the ability to evaluate things in an information-inundated society must be cultivated in people as must the ability to examine and respond to different view points. In fact, in order to push for more government support to those who need it most, for better legislation and improved governance, it is imperative

to have more, not less, liberal education.

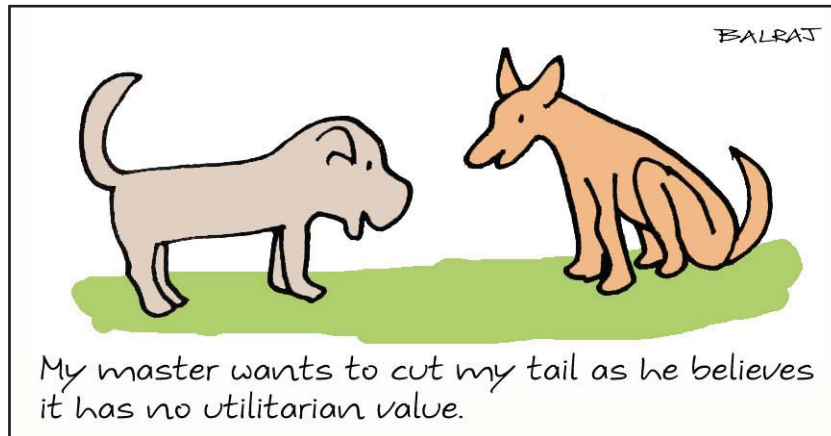
It is time for those of us in the larger liberal arts to permeate other disciplines and work spaces and make their knowledge relevant again. It is time for every writer, philosopher, historian, social scientist, poet and artist to stand up and be counted. It is time for us to emphatically tell this world of work, this so called "real world", that what

they do in the name of efficiency, precision, profitability, is irrelevant to the needs of education, certainly irrelevant to the world as a lot of us experience and understand it.

Not matter how irrelevant and indeed obfuscating and esoteric we are made out to be, it is in this world of liberal

arts education - this playful world - that ideas are born and nurtured, that ideals are upheld, where questions of relevance and irrelevance are discussed and debated within larger discourses, sometimes in the abstract, other times within contexts of the public good.

It is in this sense that what is most academic is also the most useful. It is in this spirit that it is time to reclaim the "irrelevant" and "useless" ideals of our teenage years again, for they may be just what are needed today.



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