The necessity of intellectual virtue

Intellectual openness, which must be an integral part of our education, is missing in today’s world of democratised knowledge.

The acquisition of knowledge is no longer the preserve of a few. The need for widespread literacy in modern societies as well as the development of public spheres has meant that the acquisition and communication of knowledge, including the understanding of radically different people and cultures, has to be democratised. Knowledge, through reading and writing and exchanging ideas is a general human need in contemporary societies.

In the past, those trained to acquire, preserve, nourish and transmit knowledge had to go through rigorous protocols. They had to learn the norms of knowledge formation: proper ways of collecting and assessing evidence; drawing sound inferences from data; formulating concepts and frameworks; collecting and assessing evidence; cultivating empathetic understanding. It is true that some forms of knowledge gathering and transmission which were normal earlier make us uncomfortable today. The elites spoke primarily to themselves, wrote for themselves, stealthily guarded the knowledge they ‘owned’, did not allow public dissemination, and even punished anyone from outside the circle who tried to procure it. Yet, the crucial point here is the existence of fairly rigorous norms of knowledge acquisition in the past, as also an ethic of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and sharing knowledge. Great emphasis was put on intellectual virtues, and punitive measures were put in place to check corresponding intellectual vices.

Do not make hasty judgment

It is true that in the contemporary world of democratised knowledge acquisition, insufficient attention is paid to intellectual norms and virtues. What norms exist for all those who participate in the ‘life of the mind’? What virtues must exist for all those who participate in the ‘life of the mind’? What virtues must be cultivated today and what vices must be avoided? There are many, and we need to reflect on just one: intellectual openness. It must surely be an integral part of our education, nurtured early in our childhood and ingrained so firmly that it remains with us as long as we are intellectually active.

But what is this quality of openness? Suppose a newspaper claims that the Indian economy is growing at 10%, it is incumbent upon me, the reader, with no particular beliefs of my own on this matter, to check if this is true. Not much research is needed. Relevant facts — some data, which becomes our default position. It is easily obtainable from other reliable sources. Anyhow, the least I can do is not rush to believe or disbelieve this factual claim, to delay judgment. I must eschew intellectual impatience or recklessness and keep my mind open.

Thus, one important feature of being intellectually active is to refrain from making hasty or premature judgments. This intellectual virtue of hearing both sides, to be persuaded only by better evidence and argument, should be cultivated through education. Exercising intellectual caution and not getting easily swayed by hyperbole is an integral part of intellectual life. Sadly, this elementary virtue is neglected or forgotten today. Why else would rumours and fake news be as rampant and successful?

Set aside strong conviction, listen

Let’s suppose that I am presented with fairly compelling evidence, to be open-minded in another sense, is what I am required to do.

The intellectual virtue relevant here is the existence of fairly systematic harms caused by one group to another, or by social, cultural and institutional biases built into the system. Such naturalised intellectual frameworks may also be ingrained or reinforced by a particular culture, philosophy, religion or caste. So, Hindus might think about the world with their own Hindu assumptions and Muslims with their own, Christians with their own. And each finds it difficult to move beyond, to enlarge their respective visions. This is understandable but these frameworks can be the source of many prejudices and, because they are implicit, lying in the background, can generate an invidious form of closed-mindedness. Only those who have opened up their hearts and minds can overcome the limitations of deeply entrenched world views. Alas, this open-endedness is least remembered when it is most needed. No society can survive normlessness in intellectual life. Neglecting intellectual virtues can survive normlessness in intellectual life. Neglecting intellectual virtues can survive normlessness in intellectual life. Neglecting intellectual virtues can survive normlessness in intellectual life. Neglecting intellectual virtues can survive normlessness in intellectual life.

Move beyond your world view

A third form of open-mindedness is even more important, crucial for knowledge of other people and cultures. Our habits of reading, listening, seeing and understanding often get locked within a particular intellectual framework, which becomes our default position. It becomes naturalised, something taken for granted. It is understandable but these frameworks can be the source of many prejudices and, because they are implicit, lying in the background, can generate an invidious form of closed-mindedness. Only those who have opened up their hearts and minds can overcome the limitations of deeply entrenched world views. Alas, this open-endedness is least remembered when it is most needed. No society can survive normlessness in intellectual life.

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