**Beyond biases and critical thinking**

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*“It’s not at all hard to understand a person; it’s only hard to listen without bias”- Criss Jami, Killosophy*

A lot can be derived from the thinking of a 12 year old boy who transcribed it in his tweet after 49 years, reflective of the sensitivity with which he must have observed his elders in day to day parleys and with the way some of his teachers may have enlightened him on touchy issues.

He says: “An active and objective listening to a talk-palatable or critical, or an attentive and comprehensive reading of a write-up requires suspending one’s own personal beliefs and biases during the talk or reading. This helps effectively understand/appreciate the other’s viewpoints.”

At such a tender age when maturity has yet to set in, this statement denotes the thought process as well as a dislike for confounded arguments over subjects that may or may never impress or convince another unless backed up by some irrefutable evidence. This may be possible in a topic related to science but when it comes to politics, theocracy, ideology, traditions or cultural values etc. any discussion is prone to result in a heated exchange of allegations and abusive discourse culminating in disgustingly bad taste. This can be frequently witnessed all around the globe in talk shows on innumerable television channels and in Parliaments which happen to be the top-most rung of politics, not to talk of everyday encounters between families and friends.

In the educational institutions, in our country, students are mostly taught to just memorise the texts and notes to pass examinations and get degrees. Thinking originally or rationally is discouraged and any deviation from the established norms is frowned upon. There have been instances where accomplished professors of Pakistani universities were dismissed for openly criticising martial law regimes. The recent case of Mashal Khan’s killing at the hands of his own colleagues is a case in point. Abdul Hai Kakar wrote last month:”Four years after a mob of students and officials lynched a journalism student on false blasphemy charges at a Pakistani university, fear still permeates the campus as students are taught to avoid tough questions and taboo subjects.”

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A couple of millennium ago, a philosopher by the name of Socrates had to gulp down poison for daring to become a dissenting voice for the society just because his ideas were causing a revolution in the minds of the youth, which of course was disagreeable to proponents of status quo. Similarly, any deviation in terms of conventional thinking is downright rejected by sometimes even those in whose favour it is actually meant. Such is the strength of orthodox cerebration that raw minds are afraid to pose questions, particularly related to sensitive issues and even more scared to express themselves in writing lest they are ostracised by their institutions, neighbourhoods or even country.

In the universities of liberal societies, the environment is so divergent that when our students get the opportunity to attend them, at first they are taken aback by the amount of original thinking they have to put in rather than parrot-like rote. From the routine cliché talks to candid discussions on all kinds of topics, is quite an appalling experience for our stereo-typed students but they being highly adaptive, quickly settle down, whether inwardly they agree or resent the system.

Knowledge, in the pure sense of the word, can only be attained if the mind is free of biases. Those equipped with the ability to set aside their prejudices and to see or listen to a contrasting view are the ones who gain an objective comprehension of many subjects. They are capable of measuring their own understanding against the backdrop of another’s, enjoy a treatise that may not otherwise appeal to their infused mind and bear with tolerance a provocative statement or an innuendo.

A good example would be that of looking at a painting wearing smudged or tinted spectacles. These onlookers will never be able to appreciate the vibrant colours or the delicate strokes or the finesse with which the artist has portrayed details. For them it is only a canvas with coloured murky stains and not a piece of art which only luminous eyes can discern. The same holds true for other spheres of life. So many good suitors for daughters are rejected on the basis of preconceived biases. Many a talented candidate may be turned down holding the idea of a job different from prospective employers. Promising professionals may be stripped of their licences just because the regulator does not see eye to eye with their diverse views. This could be an endless list.

Fact of the matter is: “The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend” in the words of Robertson Davies in the novel Tempest-Tost and as Veronica Roth puts it in Allegiant: “But I think that no matter how smart, people usually see what they’re already looking for, that’s all.”

Life’s broader horizon can only make sense to the ones who are willing to listen to and learn from those who challenge their fore-judged principles, who strive to make a significant impact on new definitions that the world has to offer. They are the ones who are truly unique and knowledgeable.

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