

New thinking to create level playing field

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Comment

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THE Third Festival of Thinkers was held in Abu Dhabi recently with more than 200 experts congregating to discuss urgent issues facing the world today. Among them were at least 10 Nobel Prize laureates from 40 countries which included Professor John Nash, Dr Robin Warren and Professor Richard Ernst. Others who attended were King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, Cherie Blair, Mike Moore, the former prime minister of New Zealand, legendary US basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Dr Fidel Castro of Cuba.

The issues discussed went beyond the current economic crisis and environmental degradation which was aptly themed "Future Capital: Moving Beyond the Economic Crisis". It ranged from illiteracy to poverty, from mental to physical health as though encapsulating the goals and challenges initiated through the Millennium Development Goals which will end in 2015. In this respect, the festival was timely.

In his opening speech, the country's minister of higher education and scientific research said: "This region of the world has a centuries-old tradition of deep and innovative thinking in areas such as astronomy, mathematics and sciences."

He was referring, of course, to the Golden Age of Learning, at a time when the Muslims were engrossed in knowledge generation and dissemination worldwide; not only of their faith but also of the material world, all intertwined.

The minister rightly pointed out the "unique and vital part of the world" that had spanned among the oldest centres of civilisation long before similar centres were replicated in other parts of the world as it is today.

"It is home to some of the earliest universities and many great ideas have been produced by scholars from the Arab world," he reminded the participants.

This is a fact that is worth repeating because, too often, it is buried under a period conveniently labelled by the West as the "Dark Ages". On the contrary, it was, in fact, a vibrant, sophisticated time when non-Europeans made significant contributions for some 800 years, leading eventually to the Renaissance in Western Europe.

This then was followed by a series of periods of colonisation and hegemony that has left a very lasting impact on the kind of thinking and thinkers that is promoted until today.

The issues that are of concern today, therefore, are by no means unrelated to this dominant thinking and the thinkers that we often hold in very high esteem.

Some of these continue to be perpetuated as mainstream thinking in designing and promoting the education system without so much as to challenge it, worse without giving much interest to indigenous values and local wisdom -- all in the name of "modernity".

This has been the subject of much critique of what seems to be a pervasive occidental, if Eurocentric, biases in education despite what Professor Jack Goody of Cambridge University termed as the "theft" by the West of the achievements of other cultures.

It is intended as though to produce "educated" elites who remained quite illiterate about their own cultural identity and roots. In fact, some consider the latter irrelevant and a hindrance to progress. And so education became markedly asymmetrical and failed to act as the leveller of society despite often being touted to be one. Instead there are increasing disparities that permeate into different walks of life: economic, social and of course, cultural, manifested in the lop-sided intellectual development leading to an even more inharmonious way of life, within oneself and without. This is quite apparent in today's world, perhaps never worse at anytime in history.

To quote another speaker at the festival, Swami Parthasarathy, a philosopher and introduced as "India's only living saint": "All universities give you knowledge, which helps you make a living, but you must use your intellect to create the living. It has to come within you. The mind has the greed and if the intellect is not developed, it is too weak to control it. So you see, it is the mind that destroys your peace."

It is encouraging, therefore, to note that sub-themes such as development and the effect of globalisation on culture and language were also taken up during the meeting. For without a deeper awareness and understanding of these emerging issues, there is little hope for new and innovative ideas that will create the path of an alternative way of thinking more suited for the 21st century mindset leading to an even brighter future for the global society.

Unless the many human-made asymmetric thinking and biasness are dealt with in such a way that it creates an enduring level playing field, the disharmony will continue, and the future would be a bleak one for all. Thinking conceptualised and formulated based on what happened on the provincial scale of the Western world can no longer be imposed upon the rest of the world.

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