

The relevance of humanities as resistance

Songs are sneaky things. They can slip across borders. Proliferate in prisons. Penetrate hard shells. The right song at the right moment could change history.

– Pete Seeger

The study of humanities and the liberal arts is underpinned by the question of value, with the life-enriching beliefs and ideas articulated by artists and philosophers. Any attempt to understand the relevance of the humanities in the murky age of neoliberalism is a move towards confronting the social and political magnitude of multiplicity, exile, and, more than anything, the inevitability of debate in a true democracy. It is indeed an exercise in shaping our resistance against ignorance, animosity and forgetting.

A connect

Art indeed, enriches thought and action. We need to inculcate a commitment to aesthetics as a powerful means of emancipatory politics in times of fundamental transition. Herein lies our hope and our dreams. We, who live today, have slowly begun to remember our history, and our poet's songs. A life lived in art struggles to transmit the voices of the masses to the powerful for whom it is increasingly becoming difficult to ignore the rising tide of radical social inquiry and irreverent thinking.

Václav Havel, the playwright from Czechoslovakia, writes: "In such a world full of ruthless economics, fanaticism and tribalism our survival depends on the degree to which we accept responsibility for ourselves and the world." It is in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, that I see this solemn sense of duty in Joad's statement: "Whenever there's a cop beating a guy... whenever there is a fight against the hatred in the air, look for me, Mum, I'll be there." In his voice I hear the cry of George Floyd smothered by a policeman in the United States, and in the farmers' agitation on the borders of Delhi. I hear it in the cry of the tribals steered by Stan Swamy who fought and died for their rights.

I see here an overpowering uncertainty reflected in the lack of balance between the world of art and everyday world of substantive reality. The famous novel by Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, explores the symbiotic connection between political opposition and liberal arts. Had Lenin, he wishes, met the Dadaists in Zurich, the revolutionary vision to fight against totalitarianism would have achieved that interconnectedness, underscoring the entirety of revolutionary transformation of each component of social existence.



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In this synthesis lies the defence of varied cultural space against the burden of a monolithic, religious or ethnic identity. Underpinned by a progressive left-wing perspective, the defence gains in significance, based as it is on the development of the critical art of inheritance, of combing past and present and establishing links to shape a better world.

The *raison d'être*, therefore, of the study of liberal arts buoyed by peace and communal harmony, is articulated by Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's famous work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where he sets out his ideology of liberty from nationality, language and religion. In one of the central statements in world literature, he says: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can..."

The efficacy of coercion of free thought, therefore, becomes negligible when the state makes the appalling slip up of turning our universities into retrogressive organs of the state. Hence, the need arises to seek alternatives and return to philosophy, realising we have made blunders in accepting the forces of neoliberalism and deteriorating democratic conditions.

Focus on the liberal arts

A serious thought then, has to be given to the liberal arts in our universities which seem to have been pushed into the background of state programmes and funding. Alas! I see the end of universities such as Visva Bharati at Santiniketan or the Sabarmati Ashram at Ahmedabad at the hands of vicious right-wing forces. We suffer an amnesia of the universal humanism of Rabindranath Tagore's fearless mind, and his belief in knowledge without confines or creative self-determination.

Take the example of art under the Third Reich. All centres of learning and the liberal arts were shut owing to the mindless fixation with economic productivity that led to Hitler's intensely nationalist war machine. All great thinkers escaped from Germany. One year after the Allied victory, the historian, Friedrich Meinecke, published *The German Catastrophe*, recommending the creation of "Goethe communities", with ceremonies at numerous venues paying homage to great poets and literary figures, supplemented by classical music of the greats. This was the only way of immunising Germany against the onslaught of fascism. Meinecke's faith in the supremacy of humanism

to protect Germany, and possibly the world, from political radicalism can be seen in Goethe's friend Friedrich Schiller's notion of a university free from resentment, xenophobia, and lust for power.

Our humanities programmes, therefore, have to be spirited enough to act as safeguards against the worst irrational thinking that shuts us from the wisdom of "poetry and literature, philosophy and theology, the arts and history". The evocation of the music of Bob Dylan and Dire Straits, Leonard Cohen and Joan Baez, blends with riots in Chicago, with provocative uprisings in Paris and Berlin. The Prague Spring of 1968, the fleeting period of political liberalisation in Czechoslovakia that resulted in the invasion of the Soviet Union, is the single most historic event that inspired many dissident movements. The breathtaking *avant-garde* music of those days opened new pathways to a vibrant cultural and political terrain. Evoking a deeply felt sense of historical milieu of the period, music offered a scathing critique of the anti-humanistic workings of the state apparatus.

A weapon

Undeniably then, education in "culture, philosophy and art" has the potential to bring forth, as Martha Nussbaum writes, an advanced humanist society accomplished to oppose "the rebirth of nationalism, the triviality of technology, the vulgarity of commerce and the cultivated stupidity of the media and the universities". Ostensibly, the deficiency of training in the liberal arts is what restricts political and academic leadership. Steeped in the love of the arts, students will readily come together across divisions of class, race, and religion, and thereby erect a milieu opposed to absolutism. Indeed, in the face of the nightmare of history, it is poetry that becomes the weapon against barbarism and the global phenomenon of persecution.

The foremost critical question before us is to see how and if academic scholarship can challenge the corporate media and the state, evolving a new lexicon that can confront assumed assumptions of knowledge. The 1960s were a way to go about it in the face of contemporary politics, examining and questioning our social and historical situation. Our struggle continues and I am convinced that the memories of that time will be cherished by future generations and provide the basis for the renewal of struggles and campaigns for social justice and freedom of inquiry.