

Edu-Care

Straight Talk

Stopped!

WHEN the students returned after their summer holidays last year, I asked them whether they had enjoyed their holidays. Almost all responded with “the first few days were fun but then the holidays stretched too long”. I remembered how much fun we had in the two month long summer holidays and persisted in my questioning: “But you could have done anything that you wanted!” But again they said that there was nothing to do. This was when the idea of being stopped occurred.

A friend’s interpretation was that this bunch of students does not have much that is happening in their lives apart from school. That may certainly have been the case but why did that stop them from making things happen or doing things they would have found interesting? This led us to consider whether only children are stopped in this way or are adults also stopped?

Given the present pace of life and frenzied activity, it is difficult to think in terms of being ‘stopped’. However, once you do notice it, then it seems as if many people actually seem stopped - for many different reasons. Sometimes it is not so simple to recognize instances of being stopped because some people seemingly on the go are actually stopped. This is especially true when people who are successful and seem on a fast-forward are stopped.

One is not using the word ‘stopped’ to refer to the state of being burnt out or depressed. Nor does it refer only to the common experience of being stopped because one is confused, i.e., pulled in different directions and is therefore unable to choose between two equally desirable or undesirable options. What does it mean to be ‘stopped’? We ask ourselves this question in this issue and show how we experience and relate to this in the context of our life and work. As usual, we explore this from different points of view – the personal and social – and try to make sense of it, but unlike our usual practice, we go a little further this time and dare to offer suggestions.

*Issues of the Day***India Moving?? Naaah!**

Gurveen Kaur

ONCE you notice the phenomenon that we call ‘stopped’, you begin to see it everywhere. It suddenly seems as if the world is on a treadmill – vigorously moving their feet but getting nowhere. Everyone gives the impression of great activity but in actuality are stopped.

Individuals are stopped for they see no way of stopping the madness of the world – the direction, pace, corruption, and contradictions. They continue doing mechanically whatever they are required to do or have been doing because they see no possibility of being able to stop or change anything. Popular lyrics often reflect the feelings of the age and we’ve all heard *“Nothing’s gonna change, in this world we live in, life has no beginning and no end ...NOTHING’S gonna change...”* The hopelessness, the meaninglessness, the purposelessness could not be more starkly or evocatively expressed. A sense of impotence, along with feelings of anger, confusion, and resignation characterize the mood of our times – and, because life does not stop with that realization, there is activity for the sake of

activity and for the sake of continuing existence.

Parents are so often totally at a loss how to support their children. Not just parents who disagree with their children but also those who sympathize and yet find that they are unable to reach out appropriately. They no longer feel they can offer them a clear direction. One is not looking at just the communication gap here but something else – at where after all the thinking and searching one is not clear what needs to be done.

Teachers are unable to find students who want to study seriously and students are stopped for the lack of teachers who can inspire, guide and teach in a meaningful manner. Unemployment figures are going up alarmingly, while employers are looking desperately for people who can do a good job.

Experiencing the ill effects of ecological imbalance, we realize that we have reached a point of no return and that the earth can no longer sustain our present lifestyle. Scientists warn us that the window

that we have - within which we must reverse and contain the exploitation of the environment – will not be open forever. In fact, we have a short time within which we must change our present consumerist lifestyle but we are unable to act intelligently to that warning.

What began with alternatives, is now affecting even people within the mainstream. Counter mainstream initiatives were the first to feel the pinch as spaces within which they operated began closing in and they found it difficult to survive but now others operating within the mainstream find themselves feeling suffocated/ asphyxiated within the system.

As MNCs take over the market, small and medium business houses that have worked in that trade for generations are wiped out. These businesspersons know what is wrong but are powerless to do anything that will stop the onslaught and enable them to get their business going again. Small farmers are even more badly hit and in their desperation are ending their lives. Traditional artisans with their intricate skill, using fossil-fuel-free, indigenous technology find themselves stopped by the practical efficiency of mind-numbing modern

machinery and the logic of the marketplace.

Highly competitive, elite or high-profile international schools or national chain schools are wiping out not just government schools but all other educational institutions no matter how old they are or how high their quality. Parents have serious questions about these international/national chain schools but seek to admit their children into them nonetheless. They are ‘stopped’ as they see no viable alternatives.

Politics is powerless as economics dictates. Talk to any senior government official and s/he will tell you –without any sense of something being amiss - that they are powerless to change the way things operate or are moving. CEOs of big corporate houses may not think or feel they are powerless to effect change but can they really change things and work contrary to the present trend – even when they realize it is wrong. Recently a friend had appealed to the Prime Minister of our country to change something that and all he could say was that “I am powerless to do this – this is beyond my powers”. Glib and pious answers like “No one person can run the show” sidestep the truth that people are powerless to control the system that controls their lives.

How is it possible that even within their own jurisdiction they feel incapable of taking sensible decisions? Is this not an illustration of what it means to be stopped – this inability to take effective action?

As effective rebellion or revolt no longer seem possible, one has instead 9/11 and Rang De Basanti. Narmada Bachao Andolan, which respects the law of the land, with its peaceful and reasoned approach, is impudently and arrogantly brushed aside despite the fact that the justification of its demand is evident.

On a closer examination we find that this is an age of sharp critiques and analysis but short on solutions and silent about viable alternatives. The so-called suggested solutions are nothing but patchy, stopgap arrangements within the existing framework.

We can all see that it is not working but convinced of TINA, we are paralyzed. Conditioned into intolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty we weaken or even kill

the few, small alternatives that come up. With all our wavering, doubts and hesitations we find ourselves unable to back the tentative, exploratory steps of alternative initiatives and visions. We would rather be on firm ground with an established institution however hopeless, wrong, misguided, compromised, or ineffective it is. Weakened ourselves, we weaken others!

Schooled to accept the voice of authority and the majority as the truth, we believe it even when it flies in the face of our own experience. The way out is to trust our instincts, our feelings and our hearts. To forget considerations of practical and not practical, viable and not viable and go with the gut feeling of what seems right. Our minds are too conditioned to show us the way forward. We have been schooled to accept the existing norm as the only rational way. We need to take the leap of faith and only our hearts can help us to do that. Maybe our hearts and our faith can take us where our intelligence and reason dare not.

Living an Absurd Life

Anand Swaminathan

My choosing to halt work has led to much consternation and some amusement among family and friends. A godman-cum-astrologer my mother trusts has suggested I see a shrink. Others, more considerately, hope that I get well soon. That the last decade has been immoderately rewarding - materially, socially and personally - partly explains their stand. But their larger concern is with my refusal to participate in mainstream processes or accept contemporary social constructs. Let me explain.

My early aspirations revolved around the deities of wealth, power, esteem and romance. It was easy to see that these were relative deities, and that they existed only because I thought they did. But it took enormous discipline and time to weave this realisation into practice. The desire for purposeful living seems inherent in my condition; therefore, only when I discovered a new set of assumptions was I able to let go of my bourgeois ideology.

These new assumptions - the socialist salad of reason, equity, compassion and action - seemed to offer a stronger basis on which to

reconstruct my philosophy, especially when garnished with the oriental desire for enlightenment. This period saw me abandon a traditional corporate career and engage in developmental work.

Like science and religion, philosophy too needs starting assumptions upon which to construct a certain world-view. But every philosopher realises that all first assumptions are creations of the human mind. Compassion and reason might hold greater appeal than conflict or faith, but such intuitive appeal is insufficient to suggest their superiority.

Counter views are equally legitimate. For instance, in the context of ecology, humanity seems a pestilence. In the cosmic context, humanity is of no significance. And when philosophy is shorn of its desire to see meaning and purpose, it is difficult to disagree that the world is essentially without meaning or purpose. Hence, since we do not have the luxury of choosing a limited universe from which to operate, every philosophy is necessarily a simplistic and minimalist model - we see what we want to see.

As Camus argues, a man cannot respond to the absurdity of existence with celebration, as it fundamentally disagrees with his need for “reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle”. When I peel the onion of my assumptions, after each layer I expect to see an absolute core. Yet, when the final layer is stripped, nothing remains.

After decades of decadence, I stood with one foot in conditioned

certainty and the other foot in absurdity. It only seemed wise that I halt.

This halt, which began in despair, has now taken positive tones when I asked myself, is this not the beginning of freedom? This is not the anarchist’s freedom from choice; rather it is the optimist’s freedom to choose.

And for the moment, I choose to explore.

My first haircut

It is perhaps a tale that real makeovers should be made of. But makeovers are of course mostly in the realm of make-believe whereas this story is far from that. This is about believing in a simple wish and making it happen. This is my believe-make, my makeover - a world of possibilities.

Growing-up is about making choices within an imposed framework of family, school and also in my case, religion. I grew up a Sikh boy, turbaned and later bearded. With age, I began to realize the difference between my face and my classmates'. I noticed their neat haircuts, their clean-shaven faces, their confident manner and occasional running of hands through hair. My own reflection in the mirror began to alienate me. It 'stopped' being mine. I felt I had been stopped from being who I really wanted to be.

There were almost two decades of stopping. Gradually, I was given the choice of the colour of turban, to slightly trim beards but never let go of them completely. It's a choice most exercise willingly out of staunch faith in the nobility of Sikh identity. Stopping happens voluntarily, a conformist's reflex,

never questioning the impositions. Some get completely inured in the lifestyle and do it because that's how they were born and brought up. In a way, 'not questioning' is a large part of being 'stopped', of stopping oneself and sometimes, others.

I had decided to cut my hair long back - the image of my older first cousin with a fresh haircut had etched itself in my subconscious. I asked myself, 'Why can't I do it?' And I knew I wanted to, and that I won't be allowed to. That I had to work a way out of the boundaries, crossing which meant public transgression and unforgivable sacrilege. And then one day I did! Six months after I went to Delhi, I did it. The consequences had been well laid out before me by my parents. The shame of family and the rage of relatives were to join in a 'noble cause' to chastise the overstepping of the religious enclosure they had built over years. And what had I done? It was like losing a religious virginity, only that there was never going to be a matrimonial event or occasion for me to lose it later.

The experience of sitting in the salon chair was almost like flying for the first time. Wearing my

turban, I felt slightly bashful sitting next to a row of men, whose ranks I was going to join shortly. I opened it slowly and let my hair fall free. Sitting back, I could not bid adieu to my reflection in the mirror as my glasses had been removed. My eyes closed and in my head several people went to work at setting into motion, hitherto stopped sensations. After almost an hour, I woke up to

the burning tinge of aftershave lotion. The image of a shaving kit replacing my set of turbans and comb appeared in my head. I looked into the mirror. The reflection was far from familiar. I had changed the way I wanted to look. I had stopped the people from stopping me any more. I had made a real difference. Not only to the way I looked but to the way I lived as well.

Are we really stopped?

B Syamasundari

All dialogues broken are instances of people 'stopped'. Stopped has a negative connotation, indicating an impediment that keeps one from moving forward with the dialogue. However, we need to clarify if moving from one position to another is indeed the only desirable, or the means to go ahead. But when we say that a conversation broken down is a signal of being stopped, we are saying there is something more than just the inability to progress. We are talking about debates that include a select few, multiple forums each of which engages a specific audience, each able to only provide direction for moving in opposition to one another. We are therefore contesting the view gradually gaining currency that travelling together is not possible; that it slows down the momentum of the journey and it does not contribute in real terms to the community at large.

You may well ask how it is that our society can be said to be moving forward, coping with many changes and competing for a place among the best, in the absence of real dialogue. The travel does not stop altogether even if talking together is impossible. The only issue at stake is whether we are aware of

the number of people we leave along the way and the others that we forcibly drag with us. This may strike you as an exaggeration, when we occupy a place as the world's largest democracy, one which is alive and vibrant. But the truth of the matter is, today a single measure of success has achieved universal approval—and this measure allows only a few to 'measure up'. The marginalized section also believes that inclusion into the reigning parameter alone is the route to accomplishment and therefore success. The effective erasing of varied voices can happen only when there is little visible space for maneuvering. If there has to be a critique we have to step out of the paradigm and stand aside to be able to look at the existing measure with an open mind. Otherwise the juggernaut of the mainstream will roll on in the illusion of carrying forward a democratic agenda.

It is time for us to consider any debate that polarizes people and nations today and search for new ways to take it further. For instance, the argument about tradition and modernity and our location with regard to it forces us into one camp or the other. The sub debates under

this are development and anti development, religious and secular and so on. These have acquired the quality of conversation stoppers. Both sides (or the multiple sides) see nothing beyond their position and convince themselves that there is no movement unless the other side backs down or if they give in. If this happens between friends they set it down to individual preference, put it aside and continue the friendship. Are we ready to recognize that we are stuck and begin afresh or at least embark on the process of loosening? As long as we are not prepared to see that it is a matter of being fixed in our understanding and not being able to see other dimensions, we will either externalize the problem or reduce it to a personal preference. Either way, it becomes non negotiable.

Why do we bother with the issue at all if the work is getting done? That is, if people are somehow pulling together and sinking their differences to move ahead? There is no need for a forcible reconciliation or pushing the differences under for us to move ahead. Taking a leaf out of scientific enquiry, we need to proceed from observations to tentative premises that are checked out in daily practice and finally lead to paradigms. These are models which underlie practice

and help in articulating the overarching theory. This paradigm becomes our lens, our *weltenschaung*, which forms the basis of our understanding and actions. Slowly as the paradigm gains ground, there comes an observation which tentatively but firmly poses a problem to the existing model. Then the paradigm gives itself a gentle shake to readjust and make place for the new observation. The query may sit uncomfortably in the beginning but slowly may fit into the model. Alternatively, it may continue a shaky existence where the slightest push may dislodge it. Now the observation dons the role of a hypothesis and hangs in isolation outside the mainstream. If this stands the test of time it will slowly start gathering kin hypotheses and ultimately may succeed in replacing the earlier paradigm. There is a continuous sense of motion in the whole journey of the paradigm. There is a sense of a true dialogue happening throughout the process of unraveling and reformulation of the new model. If we apply the same logic to the cases of dialogues broken, can we find ways of reaching a common point that can restart the conversation?

The two extremes of an argument are like two fixed points equi-distant

from each other with no knowledge of how to travel towards one another. The two points represent two disparate worldviews with their constituent elements circumscribing their centres. To start any movement, the limits have to be made less definite, the certainties shaken and new queries questioning the fundamental positions need to be posed. This is the first step towards the beginning of the journey and a commencement of dialogue between polarities. Therefore, we need not be “stopped” but can – with a bit of effort – be part of a continuing journey.

What do we do when we are stopped? Retreat into oneself to find time for reflection or remove

ourselves from the familiar places and people to find the time and space for reflection? But why do we want to discuss the issue; do we want to make a case for stopping and argue the merits of the case? Or do we want to look at people largely caught in time-bound routines, not enjoying the process and looking for relaxation elsewhere? For instance, the changing nature of work takes us away from ourselves externalizes it. We are forced to look for a process of reintegration in order to get back the sense of unity. However the articulation of this separation is not very conscious and it requires “stopping” in every sense of the term to look into oneself to understand the matter.

Unstoppable!

The bus stops
 at a traffic junction
 and I watch
 the frozen tableaux
 around-beside-in-between
 the crossroads.
 Children with runny noses
 selling sympathy
 for one-rupee coins;
 Cars-jeeps-autos-bikes
 spewing carbon emissions
 while their owners
 check impatience
 with cell-phones;
 Executives in back seats
 barely look up
 uninterrupted behind the
 business paper;
 College students
 lugging backpacks
 light on knowledge, heavy
 on projects and promises;
 I watch, I smell, I hear
 I wonder
 at the tick-tocking
 connections made-unmade-
 remade
 in my mind.
 I have just enough
 time
 to wish
 that things would stop
 long enough
 for me to take a breath
 and understand
 things as they really are.

But the lights change
 red to amber to green
 in the space of a half-thought
 and the bus moves
 un-freezing the tableaux
 just before
 it makes any sense.

...

The way I look at it, there are too many things around me that stop me from stopping! Stopping myself from running at high speed or even medium speed on a track I haven't quite figured out the width and topography of, towards a goal I'm not sure really exists or one that I even want to reach, alongside fellow runners I barely know. Or stopping to understand the delicate ways in which what I do connects with the complexities of the world's daily life—or even the daily life of my immediate community, Or even stopping the way I do and think, to take even a small side-step to reflect whether it is this that keeps me from stopping the things that make me feel powerless, unable to change what makes me unhappy or dissatisfied.

Right from when the alarm clock on my mobile device goes off—an insistent beep accompanied by a synthetic voice that says “it's five-o' clock, time to get up!” – I am on

call. On call for the myriad demands of the day, and for the schedule set by an economy and social system I am held hostage by. Quite willingly held hostage, I might add!

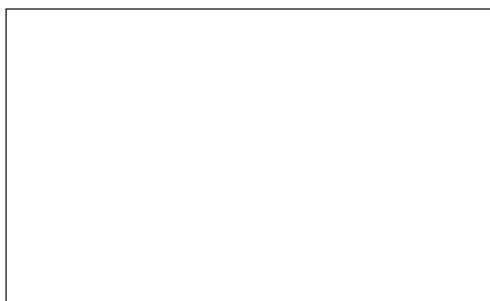
I say 'willingly' because I have not made any effort to loosen the chains that bind me to this routine. My excuse—and by now I have conveniently convinced myself of its inevitability—is that I cannot step out of the structure, lest it collapse! Or worse still, that I might be in a space that has no binding structure, where I might have to create not only that which my skills and training equip me to, but also the circumstances in which the creation happens, the schedule, the beginning and end... in short, the decision to do, when to do, what to do and how to do would rest entirely on the strength of my unprepared mind!

It should be fairly clear by now that what stops me from stopping is the fear of what might happen next. And of course the worry that there would be no external force or set of rules to blame if I do not succeed. In fact, even the very notion of success would be up to me, in a sense! So much easier to simply drift with the current, and just not stop!

Why is such a stopping necessary? Much of what we do, day to day, is done out of sheer habit. We fall into familiar patterns of interaction, we do things in a certain routine, almost unthinking manner. When we run into a problem, say, have an argument that seems to have no resolution, we tend to respond from within the structure we are caught inside, in the patterns of response we have been used to. It's very hard for us to look at things differently, to truly 'stop' ourselves from going in ways we are used to and begin to move in different directions of thought and behaviour. And unless we can do that, at least for a short while, unless we are able to remove ourselves from situations and literally 'stop' ourselves, we will never see anything in a truly different light.

Even when we are not in the middle of a problem, 'stopping' becomes necessary just to gain perspective. In a way, perhaps what I am talking about is no different from the stillness of the mind that is gained from deep meditation. There is a clarity that emerges from distancing oneself from the context one inhabits and from oneself, essentially.

BOOK POST



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Edu-Care is 'a forum for education concerns' but we do not subscribe to the narrow definition of education restricted to classroom issues or schooling. Education, for us, is not only what happened to us or was taught in schools but is a lifelong process of how we define ourselves. Education is a continuous process of self-realisation through self-clarification, self-definition and self-determination through grappling with life issues, with contemporary dilemmas and debates for a fresh understanding, eschewing second hand solutions. A culling out of personal values from within a social, cultural, temporal, technological, political and economic matrix of received wisdom that one neither blindly accepts nor blindly rejects. An attempt at making definite examined life choices. It is this personal quest and journey that we share with our friends in Edu-Care. It is an attempt at a consistent, considered, critical and creative engagement with contemporary dilemmas, debates and issues.

(Gurveen Kaur)