

Attitude is Every Thing

- N D Dani

He first came to my second story house ten years ago. The stairs that reach a person to the first floor of my house are narrow and turn at the right angle in the middle. The turn needs extreme care as the step at the turn is the shape of a narrow triangle. A sighted person can stumble if he is climbing these steps for the first time. My worry at the moment was acute because the visitor was a frail person of forty-something and blind in both eyes. I kept instructing the adolescent escort of Mr Srivastava and was not at ease until he had reached my study and been seated in a chair.

I now took a close look at my visitor. Forty-something, short-statured, stooping, shrivelled and totally blind, he was a picture of despair. Pity was the obvious response. I told my wife to get us some tea and biscuits. I wanted to be very courteous. I didn't want my guest to have the faintest thought that he was being unwelcome in my house because he was blind. He had already introduced himself to me. I noted that he could handle spoken English well. He was running an organization for the visually handicapped and asked me if I knew any blind boy or girl in the town. "There is a bias in our society which makes the parents of blind children put them out of social visibility. They are given food and clothes but never sent to school. Such parents try to hide the fact that they have a blind child in their family," Mr Srivastava told me. I immediately remembered the case of Ved Mehta, the famous Indian writer in English, now settled in America. Ved Mehta lost his eyesight to cerebral meningitis before he could celebrate his fourth birthday. I had read that his doctor father's decision to send his son to a school for blind children in Bombay was not supported by his own relations. From Bombay he went to Oxford and then to the USA where he studied at Harvard University. We know this blind man as a celebrated writer in English. Ved has written that the Hindus consider blindness a punishment for sins committed in a previous incarnation. But his father, a doctor, tried to fight the superstition and gave him an education, like his other children, so that he could become a self-supporting citizen of the world. But Ved Mehta was born in 1934. What surprised me was that even today there are people in India who think about blindness the way people thought about it many many years back. Mr Srivastava had made me aware of one of the blindspots of twentieth century Indian society. I had read about the Braille method of teaching to the blind people but knew nothing about the Braille method. I felt ashamed at my own lack of understanding. In fact I realized that my information about the new digital teaching aids for the blind was extremely limited. Mr Srivastava told me about the

pedagogical activities and tools available at his organization.

I was inquisitive but I was aware that a blind person can have no visual clue to his audience' interest in what he is saying. I, therefore, kept punctuating his sentences with a deferential 'True' or 'That's right'. I would also ask specific questions about the work of the organization he was working with. I was alert about the words I chose and the way I intoned them. Never for a moment did I want him to feel that I was treating him in a cavalier fashion. My only brush with the blind persons till then had been in the form of beggars whom one gives some loose change out of pity for their wretchedness and then puts them out of his mind. Here I was with a blind man who spoke English tolerably well and ran an organization to support and educate the blind.

In the course of our conversation, Srivastava sahib told me that he was struck by glaucoma, a dreaded eye disease, in the early boyhood and lost both his eyes. I knew about glaucoma. I knew that in this disease the optic nerve is damaged and nowhere in the world there is any treatment to reverse the damage done. I also knew that only palliative treatment is available and one can manage very well if one takes the treatment religiously. Perhaps Srivastava saheb's parents were poor and may have tried quack treatments which could not save his eyesight. Had his parents been well-to-do and were educated people and had taken him to a doctor, he would have been seeing the world with his own eyes and not through the eyes of his young escort. I felt miserable at the poor man's misery. I knew my Milton and Milton's pain in the lines in his sonnet where the blind poet bemoans: "When I think how my light is gone/ Ere half my days in this dark world and wide." I felt miserable at Mr Srivastava's misery. One does not know how to console a person in these circumstances. Also, I realized that the words of commiseration sound so false.

Mr Srivastava told me that his organization functioned on voluntary donations by philanthropic persons. I was most happy to be asked to do something concrete for this unfortunate man. He took a couple of English language magazines from me to be read out to him by his young escort. I found it difficult to put him out of my mind and found myself telling my wife how lucky I was in having the gift of sight. Was not the Almighty very kind to me?

Mr Srivastava came every year in September-October. I always tried to be most courteous, never seeing him off without a cup of tea and a modest snack. I noted that he never had the same escort for more than two years. This was obvious. Which boy could commit him to serve a blind man for life? How tough it is for a blind man to go through life, I wondered. Years went on. Inflation necessitated a raise in the donation. After all what I gave him was birdfeed. Mr Srivastava knew several useful skills like repairing cane chairs and requested me to get him some work. I realized that the poor man was living a precarious existence.

Mr Srivastava came last in October. I brought him in respectfully and enquired about his activities over the year. I never brought the question of donation first thing in the day. I would never let him feel that he came for a few bucks. Even a blind man has dignity and though in need of

money doesn't want to be treated like a beggar. I asked him if he could address the students of my department at our college. I knew English was not a problem for him. He could talk about how people should behave with blind persons. Blindness, I said, was a misfortune, something about which one could do nothing but blind people ought to be treated with kindness.

He kept quiet at my words for several minutes. When he proceeded to speak, he had a surprise for me. "*Blindness is not a misfortune. It is an impediment. Everybody has an impediment.*" And then he shot a sentence at me which gave a glimpse of the strength that kept him going, "*You know how to drive a car. I know how to make a car.*"

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An International Refereed Journal of Postmodern Studies

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