

Inveterate Optimist

N.D. DANI

Optimism in human beings is a great quality. Nature has optimism programmed in human genes. Nature knows that humans will not survive in the harsh environs in which they are born if they do not have optimism ingrained in them. That's a great example of Nature's mercy. In fact, humans get depressed if their natural tendency to hope and hope for the better is artificially or naturally thwarted for a long time. Look at a baby. It wants its mother to pick it up and when it sees its mother it throws its hands and legs optimistically towards her. If the mother doesn't pick her or him up on several occasions, the baby will get depressed and there are psychological studies to show that such babies turn into anti-social beings on growing up. Among English poets Robert Browning had the best reputation (or is it the worst?) for being an optimist in his poetry and, one would like to believe, in his life, too. However, his contemporary, Lord Tennyson, has a more cautious, realistic optimism. Sample his 'Ulysses'. The great Greek warrior is egging on his tired sailors to sail on but he doesn't give them unalloyed hope. Ulysses' hope is rooted in reality. He is not unaware of the dangers that lurk behind those who decide to lead a life of adventure or misadventure. Sample the lines: "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down: / It may be that we shall touch the Happy Isles,/ And see the great Achilles, whom we knew" Robert Browning appears to be a no-holds-barred optimist throwing all caution, nay negativity, to the winds. How else could the 19th century British poet, defying all scientific evidence

to the contrary a la Charles Darwin, hope in his well-known poem 'The Last Ride Together' that the moment of his riding with his girlfriend (now turned against their relationship) could be frozen for eternal joy! You are familiar with these lines but just to refresh your memory: "What if heaven be that, fair and strong/ At life's best, with our eyes upturn'd/ Whither life's flower is first discerned,/ We, fix'd so, ever should so abide?/ What if we still ride on, we two/ With life forever old yet new/ Changed not in kind but in degree/ The instant made eternity,--/ And heaven just prove that I and she/ Ride, ride together, forever ride?" You would rightly say that this kind of optimism cannot be improved upon. This is the ultimate variety of optimism.

But I shall tell you about a person who having learnt his optimism from the likes of Browning can beat his models at their own game. This man is no other than my good friend Mr Khanna who had taught Browning to university college students for several decades. I am sure, the Brownian variety of optimism is not a part of his intellectual make-up; it has entered his blood, nay, his genetic material. Yes, he is a professor, a professor of English literature. Many years back a strange idea entered his professorial head. He decided to set up an English medium primary school at his house. His children having left home and the town for metropolitan cities for better opportunities for higher studies, he thought it right to open a school for children. For the starters, he and his wife, who also happens to be a teacher, were sufficient to run the school, or so he thought. Later on, he asked a needy student to help him out at his newfound school. The school gradually picked up speed. Although the building was not very large, the rooms proved large enough to house the beginning classes. Came 15th August, the Independence Day. In the meantime, the professor-cum-owner-cum-manager of his 'Children's Academy' acquired a second hand audio system which was used to address the children at the time of the morning assembly at the school. This second-hand audio system also came handy when the school had some

cultural function by its children besides the mandatory, Independence Day, Republic Day, Gandhi Jayanti and Chacha Nehru's Birthday Celebrations.

Every morning, tiny tots came with fresh faces and a spring in their steps (unlike the children in Jacques' Seven-Ages Ages speech in 'As You Like It') dressed in the school uniform and the school began. In our small town, the school gradually acquired a reputation of sorts for imparting education to small children in the much-wanted English medium. Occasionally, I would drop in to ask Prof Khanna if I could do anything for his brainchild. He told me that he had decided to hold the Independence Day celebrations this year at his school with some fanfare. I wished him luck. He said he wanted to invite the local MLA to address the children and the parents on the Independence Day. I knew that the MLAs are in great demand on Independence and Republic Days but since Mr Grover, the MLA, was rather a down-to-earth politician, we hoped that he would not say no to our request to make him the chief guest at Professor Khanna's 'Children's Academy'. I knew the MLA sahib lived in the same town and since we knew him and he knew us, persuading him to honour the fledgling school of Prof Khanna won't be a problem. On the Independence Day, the school was decorated with buntings. Prof Khanna had dragged his drawing room furniture to the open courtyard which, on Cultural Days, doubled up as Celebration Space. (Finances were obviously a never-ending worry and the school just managed to pay the salary of the two lady teachers it now had. Obviously, home items, like furniture and crockery had to be borrowed from Mrs Khanna to serve the VIP guests and parents on Cultural Function Days.) Grover sahib, as expected, condescended to grace the occasion and the modest Invitation Cards that Prof Khanna got printed with money from his salary used this expression 'condescended' to highlight the generosity of the local MLA, Mr Grover, towards promoting the cause of primary education in his Constituency. Prof Khanna requested his neighbour Gupta ji

to lend plastic chairs to seat the parents/ guardians and other guests. Mr Gupta who ran a catering business in the town agreed to charge a nominal charge in deference to the fact that he was supplying chairs to a school meant for children. In fact, Mr Gupta's own grand-daughter was a student at 'Children's Academy' and he hoped that this gesture of his would put his ward in the good books of Prof Khanna and his teaching staff. Children were given elaborate instructions by Prof Khanna himself on how to behave when Grower sahib, the local MLA, comes for the function to unfurl the National Flag on 15th August. Miss Neena and Miss Shaila, two ex-students of Prof Khanna and now the teaching staff of 'Children's Academy' were given detailed instructions as to how to conduct the ceremony on the Independence Day. Mrs Khanna, who gave his time to the school after her own College was over, was entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the refreshment part. The children, tiny tots that they were, were made to mug up their little speeches on patriotism by Miss Neena and Miss Shailja. All of us looked forward to a grand function on the 15th of August. There is a saying in English, "The best laid out plans of men and mice may go awry." I think this saying catches the element of surprise that all human efforts and enterprises carry in their womb. You leave home with your family to have a picnic on a day of sunshine and by the time you leave the picnic spot you are drenched to the bone because who could ever think of packing umbrellas along with cheese sandwiches on a sunny day. The Greek dramatists had an uncanny understanding of this element. They knew that life has this quality of springing a surprise at us and sometimes this surprise may take a rather nasty turn. The Greek tragic playwrights placed this element of 'tragic irony' in their plays at the right moment and sprung it at both the character concerned in the play and the pleasantly expectant audience at the most appropriate time to exact the maximum of sighs from the most hardy among the audience.

The Independence Day celebrations began at Prof Khanna's Children's Academy' right on the dot. Mr Grower came on time and after the National Flag had been unfurled, the children began their well-rehearsed short speeches. Mr Grower was obviously a much-wanted man on the Independence Day as he was expected to be at other functions too. He requested to be relieved quickly. You cannot let an MLA go without making a speech. Speech is his most delicious repast. After some deliberations between Prof and Mrs Khanna it was decided that the Children's speeches could be resumed later on. Mr Grower would make his speech full of patriotism and the function could continue after he had taken leave of the guests at the school.

Miss Neena announced on the audio system that there was a slight change in the time-table and the next item on the agenda would now be a speech by Shri Grower ji, the Honourable Vidhayak ji. She requested Prof Khanna, the President-cum-Manager of 'Children's Academy', to formally welcome Shri Grower. Prof Khanna in his wisdom to curry favour with the bigwig went out of his way to mention the previous landmarks of the political career of Shri Growerr ji. Prof Khanna made a special mention of the contribution of Shri Grower ji towards the town of Lakhanpur. He requested in his chaste English and with appropriate element of linguistic sycophancy that it was indeed a great gesture by Shri Grower ji, Honourable MLA sahib, to bless the children of the school on this noble occasion.

And then the unexpected happened. Nobody knew how it could happen. Vidhayak Grower ji stood up to bless the children and to give his good wishes to the guests and the school. What we actually heard on the audio system was something like this: "Grr, ton seen pon. Grr pon seen ton. More grr, more ton, more seen, more pon." Somebody brought it to the notice of Prof Khanna. He decided to repair the fault. He set down to the task with complete seriousness. He twisted first this knob, then some other knob and triumphantly asked us if the sound was now

clear. We loudly told Prof Khanna that all that we could hear on the public address system was grr seen ton pon. Prof Khanna had learnt his lessons in optimism from Robert Browning. He bent himself to do more repair work. More twisting of knobs. This time in addition to twisting the knobs, he gave several slaps repeatedly to the audio box which was not co-operating on this day. (Probably, the box thought that it was a non-cooperation function like Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement and decided to contribute its mite towards this noble mission.) Mr Grower was puzzled but ignoring the chaos he decided to continue. As far as I remember Prof Khanna had never studied even basic science in any of his classes, forget any knowledge of electronics. Therefore, I requested my dear friend to send somebody to the main chowk and get a new audio system on hire. I said that since it was time for the shops to have already opened, he could do that. But Prof Khanna is an optimist, of the inveterate Brownian variety. "Don't worry, I will fix it right now." The way he put stress on the word 'will' made me fear for the whole show what with the MLA sahib himself being the chief guest. Prof Khanna engaged himself seriously, ignoring his wife's similar request to have another audio system from the market. He twisted all the knobs once again. Once again, he hit the right and left sides of the audio box. His knowledge being limited to twisting and hitting what more could he do. He asked his wife to get him the screw driver, the one they used to tighten loose nuts, oh no, not in his head, but in household items like Mixie, table fan etc. I wondered what Prof Khanna, a Professor of Literature, intended to do with a screwdriver. I was afraid for his safety. Electrical items can take only so much nonsense and no more, even if you are a respectable professor. If, with total ignorance of machines, you open a machine connected to electric supply the chances of having an electric shock, from the contact of the screwdriver with a naked wire were always very strong. I warned Prof Khanna. "Don't worry. I'll be careful." I prayed to God. Nothing came out of the opening of the box and the

application of the screwdriver at two or three places. In the meantime, Grower sahib, who had decided to go ahead with his Independence Day speech anyway, went ahead. All that we heard was: "grr, seen, ton, grr, pon, pain, paan, grr." I wondered if this combination of sounds could be recorded on a cassette and adopted as our own, very private, anthem for the 'Children's Academy' and Prof Khanna, the President and owner of the school, could make it mandatory to play this cassette after the school assembly every day.

At last the speech was over and the guests and the chief guests were requested by Mrs Khanna and the teaching staff of the school to have refreshment. Prof Khanna looked very confident. "What makes you so excited, Mr Khanna?" "Didn't I at last set right the fault in the audio system, Dani saab?" "Who told you that, my friend? All that the guests heard of Grower sahib's speech was seen, grr, pon, ton, pain, grr."

At this Mr Khanna's lower jaw fell. He looked crestfallen.