

Taj Wala

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In 1986, one of my close friends needed a “no objection certificate” signed by the dean of our medical college. It was a pivotal piece of paper for his academic career. Obtaining such a certificate in India is a monumental task. After making many futile visits to dean’s office and even after paying a service fee to front office, it could not be done. Understandably, dean was a busy man and his hands were full with more important things. Deadline came uncomfortably close and it was Saturday at 1.30 PM. On my insistence, we decided to make one more trip to the dean’s office. To our disappointment, the dean had left for the day.

In a state of helplessness, my friend and I sat in Khooni Darwaza, an old monument across the front gate of my medical college and discussed why life is punishing us. Then I had a sudden surge of brilliance. Dean lived in a staff quarter at walking distance from our college. I suggested that we go to his house and plead our case! After some persuasion, he agreed and we walked towards his residence with mixed feelings of hope and apprehension. We requested the “housekeeper” who opened the door that we have to see the dean for an important matter and it will take only a few minutes. The request was denied. We were politely but firmly informed that such an unscheduled meeting is not possible and dean cannot be disturbed. We made many pleas but they all fell on deaf ears. The housekeeper was just carrying out his orders. There was no malicious or financial intent. Although it was none of my business, being a curious creature, I asked the man what exactly is dean doing and why it is so unholy to disturb him at this time. With an expression of a little smirk and conspiracy, he told that dean was watching a movie. He further volunteered to inform us that the movie was titled “Saajan Bina Suhagan” (Rajendra Kumar, Nutan, 1978) and it had to be watched urgently because the rented movie and the video cassette recorder had to be returned by the evening. Walking back in total disgust, dejection and disappointment, I suddenly remembered Taj wala.

I teach medical students in a local college. Last year has been an unprecedented challenge for education due to Covid-19 pandemic. It was summer of 2020 and education leaders were in panic. How to continue education program during lock down? A zoom meeting was called to discuss the best ways to tackle the situation so that education

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does not suffer. The meeting lasted for more than 90 minutes. To my dismay, the entire focus was on how to conduct exams from a distance making sure that students do not cheat. There was very little, if any, discussion on how to make sure that students learn the core concepts so that they are prepared to serve as effective future health care providers. When the meeting ended, staring at blank computer screen, I once again suddenly remembered Taj wala.

So, who is this Taj wala who I keep remembering when my mind is under some kind of academic turmoil?

In 1970s, there was a corner grocery store in Kamla Nagar, New Delhi. The name of the store was Taj store. The owner of this store was one of the most humble and respected man in neighborhood. Everyone called him Taj wala. His honesty in daily transactions was acknowledged by both, his friends and business rivals. He was a simple man with a predictable daily routine. The man was an avid reader of newspaper. He would read entire newspaper cover to cover. That kept him up to date on local as well as national affairs. He conducted his business transactions with utmost integrity. By all accounts he was a successful businessman. However, as I got to know him more, I started to feel that he was not satisfied with what he does. I later realized that his true passion was something else.

I started going to his store when I was in 5th or 6th grade. Initially, it was all business. You give him the grocery list, he gives you stuff, you pay and business is completed. After about an year, he started to open up a little. He started to ask me where I go to school and how I am doing in studies. One day he asked me to show him my next report card from school. After looking at it, he gave a nod of approval and gave me a Cadbury chocolate. I did not fully understand but I quietly accepted the unexpected gift.

After that, we started talking a little more. Being well read, he had opinion on nearly everything that was important in our times. You could ask him who is selling the best quality "Manjha" (glass impregnated kite thread) in the market. He could predict with near 100% accuracy who will win elections in Delhi. He held some surprising views about Indian movies and artists. For instance, he found the comparison between

Mohamed Rafi and Kishore Kumar to be a futile debate. His opinion was that both will be immortal and will continue to entertain music lovers forever. His view that Asha Bhosle is a more versatile artist than Lata Mangeshker may be controversial but probably true. Without going into unnecessary details, he disapproved Zeenth Aman as an actress because he did not find her movie roles to be suitable for Indian youth of contemporary times. Once he mentioned how under-rated and under-utilized a little known cricketer named Salim Durrani was. Decades later, Sir Gary Sobers, a legendary West Indian cricketer of all times reiterated exactly the same opinion about Salim Durrani in a famous interview.

He owned wide knowledge. Many people would ask him about “home remedies” for minor illnesses. Many concerned fathers would seek his approval before marrying their daughters. He had opinions about business, politics, religion, entertainment, crime, corruption, poverty and everything else. I could go on, but you get the point.

But he spoke very little about himself. On gentle probing, I tricked him into divulging a few details. This is what I gathered about his past. He came to Delhi from Lahore at the time of partition. He never uttered a word about the hardships he may have faced during that difficult time. In Lahore, he was attending a local school. He was strong in Math but weak in English. He made a study group with a friend, who was weak in Math but strong in English. So, he would teach math to his friend and his friend would help him with English. They prepared together for Matriculation exam. Unfortunately, the results were not as expected. Taj wala failed math exam and his friend failed English exam! Undaunted, he started to prepare for supplementary exam. However, most unfortunately, 1947 migration made it impossible for him to take the supplementary exam and his education was rudely interrupted. Due to financial and logistic reasons, he would not pursue his education any further.

Yet, he highly valued education. He was not satisfied with his success in business. He missed being in an educational environment. He wanted both his sons to be highly educated. They were soft spoken, honest, friendly and intelligent but both decided to pursue business rather than education. He was sad about it and in a rare moment, he did share his personal agony about this matter with me.

By 9th and 10th grade I was expected to show him my report card after every important examination. While he liked good results, he would never show disappointment when results were reflective of my over-indulgence in cricket and flying kites. He would often make common sense suggestions about how I could improve my grades. He held a strong view that teachers are the most critical contributors for a vibrant society and they need to be acknowledged more for their contribution and hard work. He always asked me to be respectful and “be a good student”. I still do not know how he knew that

I could desperately use that advice.

The most surprising was the day when I received my medical entrance exam results. It was to be reported at 2.00 PM. Posting got delayed a bit. I got in. After informing my parents and making a short visit to Hanuman Mandir close to Kirori Mal College, I went to see him. To my surprise, he was walking restlessly, waiting to hear from me. I gave him the good news. To my surprise, he was in tears. He called it one of the happiest days of his life! His only message to me was that serving other as physician is an honor and privilege that only a few get in their life. So, use this opportunity wisely, he told me.

He maintained a keen interest in my education thereafter. He made many useful suggestions to improve my medical knowledge which I did not get from anyone else. For example, he always advised me that to understand a difficult topic, first learn the basics. He often mentioned that strong foundation makes a strong house. He promoted me to read beyond my prescribed text books. He asked me to spend more time in library. He was no longer a big believer in group studies (perhaps due to his own experience). Most critically, he advised me not to waste too much time learning unnecessary details about difficult topics. Rather, he asked me to learn how to practically apply established concepts well in my future practice. He fully understood the importance of innovative research and development. He always stressed the importance of keeping the mind open to new knowledge and new concepts.

After decades of being involved deeply in medicine and academia, I cannot find anyone who had such passion and in depth knowledge about education and its importance for the society. I wish he were the dean of my medical school. He would have signed that “no objection certificate” as a matter of utmost priority. I wish he were in the zoom meeting last year. He would have steered the discussion in right direction. I miss his wisdom in this confusing time when education system is under serious threat from pandemic as well from many academicians and policy makers who have little understanding of the subject. He would have many sensible suggestions that are so desperately needed. This man was fit to be a vice chancellor or president of any university in the world because he understood the importance and primary mission of education. He proved one thing for sure: You don't need even matriculation degree to be an educator. As a corollary, high educational degrees do not essentially make someone a true educator.

Many people leave lasting positive effects on others. These may include one's parents, teachers, friends, and religious or political leaders, movie artists, successful entrepreneurs etc. However, for a grocery store owner to have such a positive effects that I can feel even after several decades is rather unusual. He passed away sometime in late 1980s. His legacy and teachings are still alive after nearly 4 decades in my mind.
