Skills for a better life

-By Soumitra Subinaya

Meet Chanchala Devi, a rural impoverished daily-wage-earner widow in India who had applied for a grant under a government scheme which provided $700 to a poor person to build a house. However, she waited over four years watching wealthier neighbours getting grants and building brick-and-mortar structures while she languished in her mud-and-stick hut. What could have she done? Meet Manu, a poor sewer-worker who works under unhealthy conditions daily indulging in manual scavenging in manholes and sewers. What could he do? Meet some millions of Indians, the people who risk their lives every time they commute in overcrowded buses. Is there anything that can be done? Together we are a bunch of people whose experiences made us realize three things:

1. Ignorance is not bliss.
2. Knowledge is Power.
3. A better life is one in which by means of right knowledge acquired with right skills, a person can successfully achieve her/his rightful ends.

After having declared my concept of a better life above, now, through this essay I will expose certain oft not taught but skills that I have been able to learn from my schools and community I deem necessary for the better life.

I was a witness to the phenomenon of people risking their lives travelling in overcrowded buses until I learned about section 133 Indian Criminal Procedure Code (Cr.PC), 1973 and thus I started the revolution. How many Indians know that overcrowded buses are public nuisance which can be removed by a simple letter of complaint to the district magistrate under the aforesaid section? I am amongst the few who knows and took necessary action. How many Indians unlike Chanchala Devi know that with just $1 for a Right to Information (RTI) application, a poor widow can get her shelter worth $700? An RTI activist did and so Chanchala Devi got her due, thanks to the knower of the Right to Information Act 2005, an accountability law.¹ How many Indians unlike Manu know that a single postcard serving as a Public Interest Writ to a superior court in India can improve the lives of

millions of sewer workers? Someone did and immensely benefitted the workers including Manu.²

The purpose of the aforementioned is to expose a skill extremely important for the better life: LEGAL LITERACY SKILL because Law regulates every sphere of our lives in significant ways and Ignorantia juris non excusat (Ignorance of the law is no excuse).

Only because someone knew the wrong and the remedy in the above cases that Chanchala, Manu and many Indians could successfully achieve their rightful ends, whether it is shelter or safety. Legal literacy skills include the ability to understand what a legal wrong is, the ability to access, research, locate, know and comprehend the law which affects the aggrieved or concerned and, the ability to explore and take remedial action. However, today very few countries introduce legal literacy skills in schools and colleges. As a result without legal literacy skills the following, amongst others, occurs:

**Thousands of high school students, ignorant that driving more than a 50CC bike is prohibited under the Indian Motor Vehicles Act 1988 for 16 year olds, commit the offence and are convicted daily.**

Another skill that is highly important for a better life is Economic thinking skill. At an elementary level, consider a situation: “A thief walks into a bank, puts a gun to the head of one of the customers, and announces he will shoot unless the teller hands over all the money in the drawer. The teller does nothing. The thief shoots the customer, runs off, and vanishes. The customer dies of his injuries. His estate brings a lawsuit against the bank. The complaint states that the teller should have given the money (let us imagine it was only $5,000) to the thief. What should the court say?”³

If the court says the plaintiff (the deceased customer’s estate) wins, the banks will have an incentive to hand over the money when thieves take hostages (to avoid paying in court again next time). Thus, thieves will have an incentive to take hostages, because of the economic rationale that human beings respond to incentives. A problem arises. Allowing the customer’s estate to win in such a case might cause future hostage-taking. The court will then propose that the bank must win the case.⁴ This is a case where devoid of economic thinking skills, the judge might incentivise hostage-taking.

Now, though critical thinking skills are necessary to prevent giving in to fallacious reasoning, equally important but oft forgotten are contemplative thinking skills that involve introspection and generation of creative ideas. Contemplative skills such as

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² S. Doiraj, “Clean-up order”, Frontline, Vol.26, Issue 1, Jan 3-16, 2009
relational activities (inter-personal skills including caring and sharing) and stillness practices improve social and mental health and thus are essential for a better life. Few other skills I deem necessary for the better life are:

- Entrepreneurial skill that include risk-taking, business planning and innovation.
- Technological Skill including computer and internet literacy which assumes enormous significance in the contemporary digital age. As knowledge is power and time is precious, internet and computers provide access to information at very low transaction costs. The last time I was stranded in Atlanta, U.S.A., the only thing I needed to do was check google-maps on my smartphone for directions. If I did not have the necessary tech-skills, I would not be now here but no where.
- Last but not the least, communication skills have been and will continue to be ever important for the better life. Why? Res ipsa loquitur (Things speak for themselves), don’t they? 😊