

Kurula Varkey Memorial Lecture 2015

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I was initially under the impression that I was to give an ordinary keynote speech. I was hoodwinked by the students. Because they later sent me a mail saying that I was to give the Kurula Varkey Memorial Lecture. And those who know Varkey will understand the level of responsibility that that entails. He was a person whom we knew for so many years and I propose that today's talk will be more like a conversation with him. **More like a reflection upon where we are, what the world around us is today, what is architecture today, what is education today.** Because he would not have separated out these four areas of interest – the individual, different shapes and groups of individuals, the world, architecture, all of these he saw as **an interconnected set**. And very often, late into the night, we would talk about this. He much later than I. I cannot keep awake as long as he would. And normally at about ten thirty I would start nodding my head, not in agreement but as an indication of sleep, whereas he would continue. Often I've seen him, he was a very serious man, a very studious and a very playful man. I've seen him in front of a book, alone in his room, hand going like this (in salute), paying respect to the man who made that. I've rarely seen people like that, who could have such, almost childlike, pleasure in something which has happened in the world.

He was a very complex human being and a very simple one at that. So we'll talk as if he is thinking and as if I am thinking. And maybe something will start happening together. He had some favourite authors. And I will quote very freely from them, especially Dag Hammarskjold, who was the Secretary General of the UN during the peak of the Cold War, who wrote a book called *Markings*. He opened it in the most strained of times. That was his source of strength. What Hammarskjold wrote could almost describe Varkey at times. Here's a passage: **'To be nothing in the self effacement of humility, yet for the sake of the task, to embody its whole weight and importance in your caring as the one who has been called to undertake it. To give to people works, poetry, art, what the self can contribute and to take simply and freely what belongs to it by reason of identity. Praise and blame, the winds of success and adversity, blow over such a life without leaving a trace or upsetting its balance.'** My friends will agree that this is Varkey. No praise, no blame, disappear into the background. But do. This might sound as if this is a grave and very serious kind of person but he had an impish sense of humour, a very wild sense of humour at times. He was very fond of limericks. In the studio, he would come and pin up every day a limerick. This was one such limerick:

'There was an old man of Madras
who rode on a cream coloured ass
but the length of its ears
so promoted his fears,
that it killed that old man of Madras.'

It was quite okay for us to give back what Varkey gave us. So one of our friends, Sohan, wrote back a limerick for Varkey:

'A clear headed man was Varkey.
Nothing in his head was murky.
But his mind was no good
When it came to food.
He couldn't tell his chicken from turkey. '

That too is an apt description of the man. And after his studio, he would trundle his bicycle along to Liberty, which was the only place where tea was available after midnight, and on the way, he would be spouting T. S. Eliot's poetry at the top of his voice. And on the way back would come the limericks, well into the night. So here's a man of such parts. And when we talk together about the world today, **we must remember that the world is not just an unhappy place. It's a place of so many happenings.** It's a place of terrible things happening, and it's a place of great joy and great potentiality. So Varkey believed in the possibility of goodness in humans. **Like Shakespeare had said, 'What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason. How infinite in faculty. In form and moving, how express and admirable. In action, how like an angel. In apprehension, how like a god. The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.'**

So that was one image of man that Varkey had. That he was wonderful. Human beings could be so good, so compassionate, so courageous, and so capable of doing what is needed. But he also had **another line, from T. S. Eliot: 'Humankind cannot wear very much reality.'** And he could see both sides of this. He could see that this was a complex creature, and that **the human capacity for altruism, for justice, and ethical inner compass was the teacher's true mater. That the teacher helped the student to bring out that inner compass.** To unravel, to take away all those curtains, and make the student capable and free to see which way to go.

On society

I was thinking while writing this, is this too serious? And then I realised, why did the students take so much trouble and effort to organise the Kurula Varkey Design Forum? Why? It's not entertainment. It's not an escape. It will not bring them fame. And yet they spend so much time, so much effort to make this happen. Why did they do that? I think it shows that **in our young people, there is a hunger for the real. There is a hunger for something beyond selfish action. Something which is borne out of a caring for everything.** And I think this is what the students have, that spark. And the world can extinguish it. **Institutions and the world around can help either to kindle that spark or to extinguish it. And the question is, what are we up to doing now, with the systematisation of life that we see everywhere?** A five year old is already into systems, and right through, it is the system of life which takes the students away from nature, and has no tangible or deep relations with other humans. And the only direction that society shows him is of profit, no other direction. And so this young person is hungry. **Illich has written, in his essay *Philosophy, Artefacts and Friendship*: 'Our students show an amazing interest in the practice of *philia* (*philia*: love for; In the practise of love). The more so, the more clearly they understand the sadness of having lost all moorings. For it is society that has made people without moorings. And I never cease to be surprised by the readiness of serious students to accept my claim that the philosophical grasp of the nature of technology has become a fundamental condition for ethics in a milieu symbolised by Windows 95.'** This is written in '96.

So I think that nothing is too serious to discuss in front of these students. Because they are hungry to find out what is their direction. **They're not hungry to find out how to do things, but why or what. What kind of society do we build?** So there are two paradigms of society, three, actually, that we have – on the national scene, on the international scene. Everywhere. One I call **the pessimistic paradigm, though it is seen by everybody as the most attractive paradigm – colourful, well illustrated.** But I call it the pessimistic paradigm. This is the view of experts. Experts always say, you have to make systems to manage the world. It is the view of the mentally old. And it is the view of the cynical. What is the view? Humans are by nature greedy, selfish and afraid. This is the pessimistic view of mankind. **And the whole capitalistic system, and the whole systematisation of global economies, of global education systems. The systematisation is a very very pessimistic approach. Make systems that manage through rewards and punishment – that scatter the time and leave no time for aimless reflection.** But always maintain focussed enquiry, critically sharp – in the highest traditions of rationality. For justice, in this system, you will need measurable standards. There is no justice in this system that says, I freely give to you. There is no free lunch. And for justice you will need measurable standards so that everybody is entitled to the same degree of freedom, and the same degree of justice. This pessimistic view reduces and flattens mankind into automatons in the system. **Again, Illich: 'The things today with decisively new consequences are systems. And these are so built that they co-opt and integrate their users' hands, ears and eyes. The object has lost its distality (distance) by becoming systemic. No one can easily break the bonds forged by years of television absorption and curricular education that have turned eyes and ears into systemic components. No longer open. No longer surprised. No longer adventurous.'**

On the other side, at the other extreme, is the sceptre of anarchy. If we don't have systems, we'll have anarchy. And everything will fall apart. And we will be ravaged by disease, terrorism, fear, all those things. But I suggest that there is a third, an in-between sense of what could be a view of the world as it is today. That view has been held by artists, by people of literature. By ordinary human beings that tell stories to each other. They have known this for a long time. It is a very simple, realistic view of human beings: Human beings are complex creatures. At times they are capable of unexpected altruism, compassion, courage, sense of fairness. At other times, they are selfish, they are greedy. And both these things are part of being human. **But the greater part of being human is to touch that ability to be fair, compassionate, just. And the kind of society that is made is made out of a community of human beings in solidarity – which can take chances to welcome the unpredictable. That the unpredictable is the very source of being human. That change which I cannot foresee, I can never manage.** You know, many years ago, they started calling libraries Knowledge Management Systems. And I thought, what utter rubbish! Knowledge should explode! And it should never be possible to manage knowledge. How can you manage knowledge? Because it's all the time energy that is coming out. But for that kind of society to happen, that society in which the better part of human beings are nurtured, are opened, then that society will have to have greater reliance on humility and modesty. A sense of caring and experience of the interdependence of all on each other and on nature. And an adaptability, that you are not fixed to certain conditions but you are open to many many different possibilities. This is not the way we are bringing up the children, no? And this I think is really the challenge before us parents, teachers, everyone – how do we create that faith which knows that humans are compassionate – all of us have felt it. All of us

have felt compassion. We might be greedy all the time. Once in a while, we feel that '*yaar, iske liye kuch karo*'. You see how the students take care of the dogs on this campus. So that compassion is there. It is not as if the human being is entirely greedy and selfish. There is a book called *The Selfish Gene* in which the gene might be selfish but the total human being is not.

But this faith is of what kind? **Dag Hammarskjöld: 'It is not the facile faith of generations before us, who thought that everything was arranged for the best in the best of worlds. Or that physical and psychological development necessarily worked out towards something that they called progress. It is in a sense a much harder belief. The belief and the faith that the future will be alright because there will always be enough people to fight for a decent future. Enough people.'** And this sense that Varkey brought to the entire group of people who studied with him, is something which I think we have to hold together, as all of us who are holding this fantastic sense that *together*, something could happen.

On education

I've talked about society. I'm going step by step, as Varkey would have. Very very systematic man. His lectures used to last 4 hours. Mine will not, I can tell you that. So you could look at education in many different ways. **You could look at education as a living process, as a process of opening up, a process of freeing, as you would free a pigeon and let him fly.** Can schools be those places where the wings have become strong? Because the food was good. And they had enough friends. And they had the mother who taught. And they fly. Let loose and they fly. So could there be schools like that? **This is again Illich talking at the University of Bremen: 'In a special way this university was conceived as an adventure.'** And I think, I daresay, this university was also conceived as an adventure. **Which had no understanding of what is education. It had only a great hunger for learning, and for finding out. It knew nothing about what is education. When the school started, there was not one teacher with any qualification at all. There was not one classroom which made sense.** And this adventure continued in the minds of all those who studied here and continue to study here. And this adventure of this great continent of knowledge, this great ocean which we don't know anything about. And there will be wild monsters in it and there will be wonderful dolphins and mermaids maybe. That adventure, is what the school should be. It is the place of adventure, but it requires two things, according to Illich, it requires critique. The mind that is sharp and looks. But equally, critique without 'asceticism'. Ascetics, as you know, are people who give up. The ability to leave everything, the ability not to be encumbered, the ability not to need, and yet have the sharp vision, that asceticism. **Asceticism is the space for reflection, of going back inwards, leaving everything. That space has to be protected for education to be really something that frees. So that it becomes questions, not methods.** Learning is an interaction, person to person, person to group, environment to person. Which creates sympathy, sharing. Which creates the sense that I put myself in your shoes, and you put yourself in mine. And I can see that sometimes when it's too difficult, and I put myself in your shoes, maybe my language has to change. And still, still there is that sharing. That learning which is going on because of engaging. So that is the task of education then. **And Varkey would say, mischief is very much required.**

Without mischief, you will not learn. About what can we do mischief? You sit with an Aalto plan and you cut it, and then you laugh. We were in a concert of Kumar Gandharva once. After the interval, the hall is always half empty. So there were a few of us in the front seats. And Kumar, in his normal manner, made some ridiculous sounds. Varkey, sitting in the third row, laughed out loud. Kumar looked at him, twinkle in his eye, smiled. This is what knowledge, or the sense of seriousness, is – at once combined with the sense of mischief. I was telling Sohan Nilkanth the other day that **the teacher has to be as much a cheater. Because he cheats and seduces the student into entering that world of adventure. And the cheater and the teacher are not very different. Some students are equally good teachers and equally good cheaters.** So the tragic fate of the teacher is that his task, his matter, the task that he has taken upon himself, requires him to explain what is unexplainable. How do you explain? How do you explain that the plan of Bank of England is a wonderful plan? Or that Sir John Soane's work has some value? You can't.

And Varkey was accused of *teaching*, in this place. As how with little children, we cut up the chappati into little bites so that they can eat, so he did that to Corbusier, to Indian architecture. Even to African architecture. He cut it up into bite size pieces so that the student could understand. Once having understood, then he demanded to have it show in the drawing, where no such understanding can work. This is the challenge of the teacher. **So the teacher is an agent of transformation. He's not alone because he himself constantly has to be transformed. And his transformation occurs in the group of teachers, in the community of teachers, in the community of thinkers, in the community outside. That the buffeting of the world must transform every day the teacher. So that the teacher is never able to fit into systems. Never.** That is the challenge.

There could be other modes of thinking about education. We need not go into them. There is no point in contrasting them. **Today education has become a sort of business, in the late capitalistic period. Where education is also a commodity, which has to be attractively packaged, which you have to be willing to pay for, in order that you will get paid.** The corruption is at both ends – the corruption of the consumer and the corruption of the producer. We are not talking about that. We are talking about education at its highest level.

On life

Education is about life so we have to talk about life. I'll read you Illich: **'With amazing speed, the hardware and the software of the 1980's bulldozed the material milieu that had been generated by human action, and replaced it with a mostly technogenic, increasingly virtual, standard environment.'** He calls it, algorithmic reductionism. Wonderful phrase. **'This topology is well protected, if not well hidden, by a self image (that it creates around itself). A self image meant to give comfort to life, beyond virtue and the good. The aim to make life always better has crippled the search for the appropriate, the proportionate, the harmonious, or simply good life.'** Because every day you have to come up with a new architecture. Because otherwise you will not stand in the market. Because architecture has become a commodity which is in magazines and posters, branded. And whether there can be something else, and if that something else can be, what could it be?

Well, there might be a few paradigms. The simplest is the best. The simplest is the best. I'm going to read it as if these are commandments, you know. Sometimes you have to do that. **'New is not necessarily better. Good is not always pleasant or gratifying.'** You know **your medicine is bitter. But there are also developed tastes. A great friend, Rajiv Taranath, always says, 'mature people like bitter things'**. The fact that life is not only sweet, not only pleasant – is also hard work. Sometimes you sweat, sometimes you get uncomfortable. All of that is part of it. The best is unexplainable. And it can't be sold. It can never be sold. Some people will buy it but they won't know why they are buying it. But the best cannot be sold.

On architecture

Architecture (and life naturally flows into architecture), if we go by that paradigm of consumption, will become a commodity. Has already become, to some extent. But not necessarily so for everyone. There are courageous or wild or mad architects still making non-commodity architecture. I think some of them are here in this audience. I think that's why they were called. Because they are partly mad. The world thinks that they don't know how to do it. I'm not thinking specifically of Revathi Kamat here! So **if it becomes a commodity of consumption, as the Apple-isation of form**. Look at Apple products. Each one is packaged so beautifully that even if you don't need it you salivate and you want it. That shutting down of all the ability to discriminate between what I will use and what I will flaunt. This is what happens with architecture as well. Because the magazines will promote, and you will think that, *I have to become like that*. But will you have to become like that? This is the question that I am putting before you. Your next five years, your next ten years before practice is established. **Can you be that wild mad person? Till it becomes a habit to not accept the paradigm of late capitalism. I also call this Apple-isation as the 'funky cool syndrome'**. This is Sohan's word for it.

Gravitas: It is the sense of importance, of significance, of something. It is related to gravity. So architecture has a gravitas. I'm talking about the significance in cultures, that architecture holds. And **that gravitas will be replaced by self indulgent gratification, if we are not careful. Obsolescence will be built in**. Buildings will be made to last for 100 years, as the structural codes demand, but they will be used for ten years and then demolished. Obsolescence will be built in. The timeless will become a meaningless jingle. Christopher Alexander, poor guy, he wrote a book call *The Timeless Way*. He is very old now and not very well. Not the fault of writing that book. Maybe he is almost timeless. Miki knows him so probably he can say something.

And yes, one more. **The tragic will be replaced by the farcical**. You know, in theatre, you have tragedy. Where a culturally important action comes up against great odds and finally accepts that life is complex, has many colours. The farce, on the other hand, only divides and laughs. And the tragic will be replaced by the farcical. Which we can see in much of architecture today. The erasure of scale, for example. Yes we need to make large buildings, because there are large organisations which needed offices and so on. But can the large building become something which has scales? I think of Aalto's University. I think of Sir John Soane's Bank of England. I think of Srirangam. Huge building, but has a sense of scale. Because it is also worked upon by time and many agents. And is not the work of a single

individual. John Soane was a single individual. But others had made London before him. And he was working in collaboration with what London was. **So, in a sense, if we are serious about architecture, we will look at scale. We will look at the sense of wonder.** Wonder is not simply about going gaga. Wonder is, becoming speechless. And if in one life I can make one corner of a building in which that happens, moksha! Nothing more is required. Not yet. But that is our search as architects. And the diminution of significance has to be countered.

So now, what about the future? I'll read two passages from Hammarskjold. This he spoke at the beginning of an exhibition at the MOMA in New York, and he says: **'We have to approach our task (and he is talking about politics, mind you) in the spirit which animates the modern artist. We have to tackle our problems without the armour of inherited convictions or set formulae. But only with our bare hands, and all the honesty we can muster. And we have to do so with an unbreakable will to master the inert matter of patterns created by history and sociological conditions.'**

So it's not that you just accept. Maybe my talk is saying that we have to look backwards, timelessness and all that. Here's an old man, with a white beard, talking about the old times. So there is this very wonderful story about going forward. There was a man who believed always in moving forward. Never go back. Always forward. So he was walking and he came to the edge of a cliff. If he walked forward, he would have fallen 1000 feet below. So he walked backwards. And he said, **'At certain times, walking backwards is forwards!'**

This 'backwards' is what Varkey was interested in. This 'backwards', to go back to the juicy sources, to go back to that soil which will give us. So his favourite is this one passage by **Paul Ricoeur: 'The phenomenon of universalisation, while being an advancement of mankind, at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction. Not only traditional cultures, which if destroyed might not be an irreparable wrong, but also what I call for the time being, the creative nucleus of great cultures. That nucleus on which we interpret life. What I shall call in advance the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind. There is the paradox. How to become modern and to return to sources. How to revive an old dormant civilisation and take part in universal civilisation.'**

This wonderful passage – doesn't it say what we are all facing in our work, everyday? Students, as much as those who are doing work outside, who are teaching. All of us. So then how do we find the resources? One last quotation from Dag Hammarskjold: **'To preserve the silence within amid all the noise. To remain open and quiet. A moist humus in the fertile darkness where the rain falls and the grain ripens, no matter how many tramp across the parade ground in the whirling dust, under an arid sky.'**