A change for the worse

The past may be a catalyst or a provider of lessons from history but it is not the repeating of history that advances civilisations....

by A.R. Nagori

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The Church should never forgive Galileo for he set the earth moving around the sun in a way other than the one prescribed earlier. Priesthood took a knock from that and since then it has never fully recovered.

Shatter

The order of the universe took a different course than the one set by Aristotle. The belief that the earth was the centre of everything, was shattered. All pedestalled philosophical concepts of humanism were swept away. "Humanism" and "Renaissance", Leonardo, Michaelangelo, Raphael and others broke away from the established order and brought in creative changes with exciting discoveries. Reactions, resistance, inquisitions and papal wrath followed.

Botticelli was influenced to burn all his paintings under the reformist wind of Savonarola. Interestingly, Leonardo who was reluctant to paint the details of Christ's face for want of a model possessing such a noble character as that of the Christ, was quick to paint Judas's face with that of Savonarola in Last Suppertime.

In the inherent human character of artists, scientists, politicians and poets, gave birth to new ideas which replaced medieval thinking. The process of change has never looked back since, in Art and in life.

Trumpet

A lot of bullock-gill is being trumpeted by some of the so-called national institutions, in the name of preservation of culture, arts and crafts. Millions of rubies are spent on myopic preservatives instead of doing it.

The grooming of adolescent exclusively male, dancers, at the behest of the Sarafa Sangat and presented at airport ceremonies and craft melas or festivals, for taking troops of syphons abroad and other such half-witted schemes of 'national' bluff are nothing but merciless crimes against our poor and innocent people who are thus forced to create an empty pill in the name of patriotism. First of all there is no culture ministry devoted to its job or true to its nomenclature. As regards a definite policy, adhocracy is preferred. No accountability exists. Slogans such as we are the 'greatest' with a "glorious past" (the Mughals having no parallel etc) are coined to fool the masses.

The past may be a catalyst or a provider of lessons from history but it is not the repeating of history that advances civilisations. Great human civilisations were created by progressive thought and culture built on the fundamental principles of progress, enlightenment and an urge for the new. There is no going back in art or life.

Suggestions that the so-called "glorious past" should be revived or that the rise in art or life is retrogressive in nature. None of the revivalist Bengal School of painters could match the contribution of Amirta Sher Gil, a master of modern art in our region. Because the painters riding the bandwagon of classicism lead us anywhere. The charm of life in all its phases from the cradle to the grave. If a reproducing plant can turn an adult human into a child or an old man into a youth, to live a life already lived, the repetition would be boring to say the least. Nature engulfs all in all things around us. It is hard, living beings, the new ideas for the betterment of humankind are always resisted.

Perception

The often-effaced judgements pronounced against the Arts by so-called high priests seeking moral justification make no difference, as long as black warrant is with held. These detention periods and extensions are a temporary phase for history of art in our region. It is a well known fact that obscurantists are always hostile to arts. They cannot stop the clock, wall, nor can they reverse time and life which undergo change every second.

Prof. James Burke quotes a question posed to philosopher Wittgenstein, "What a bunch of no-knows we medieval Europeans must have been back in the days of Copernicus, to have looked up at the sky and thought that what we saw up there was the sun going round the Earth, when, as everyone knows the earth goes round the sun, and it does not take too many brains to understand that."

Wittgenstein replied, "Yes, but I wonder what it would have looked like if the sun had been going round the earth." The point is that it would of course, have looked exactly the same. What he was saying according to James Burke was "that you see what you want to see". Dutch artist Echer is a master at creating such shifting perceptions. In his painting 'Returning Birds', the painter makes very clever use of optical illusions for his vision. Apart from optical tricks adopted by painters in their works the taboos and prejudices of critics also change the objective and intended vision of the work.

A Karachi critic, once wrote a 3 column review on my 'nude couple', which was singled out of the 251 I had displayed at Karachi Arts Council. The exhibition was condemned as exotic and Romantic, lacking in uniform style. Saadat Hasan Manto rightly observed, during his trial on 'Khola-Dao', a short story written by him that... even locomotives could be interpreted as arousing sexual desire and thus presenting an erotic sight? My exhibits at Islamabad were mis-interpreted as 'political'. The Zionist uniforms and some other symbols of brutality were mis-interpreted as being aimed at a local situation. This is how individuals perceive differently from what is desired by the artists. Anything which is different from established norms is frowned upon. At one time the concept of having one's own transport was a laughable idea in the west and wise men there wrote, "... you only know where you are going if you know where you have been, and that... those who are not prepared to learn the lesson from history, are condemned to repeat it."

The change man creates is to make tomorrow better than today.

Appreciate

One should be prepared to appreciate change. The sense of appreciation for change is rather difficult but it is not unacceptability either. In the 12th century people looked at the sun going round the earth because the Church said that was the way to look at it. They thought the universe would be perfect and unchanged ever since it had been created. So there was no change to see up there, thus people in the west did not look up at that much. At the same time the Chinese were busy getting rich in the trade that was happening in the trade. They became expert astronomers before the west did. Not because they were clever and the westerners were dummies but because there was nothing that served as an established norm, as there was in west, to stop them from making changes up there. The west saw no change in the sky because there was none to see. Phenomena such as comets were thought of as warnings from God. James Burke says, "... if you believe the cosmos is made up of omlette, you can build instruments specifically designed to find traces of intergalactic yolk... in that paradigm you reject phenomena like pulsars and black holes as paranormal garbage. Most of the papers read at the Islamic science conference at Istanbul were on just that. Dr. Parvez Hoodbhoy witnessed this in his excellent paper the "Quiet death of science" published in 'Dawn' (our great modernist, Sir Syed, also wrote that the earth is not round nor does it revolve, however he did not say it was like an omlette either). In an omelette cosmos, the beginning of the universe becomes a chicken and egg problem too. The conservative resist ance to change was understandable. The idea of earth moving around the sun was unacceptable because it would have had philosophical and theological implications that were too hot to handle. Like one witnessed in the 'Monkey Trial' which condemned Darwin for his theory of evolution.

A dream came to Europe through Arab-Spain. It had foot-pedals, which left the feet free to weave faster and make nice cloth available cheaply. The Dutch smashed the thing up because it was cheaper than feeding sheep and making wool. The rioters were sheep farmers.

Technology manufacturer's not only gadgets but social change as well. Once the first tool was picked up and used that was the end of anything cyclical. The tools changed the world. We are in fact the last of the west, living with institutions that are not as vigorous as our predecessors, facing the twenty-first century problems with nineteenth century attitudes. ("Legacy of Science" NASA). These were NASA's worries faced as they are with space age problems, but in our case, it is rising over the problems of the 8th century. May God prove nuclear reactor to be less dreadful.