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# Let education live

By Peter Jacob

May 16, 2015

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It was the scorching summer of 1976 in the heart of southern Punjab when I first met Bernadette Dean (Berna). She had come to Amritnagar, a village in the Khanewal district, along with a group called Breakthrough. This group of about 20 girls and boys had travelled all the way from Karachi for an exposure immersion and to work as free labour for the construction of a community house during

their holidays (Derrick, who later on married Berna, was also part of the group).

The exposure visit of over two weeks was educational and pleasant for the villagers as well. They were surprised to see Karachi-bred youth rolling up their sleeves and getting busy in construction work in their jeans. When free from transporting bricks and mud, these youngsters chatted with the villagers, asking questions about agriculture and rural life. The visitors spoke a different style of Urdu which the Punjabi-speaking villagers found amusing to communicate in.

The village youth, used to a gender segregated lifestyle, got exposed to the idea of a mixed-gender youth group. They were inspired by the gesture of social concern so much that some of them joined the voluntary work. Lively encounters of this rural-urban exchange were recalled for years.

As one of the hosts I can testify that Berna, then a student of Bachelor of Science, was among the persons remembered for her expressive and candid outlook.

Nora and Kenneth Fernandes were also affiliated with Breakthrough.

Later on Kenneth, or Kenny as he was fondly called, worked with the local communities of Sindh and Punjab for over 20 years as a trainer and social mobiliser. Nora worked with the Karachi branch of Shirkat Gah during the Ziaul Haq's rule and the following years of democratic dispensation. Kenneth died some time ago in Australia after a battle with cancer.

Importantly, Roland De Souza, the renowned electrical engineer and social activist, was also among those who inspired social empathy among youth in Karachi in his stint as development worker in Multan. Fr Bonnie Mendes's name is more related to Toba Tek Sigh than Karachi, owing to his decades of social service there.

This is only a gist of the contribution that the Goan community made to the social fabric of the country but even more important was the plurality that they helped constitute by their presence.

During the last 39 years, I met Berna occasionally. She became a renowned educationist, served Kinnaird College Lahore and St Joseph's College Karachi as principal and taught at Aga Khan University. We spoke at a couple of conferences in the past couple of years because of my involvement in the campaign for unbiased

education.

The news last week that she was made to leave the country caused more distress than surprise to me. She had been receiving threats to her life for months merely because she was part of the team that was assigned to revise the textbooks for the Sindh Textbook Board.

Days later, the attack on the Ismaili community only confirmed the view that Dr Bernadette's decision probably saved us from another tragedy. From the assassination of the Idara-e-Amn-o-Insaf staff in 2002 to that of Sabeen Mahmud recently, there has been no respite in violence against Pakistan's social and human rights activists. The eye of a storm does not make a good dwelling for anyone unwilling to live a barricaded life.

The circumstances that involve Bernadette Dean leaving the country after a lifelong engagement in the education sector leaves us with questions over what needs to be done to counter the intolerance that resists substantial education reforms.

The way the country's leadership considers itself to be on the same page in their resolve against extremisms, the terrorists, their

sympathisers among political parties, and authors and publishers of the textbooks also stand united. Terrorists blow up schools, kill one to maim thousands and their political allies hold rallies to cultivate acceptance for religious intolerance.

The authors and publishers of textbooks resist changes on technical grounds. Initially they deny existence of hate speech in textbooks, and then they justify it on nationalist and religious pretexts.

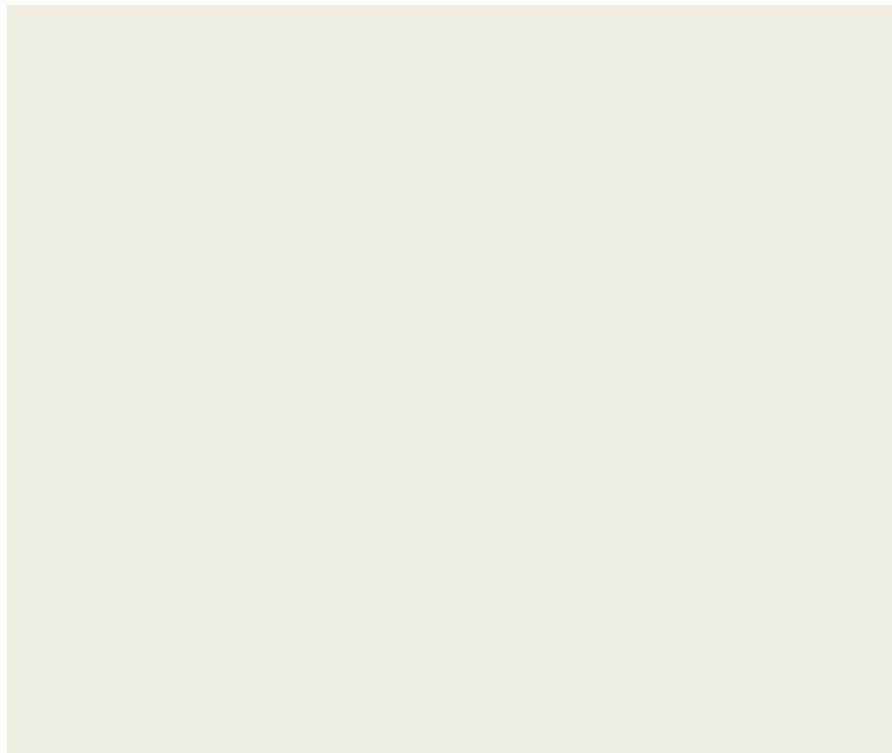
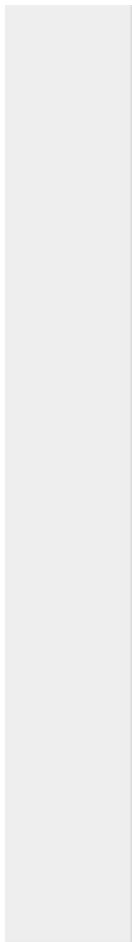
Society is continuously being deprived of its educated lot while there is virtual institutional breakdown of the education system. Sadly, this is happening amidst much-trumpeted educational reviews, compliance reports to Supreme Court orders of June 19, 2014 and a din of concerns over high illiteracy, etc.

Ideas such as Each One Teach One would require the spirit and zeal of the Breakthrough group because such a campaign may involve building social relationships beyond the boundaries. After all, how can the nation inculcate such a spirit without discarding its baggage of ethnic, religious and gender biases? The textbooks in use cement the vicious circle of intolerance which its beneficiaries will guard ferociously. How do we deal with that?

Before leaving the country, Dr Bernadette had disclosed to a newspaper where the threat was coming from. An investigation, even in her absence, would be worth trying to factor in the criminality that hinders textbook reforms. Society has to be prepared to embrace openness and education reforms together because one helps the other survive.

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**drdprithipaul** • a year ago

The real problem is that those who denounce and condemn the intolerance which kills the leaders liberal social initiatives should question their own silence during the past six or seven decades of the scores of historical distortions prescribed for public education at all three levels. That is, the badge of tolerance are themselves intolerant - though perhaps, in their defence, one may argue that due either to some sort of pusillanimity or to the love of hating the Other. The latter alternative may Pakistani style, even if the Other be correctly perceived to deserve their hatred, in justification of th

... maintain style, even if the other is correctly perceived to deserve their hatred, in justification of the official educational curricula and of the national ideological self-image. Bow before the portrait of the Nation and ask if the socio-political reality is not being properly served by the violent extremist and denouncer of extremism being the two sides of the same coin.

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**Tinkerer** · a year ago

Why is it that the threatening party is not publicly exposed by this paper and others? Let the public enemies of this country's future.

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**harry** → Tinkerer · a year ago

Could it be RAW or MOSSAD?

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