

## CRISIS OF TRUTH

My subject is crisis of truth, and I wish to begin by making the observation that there is no crisis of truth.

Truth is ever present within you and without you; it becomes existential dilemma only when we conceal truth from ourselves. And of course when the media and the political community combine to befuddle us and make us believe that there cannot be any agreement on truth. When the country that calls itself the greatest nation of earth begins to say that 'truth isn't truth', and that there are 'alternative facts', and some virtue in 'the art of the lie', then something has truly gone awfully off-centre on this planet. In this polarized situation the rest of the West is also becoming political tribes; the same West that went out to the rest of the world on a mission to educate us to cast away our tribal instincts and become like them -- enlightened and progressive. We have very good reason for us to feel terribly betrayed.

This provides the global context for my 'crisis of truth'. It is this discordant plight of our civilization that compels me to bring the subject of truth to this forum on human values because among the human values truth is the supreme value and in current thinking in many parts of the world it is becoming a contested value. It is not my intention to go into the self-serving motives and biased ideology behind such assertion as 'truth isn't always truth'. Since our context is the university, I want to relate my subject of truth to the university.

The unfortunate story of our universities, with their long cultivated habit of thinking in discrete knowledge systems, living daily within

narrow templates, is we feel quite comfortable with the rhetoric of 'alternative facts' and 'alternative truth' both in the liberal humanities and the empirical sciences. And there is nothing in our curriculum to put the broken bits of knowledge into a whole. Our exhausted discourses, after all the theorising on modernism and postmodernism, we are safely anchored in what is popularly known as the post-truth world. Here is what one expert says on post-truth:

“ We have entered a new phase of political and intellectual combat, in which democratic orthodoxies and institutions are shaken to their foundations by a wave of ugly populism. Rationality is threatened by emotion, diversity by nativism, liberty by a drift towards autocracy. ...At the heart of this global trend is a crash of the value of truth, comparable to the collapse of a currency or a stock. ” So our man casualty in the post-truth universe is truth itself.

Our universities are also deeply infected -- the student through the Frankenstein let loose by the Silicon Valley that is sapping all the blood out of them by sucking them into the dream world inside their tiny gadgets; and I have already mentioned the state of the academia. The 'drift towards autocracy' in universities is also real.

The older universities didn't have these dilemmas; the ancient universities did not anguish over having truth as the heart of their syllabus; nor did they have problem with holistic structuring of life. Traditionally universities expressed their central pursuit in plaques in form of telos meaning purpose or inviolable goal. So we have universities whose ultimate goal is truth, and others whose goal is social justice or morality. There is also Heterodox Academy that has mixed goals.

If you consider what the telos is for Universities in Fiji: for the University of the South Pacific it would be the ideology of

regionalism; the Fiji National University, get a skill get a job; the University of Fiji has board in the front that says Flexible Innovative Affordable Futuristic. I suppose that would make us Heterodox Academy. I would have preferred to have the words of the great Founder of Arya Samaj, Swami Dayanand Saraswati , that says, “He is good and wise who always speaks the truth, acts on the dictates of virtue, and tries to make others good and happy.” The unfortunate fact is in most instances the ‘inviolable goal’ in most instances have dwindled into utilitarian and vocational learning.

Academics find it safe intellectually to accept there is no agreement on what is Truth nor on any single notion of good. The reason is truth is not verbal but existential. The arguments and counter arguments in academic discourse don’t produce truth. It has to be felt in your breath. Therefore the great teachers knew truth cannot be asserted directly or aggressively; they have to allure, seduce, and persuade their disciples. That is why Jesus used the method of the parable; Buddha his sutras; and the Sufi masters dance, music and poetry. The modern university, that has to manufacture in a hurry manpower to sustain their country’s economy, has little patience for inconvenient or unsettling truths to be told through these subtle methods.

A modern English poet who was searching for truth in the East asked following questions, as if addressing our own academics and institutions of higher learning;

“ Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? “