SEMINAR TECHNIQUE

DR. S.R. RANGANATHAN

INDIAN ADULT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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PREFACE

In December 1952, the Indian Adult Education Association convened a national Seminar at Okhla to discuss "the Production of Literature for Neo-literates." The Seminar was inaugurated by our beloved leader Jawaharlal Nehru, and was attended by the late Dr. Amaranath Jha and the late Shafiqur Rehman Kidwai.

The Report of the Seminar, edited by Dr. S.R. Ranganathan was published in April 1953. It contained a chapter on Seminar Technique, giving Why, What and How of a Seminar. We are publishing this chapter in a booklet form, so that this could serve as a guide-book for those who plan to organise seminars. It could as well serve as a handbook for adult educators, who are increasingly using seminar as a teaching technique. We hope this booklet will meet a long-felt need.

Shafiq Memorial, New Delhi. March 15, 1966. S. C. Dutta

Hony. General Secretary
Indian Adult Education Association

Introduction

We have just emerged out of the seminar-week at Okhla. Our experiences are quite fresh in our mind. They will soon fade out. Before that, it will be an advantage to look back on the last one week. It may be even more so to look forward to our future seminars.

01. TRIPLE PURPOSE

The seminar has a triple purpose:

- 1 To thrash out the prescribed problem;
- 2 To give opportunity to the younger generation to train themselves in co-operative investigation of a subject in all its thoroughness, and in precision and economy of expression; and
 - 3 To observe the technique of seminar with a view to improving it for future application.

1. First Purpose

The Findings give a measure of the extent of our success in thrashing out the prescribed problem. The following table gives the problems considered in group-meetings, the number of findings brought to the second round of plenary sessions, and the number of those discussed therein in view of difference in the findings of the several groups.

	Problem	No. of Findings	
Serial Num- ber		Total	Discussed in ple nary session
1	Soul (=Subject)	1	
2	Subtle Body (=Language, Style and Illustration)	26	4
3	Physical Body (=Paper, Printing and Binding)	27	7
4	Craft-Centred Series of Books	1	
5	Audio-Visual Book for Private Study	9	
6	Role of Social Education Leaders	12	1
7	Role of Librarians and Library Associations	8	
8	Role of publishers and Publishers' Associations	10	
9	Role of Government	9	2
10	Agency for the Business Side of the Production of Litera- ture for Neo-Literates	2	2
	TOTAL	105	16

2 Second Purpose

21 PLENARY SESSION

The plenary sessions are mostly occupied by the older people. It may happen that some of them have experience on all sorts of problems. They may even be eager to place them at the disposal of others. It may be true that Mr. A has something to say on every aspect of the point and on every detail, even down to verbal details. But even more than hearing all that, the opportunity to think, to express themselves, and to take part in the debate in the plenary sessions will be of greater value to the others. The younger people should shed their shyness. They should take active part in the dis-The older people should avoid reducing them to the status of passive listeners, as students in a formal class or as back-benchers in a parliament or congress. We have learnt something from the experience at Okhla. A convention must be developed that nobody talks too often and if possible more than once. A proper seating arrangement will be of help. The older people and the vounger ones should be mixed up equally. It should be possible for Mr. A to prompt his neighbouring men, X, Y, and Z to stand up and speak. He may even whisper some points into their ears. This may require some sacrifice on the part of Mr. A. But it is a sacrifice worth making in the interest of the community and its future. Without sacrifice we cannot achieve much. It requires a good deal of self-control to tie down one's own tongue as it were and give chance to other struggling aspirants.

22 ANONYMITY

One must be prepared to allow the findings of a seminar go out anonymously. Seminar is a link in a chain of social service by a team. All social service in team must ultimately be as anonymous as the service of bees in a bee-hive. Our own illustrious authors and artists of yore had preferred anonymity. The author of the Upanishads, the Jatakas, the Puranas, the Tolkappiam, and several of the philosophical treatises, and so also the architects of monuments, temples, churches, mosques, and mahals live through their achievements and not through their individual names.

23 GROUP MEETING

The younger people have had, I believe some opportunity to think, to express themselves, and to make their contributions in the group meetings. In the opening Plenary Session a definite suggestion was made that each group should appoint a different reporter for each problem. Unfortunately it is found that this had not been done. It is found from the group-reports that in some groups the same man had continued to be the reporter for all the topics. This is perhaps due to the spirit behind the suggestion to rotate the reportership not having been fully understood. The intention was that each person should have an opportunity to practice and learn reporting, by actually doing it. It is only if he struggles with the work of reporting that he can evaluate the various reports that reach him in the course of the seminar. Perhaps the reason for failure to observe this suggestion might have been due also to the dominating or grasping quality of one person in the group. a situation the leader of the group should tactfully distribute the work of reporting equally among all the members. This is a positive suggestion that I should like to record.

3 Third Purpose

We have a good deal more to learn from this seminar. It has served as a laboratory for evolving seminar technique and for improving it.

31 CLASS-ROOM METHOD

One-Way Flow of Thought

Seminar is really a product of democracy. In the olden days society was able to take things easy. was due to low population-pressure. The needs of society were easily met by a few exceptionally gifted people doing most of the thinking for society. Except when equals met—and this was rare and if at all they met it was for contest, for competition, and for showing forth their superiority—the tradition of developing a subject was through instruction rather than discussion on a footing of equality or symphathy—a master expounding and the disciples listening. Strictly speaking even instruction is best done by mutual discussion between the master and the disciple rather than by the master giving ex cathedra talks. In fact according to the Vedas the correct procedure even for the master-disciple relation has been described as follows:

> "The master is the pre-form. The disciple is the post-form. Knowledge is the result. Discussion is the means."

ग्राचार्यः पूर्वरूपम् । ग्रन्तेवासि उत्तररूपम् । विद्या सन्धिः । प्रवचनं संधानम् ॥

The tradition of the older universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, is also similar. It is called tutorial work. This kind of two-way flow between the master and the disciple requires enormous resourcefulness on the part of the master. Group-discussion by a few participants is more variegated and profitable than discussion between two persons. But the greater the number of participants, the more arduous becomes the work of the master. And yet, democracy brought a larger number of people seeking knowledge for some reason or other. The two-way flow, therefore, yielded gradually to a one-way flow. Non-stop lecture has been the result!

32 CONFERENCE METHOD

Front-Benches and Back-Benches

During the last century the method of conference came very much into vogue. In this method quite a large number of people meet. But, only a few radiate thought through their speeches. The many merely absorb thought. This method was quite useful when the objective was to step up the emotion of a large group of people. It proved effective in our own country in Pre-Gandhian era. Mahatma Gandhi made effective use of the congress-method to fire the emotion of our people in regard to their political rights. Some of the congress sessions came to be attended by even a 100,000 people. Many parliaments are functioning mostly along these lines. A few front-benchers, who have the gift of the gab, do all the talking. The back benchers merely listen and vote according to the whip.

33 ATTEMPT AT CORRECTION

Of late, the British Parliament has begun to correct this. Each Party sets up study-groups for several of the subjects coming up before Parliament. Younger men and most of the members get an opportunity to work in these study-groups. The library of the Parliament itself has appointed a few documentalists to serve them. These are librarians. They prepare an annotated bibliography of all important published materials on the subject coming up for consideration. They also make the materials themselves accessible to users, The aim is to put Parliament's work in public on right rails by making every member of the Parliament make his contribution in the meetings of the study-groups.

34 POPULATION PRESSURE AND DEMOCRACY

Moreover today the balance between population pres-

sure and the free gift of nature by way of food, shelter and clothing, has been hopelessly upset. Dependence upon investigation by a few first-rate people alone is proving inadequate. We have to press into the work of investigation quite a number of people of lower order. This meets also the demand of democracy to give equal opportunity for every one to develop to the fullness of his own personality and to make his own intellectual contribution to society. Neither the class-room-method nor the congress-method is suited to this purpose.

35 SEMINAR METHOD

To meet this situation a new method of investigating subjects is being evolved during the last two decades. The Americans call it Workshop-Method. The British call it Working-Party Method. The Americans call it also Seminar Method. Unesco—the world-organisation for investigations of a fundamental nature, relating to education, science or culture—has adopted this term. Therefore "Seminar" is getting more into vogue to denote the new method. I have taken part in Unesco Seminar as well as in American Workshop. I have also seen reports of British Working Party. They all denote more or less the same method. In this method there is neither one-way flow from teacher to taught, nor formation of front-benchers and back-benchers. All get an equal chance to contribute, to express, to learn and to grow. The essential new element in modern seminar techique relates to investigation, not by a small group, but a large body of participants from different areas within a nation, or different nations or different cultural groups. These bring their distinctive experiences. These are pooled together. The outlook gets widened. Enthusiasm gets heightened. Efficiency gets intensified.

36 A FATAL VIEW

In its incipient form, the essence of mutual discus-

sion and all round participation may be found in good family circles. It may even be in vogue in circles of friends. But these are all small-scale affairs. These are often casual. Such informal group-discussions are seldom concentrated on a single topic. Nor are they based adequate planned preparation. The findings are seldom recorded. To have them in view and to say that seminar method is ancient is of the same order as saying that our ancients were experts in air-craft building and airnavigation, because kite-flying had been in vogue from ancient times, or Valmiki's Ramayana describes air-flight from Ceylon to Ayodhya, or because of Samuel Johnson's Rasselas. Many of the anatomical features, physiological functions and ecological response of man had their incipient correlates in the earliest forms of life. To say this and to stop there is to court sterility. This is a fatal view to take. To take Sanatkumara's narration of future events to Saunaka and other sages in Naimisha Forest, or the Coffee House discussions of Samuel Johnson, or the river-side parleys of grannies, as the proto-type of modern seminars may be pleasingly fanciful. But to cite them as reasons for the absence of any need for forging a proper Seminar-Technique and improving it continuously, is fatal. It will appeal to the inherent inertia in man. It may even elicit a round of approbation and clap of hands. But it will sap all initiative. It will arrest progress. It will tie us eternally to the past.

37 New Technique

The Seminar Work now being evolved has many new features. These make a new name necessary to denote the method. We may call it Seminar Technique. Long and careful preparation is needed to make a seminar fruitful. The mental powers of a large number of people are to be turned on the same problem. At a stated short interval of time all are expected to work together on the same problem. All have to live at a high level of energy throughout the seminar period. It has to be

backed by an efficient and well-organised secretariat service. Communication between participants has to be kept at a high level of efficiency and promptness. Indeed a new technique is being evolved only in our own times to harness seminar method to the greatest advantage.

4 How of Seminar

Six stages can be recognised in a seminar.

- 1 The posing of the subject in a preliminary working paper;
- 2 Preliminary contribution by prospective participants;
- 3 Producing a detailed and provoking explanation of the preliminary working paper;
- 4 First round of Plenary Sessions to break down the subject of the seminar first into a few major divisions and later to atomise in succession each of these major divisions into several ultimate units;
- 5 Grappling with the several ultimate units in small group meetings;
- 6 A second round of Plenary Sessions for finalising the digest of the findings of the groups.

5 Before the Seminar Meets

Leader-in-Chief

The success of a Seminar will depend upon two essential factors:

I The work done till the Seminar meets *i.e.*, preliminary working paper, receiving the preliminary contributions of the partici-

pants, and the production of a provoking presentation of the subject. To do this work efficiently, the Leader-in-Chief must come into the picture at least six months before the time of the seminar. He should be hard-working and systematic. He must keep an open mind. But he must not be afraid of making the presentation mentioned as the third stage in a provoking way. He must be prepared to be misunderstood to be a partisan for a particular view. But in reality he should have no pre-conceived, rigid, opinion; and

2 It is equally essential to register the prospective participants at the very start. Then only the Leader-in-Chief can get on with his work. He must prepare a preliminary Working Paper, communicate copies of it to all prospective participants, and attend to the third stage mentioned in section 4 of this Chapter.

6 At the Seminar

61 STEERING COMMITTEE

Detailed Working Paper

In the first Plenary Session the participants must be divided into small groups with not more than ten and not less than three members in each. The members of each group should generally be heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. Then only all points will be considered by each group from diverse angles. A capable man should be chosen as the Group-Leader for each group. The Leader-in-Chief and the Group-Leaders should be constituted into the Steering Committee. Each night, beginning from the day preceding the first Plenary Session, the Leader-in-Chief should place before the Steering

Committee, a Working Paper on the topics to be presented on the next day to the Plenary Session and to be pursued by the groups on the day after. This Working Paper should be in the form of a series of questions to be answered by the groups. Wherever necessary, annotations should be given. Addition of a select documentation list also may be helpful. In the Steering Committee, Group Leaders should all post themselves thoroughly with what is aimed at in the Working Paper. The interpretation of the Working Paper at the Plenary Session and in Group Meetings will depend upon their ability to understand it properly. My feeling is that we did not quite succeed in this. Our fault was that we attempted to arrive at decisions or to impose our own pet preconceived nations instead of merely posing the questions for discussion and decision by the groups. A good deal of self-discipline is necessary to do the work of the Steering Committee with an open mind.

62 FIRST ROUND OF PLENARY SESSION

In the afternoon of each day, about an hour should be spent in the Plenary Session. At this session, by rotation one member of the Steering Committee should explain the full implications of the questions put down in the Working Paper. Even here he should not disclose his own opinion or decision in the matter. If at all, he should only suggest possible decisions—but never a single decision which is after his own liking. My feeling even here is that we, the members of the Steering Committee, did not come out quite successfully. Unconsciously we sought to influence the participants by our own pre-conceived decisions. What was worse, sometimes we confused the issues. We confused the issues by dragging in and discussing questions raised under other topics.

63 GROUP MEETING

The ideal is for each topic to be discussed by each

group. The least that we should do is that each topic is discussed at least by three or four groups. Each group should elect a reporter. As far as possible every member of the group should be given an opportunity to function as a reporter at least for one meeting of his group. At the Okhla Seminar, some of the participants put in their appearance only on formal occasions. Some others attended only one or two of the six or seven group-meetings. In future, it must be secured that all the participants take active part in more or less all the group-meetings. Causes of truancy must be traced and eliminated. For one thing, excursions should be segregated to whole days either before or after the days set apart for deliberations. The mental set needed for hard and serious thinking is otherwise smoothered. Fatal reluctance to take off the coat and dive deep into the subject takes possession of the mind.

631 Group Leader

The Group-Leader has a great responsibility. He must have a complete grasp of the entire break-down of the subject into major topics and each topic into its ultimate units. While discussing one topic or ultimate unit, he must see to it that other topics or ultimate units are not brought in. All the others should, so to speak, be eliminated or replaced by certain fairly good assumptions. In this matter there was much to be desired. The absence of this technique caused confusion even in the first round of Plenary Sessions. I wish that we all have an opportunity to read a delightful book on this subject. It is called How to solve a problem. It is by Polya. Polya was formerly Professor at Warsaw in Poland. Now he is in the Stanford University in America. I had met him. His book is full of commonsense. It will be of immense help in conducting seminars. The method of discussion should be not to raise and solve all difficulties at one time. We should take one problem at a time and solve it properly. We should then take up the

second problem. We should solve it independently. We should do like that successively with each problem. We should in the end examine the result of taking all the problems simultaneously.

632 Divide and Rule

It is truly one of the Panchatantras—Divide and Rule—a tactic which the British tried on us so successfully until Mahatmaji more or less brought us together. This method is invariably employed in solving problems in mathematics, physics, chemistry and the biological sciences. This method is nowadays also being employed in economics and other social sciences.

This Method of "Divide and Rule" should be continued at deeper and deeper levels got by a further and further break down of problems into ultimate elements, The Leader's skill really consists in arranging the problems of attack in the most helpful sequence. Suppose A,B,C,D is the most helpful sequence. It is often found that by the time A is solved, B shrivels up into a very small problem. C and D often present hardly any alternative. They present no problem. They get solved automatically. If, on the other hand, we start with problem D, there is utter confusion. It does not easily yield itself to analysis and solution. C also baffles us. We get tired. We throw up our hands in despair. Here the Leader-in-Chief can contribute a good deal by arranging the issues for consideration in a most helpful sequence. The Group Leaders should be prepared to understand the significance of the order given by the They should be sensitive to any Leader-in-Chief. advantageous change of order, suggested in the group discussion. They should make the change as the need for change emerges.

633 Group Report

The decision of the group on each question should

be stated briefly and in precise language. Nothing but confusion will ultimately arise by using loose language on the plea of being popular. Seminar Work is precision-work. It is intellectual work. There should be no rhetoric. There should be no play of words. To be afraid of technical terms is to miss the purpose and the true technique of seminar.

634 Use of Notation

The use of an expressive notation—decimal notation with facets is the best known so far-will be a great help to thought. Participants in seminars should accustom themselves to its use. To resist it without attempting to understand and experience it, will be the way of the inertia in man. To compare it to the ugly scaffolding of a building is to confirm this inertial revulsion in others. To compare it to the preliminary aids in creating a work of art is a result of misunderstanding. Seminar Work is the process of arriving at findings. It must use all aids-particularly notational aids. To magnify Mr. Layman's aversion to notation is but to play to the gallery. The findings of the seminar are intended for use by experts in all sectors related to the subject of the seminar. No expert should fight shy of notational aids and jargons. The findings should be presented in a more or less helpful sequence. degree of subordination among them should be indicated. This can be done best by an expressive notation. will make reference easy. The findings of a seminar are expected fo form a solid document to be looked up and acted upon continuously for some time. This ultimate purpose should not be sacrificed at the altar of the Mental Inertia in Man. Many of the authoritative treatises on positive knowledge have already brought the use of expressive notation into vogue. It may not be necessary in poetry or any other literary piece appealing to the emotion. The dharma of Seminar Findings is to be dry-as-dust intellectual stuff. They may be introduced by an emotional write-up as an appetiser. But the findings themselves should be dressed up severely for intellectual pursuit.

64 COMMUNICATION

Copies of each group-report should be handed over to all the members of the seminar before the evening of the day in which the group considered the problem. We did not quite succeed in this. This was due to wrong time-table. We had the group meetings till 4 P.M. The groups did not hand in their reports till late in the night. If we had the group meetings in the forenoon and continued and completed it in the earlier part of the afternoon and if an interim report has been called at the end of the forenoon meetings, this mistake would have been avoided.

7 Second Round of Plenary Sessions

71 DIGEST OF GROUP REPORTS

The next business is to collate the findings of different groups on each problem. Much judgement will have to be exercised to weigh the decisions of the different groups. Trivial and non-significant variations should be overlooked. The consensus of opinion of the different groups should be enunciated in the form of draft findings to be put up before the second round of Plenary Sessions. If there be opposing or serious alternate findings these should be indicated in a note as "alternatives".

72 SHARING THE WORK

This work of digesting the Group-Reports takes time. But the interval of time between the Groupmeetings and the second round of Plenary Sessions is very short. The leader-in-Chief cannot with comfort do the digesting work for all the problems. This work should be shared by all the Group-Leaders. The digest of findings should be supplied to all the members of the seminar sufficiently early to enable them to study them before coming to the Plenary Sessions.

73 FINALISING FINDINGS

In the second round of Plenary Sessions the findings should be finalised. There is no need to discuss unanimous findings of groups. Therefore the controversial findings should be indicated by some device like asterisk (*) in the digest paper. These alone need to be discussed. Each finding should be presented in the form of a definite proposition. The opposite group should formulate their decision in the form of proper amendments. The usual parliamentary procedure should be followed to dispose of the amendments first and the amended propositions thereafter. It is necessary that the other rules of parliamentary procedure should also be followed. For example, nobody should talk more than once. Nor should anybody repeat an argument already presented by another etc. I think we did not quite succeed in this matter. A good deal of time was wasted and confusion was caused by not expressing an alternative view in the form of an amendment-except of course when it was a negative—to the findings of the majority. Often it happens that the same two opposing persons talked quite a number of times alternately, without bringing out any new point or argument. By this a good deal of time may be wasted. Even compulsion may be caused.

8 Secretariat

81 BEFORE THE SEMINAR

Next to the ability of the Leader-in-Chief and the

Group Leaders, their analytic approach to the problem and their unbiased guidance at group-meetings and in plenary sessions, the success of a Seminar depends largely on secretariat help. Time is of the very essence of every item in the work of a Seminar. The first three stages of bringing out the preliminary working paper, digesting the preliminary replies received, and the bringing out of the provocative presentation should be done strictly according to time-table so that the provocative presentation is in the hands of the participants at least one month before the Seminar. This requires considerable secretariat work.

82 AT THE SEMINAR

During the seminar itself, the draft Working Paper for Group-Meetings, containing the first break-down of the subject, should be released for the first round of Plenary Sessions on the morning of the day on which it is to be considered. This alone will give time for the participants to study the working paper in a leisurely way before coming to the Plenary Session. Again the Group-Reports should be copied and supplied to all the participants before night-fall on the day of the meeting of the Group. This alone will give time for the participants to compare their own conclusions with that of the other Groups. Similarly copies of the digest of findings should reach the hands of the participants at least one day before the second round of the Plenary Sessions in which it is to be considered.

83 STRENGTH OF STAFF

In this Seminar we had as many as 52 Seminar Papers. We ought to have had 60. These 60 papers had to be put through by the Secretariat in four days. This is apart from other work like issue of Information Bulletin and routine correspondence. Our secretariat

did a good job of it. But I am afraid they were overworked. We should provide a much larger secretariat staff. To grudge money in strengthening the secretariat staff is to throw away the large amount of public money and time spent on the seminar. People come from distant places. Everything should be made easy for each of them to make their contribution to their fullest measure.

84 CARD TECHNIQUE

Time has come to save time and secure efficiency with the use of Card Technique. Three cards or tough slips should be prepared for each participant as and when he registers himself. One should be filed alphabetically by name. Another set should be grouped by language or constituent State or on any other relevant basis. This will be of help in several ways and particularly for mailing work. The third set should be used to follow up the participants' work in group-discussions. Much of the work can be mechanised in this way. will allow profitable division of labour between phases of routine work and non-repetitive, non-mechanisable, deliberative and editorial work. Half of my time as Editor of this Volume could have been saved thereby. A good deal of the worry of the Associate Secretaries could have been avoided before and during the seminar. The entries for each of the cards should be functionally designed. This is a detail to be varied with the circumstances of each Seminar. I am not going into them in this short account. The guiding principle should be Elimination of Waste in Time, Materials and Man-Power.

9 General

91 VENUE

The venue of the Seminar should be a quiet countryside place without any centre of distraction. The parti-

cipants should give up the old conference habit of coming to the Conference and spending most of the time on sight-seeing. A seminar is a serious affair in which everyone has to work hard. The participant should come with a determination to work cooperatively and intensively throughout the session. In Chicago Seminar, which I attended, all the participants put in nine hours of work each day. Social entertainments and excursions should be totally avoided or should be set aside either to the day previous to the seminar or one or two days after the seminar. Yes. Hard work is necessary. There are moments when men can put forth a hundred times more work than usual. This he can do without feeling the strain. We do it for a long stretch of years during war or war-like times. We do it for a week or two at a stretch during marriage and other festive occasions. Prime Ministers and similar leaders have to do it for years during the period of their office. Participants in a seminar can do it for a week or for a month. This is not impossible. Only, the mentality should be properly attuned. James discusses this problem in his Levels of Energy.

92 ARRANGEMENT FOR PHYSICAL COMFORT

Food, bath, and public conveniences should all be as good as possible. All the participants should live under the same roof. They should dine together. They should have their games and physical exercises together. This mix-up will make them live the subject of the seminar continuously throughout the period of the seminar. As the Gita says:

Through seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, walking, sleeping, breathing, speaking, dropping, catching, winking, one should be in perfect rhythmic response to the subject of pursuit.

पश्यन् श्रुण्वन् स्पृशन् जिञ्चन् स्रवन् गच्छन् स्वपन् स्वसन् प्रलपन् विसृजन् गृह्णन् उन्मिषन् निमिषन् ग्रपि ब्रह्मािग् ग्रादाय कर्मािग् सङ्गं त्यक्तवा करोति Gita. Chap. 5. Verses 8—9.

Their mind should be totally absorbed in the subject of the seminar.

93 OVER-ALL OBJECTIVE

The over-all objective of the seminar is to tackle a problem collectively. It is done by each participant practising work-chasity during its period. The seminar should release and harness the creative power of each participant. The creative work should be done in concert with all the participants. The spirit of co-operative team work should be dominant in the seminar. The co-operative spirit needed has been well described in Vedic literature:

"Let us live together. Let us dine together. Let us do daring deeds together. Let us beget inner energy by our joint-study. Let us not indulge in mutual hatred. Om! Peace, Peace, Peace!!

स्रो३म् । सह नाववतु । सह नौ भुनवतु । सह वीर्य करवाव है । तेजस्विनावधीतमस्तु । मा विद्विषावहै ।। स्रो३म् । शान्तिः । शान्तिः । शान्तिः ।।