

Role of Teachers and Educational Institutions in Value Based Higher Education

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Abstract

Greed is believed to be at the root of the current crisis. Modern education system's failure to impart ethical values is partly to blame. Spiritual principles of selfless service hold the promise of a solution. Teachers can play a crucial role. They have an opportunity to help shape the character of students. This paper examines the teaching – learning process from Indian spiritual perspectives, to try and find some potential solutions for the current moral crisis. We discuss teacher-student relationship in an institutional setting with the case study of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, a university founded and guided by the great spiritual and humanitarian leader Mata Amritanandamayi Devi. Amrita follows practices inspired by the exalted values of the rich Indian spiritual tradition like joint prayer by the teachers and students before starting the classes, teaching lofty human values through formal courses, inculcating values like service to the mother land, mankind and nature, with love, trust, tolerance and humility. We report on the methodologies adopted and the results achieved so far. We also cite other practices like “Stilling the Mind” taught by Prof. S K Chakraborty at IIM Calcutta and offer the authors' experience in following these practices.

According to Mata Amritanandamayi, the Chancellor of Amrita University, the solution lies only in two words: “Love and Serve”. In her message on the World Peace Day (September 21, 2004), she said,

*“**Amma has a desire that** everyone in the world should be able to sleep without fear, at least for one night. Everyone should be able to eat to his fill, at least for one day. There should be at least one day when hospitals see no one admitted due to violence. By doing selfless service for at least one day, everyone should help the poor and needy. It is Amma's prayer that at least this small dream be realized.”*

We believe that such teachings from spiritual leaders have a lot to offer the modern world. Teachers can play a significant role by embracing these values. Finally, we look at global and national norms of teaching excellence, and relate them with the above thoughts.

Introduction

“Amma has a desire that everyone in the world should be able to sleep without fear, at least for one night. Everyone should be able to eat to his fill, at least for one day. There should be at least one day when hospitals see no one admitted due to violence. By doing selfless service for at least one day, everyone should help the poor and needy. It is Amma's prayer that at least this small dream be realized.” *Message of Mata Amritanandamayi, Chancellor, Amrita University on the World Peace Day (September 21, 2004)*

Amma's poignant dream quoted above can give one an idea of the kind of inspiration that drives and inspires us at the Amrita University founded by this great humanitarian and spiritual leader. The global context in which Amma shared her dream with all of us is so depressing. Nowhere in the world today, there is a single night when people are able to sleep peacefully, without fear! Millions of people all over the globe are suffering from hunger – they do not have even one square meal a day! Every day, in different parts of the world, violence of man against man is killing and wounding hundreds and thousands of innocent children, women and men. Amma has been travelling all over the globe for a quarter of a century, and has listened to millions of suffering people. She speaks from her direct experience. This is a real crisis facing us today - the suffering of the millions everywhere.

In order to address this global crisis, we must try to ascertain the root cause for this colossal suffering of mankind, brought to play upon mankind by none other than mankind themselves. Sometime in 2008, one of the authors asked an assembly of more than 200 MBA students at Amrita, “Can you say, in one word, what is at the root of the current crisis?” The entire group shouted in unison, “GREED!”

The IPCC-chair, Rajendra Pachauri¹ while receiving the Nobel Peace prize quoted Mahatma Gandhi saying, "There is enough for everybody's need, but not enough for anybody's greed," We, therefore, offer this hypothesis: “Greed amongst powerful people in the world is at the root of the present crisis.”

In human society, we need a system of governance. In all such systems, including the democratic system, power to govern has to be vested in some individuals. This leads us to yet another famous saying, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely².” We would perhaps be searching for an oxymoron, if we expect people in power not to be corrupt! Is that always going to be so? Do we not have any solution? Is the human society then doomed to perpetual suffering at the hands of the powerful? If that be so, we have no hope for a solution.

But fortunately, the Rishis (seers or sages) of ancient India had found solutions for the

sustenance of mankind in spirituality or Dharma. Adherence to spiritual or Dharmic principles can help a person in power to be endowed with strong human values; and thereby, we may have a solution in spirituality.

Prof. S K Chakraborty³ proposes the “*Rajarshi Model of Governance*”. The word Rajarshi is a combination of two words – Raja the king, and Rishi the sage. Sri Rama is believed to be an ideal model. One is a king on the one hand but at the same time one is a renunciate at heart like a sage. Such a person has been able to rise above his personal desires and ambitions in the material world. This person is solely driven by the concerns for the welfare of his people. This is where the spiritual principles taught to mankind by the great thinkers, sages and spiritual leaders come in.

The educational system in a society or a nation should help to develop a noble value system in its citizens. In order that the desired spiritual values are understood and accepted by the population, both those in power and those who are not, we need to incorporate the teaching of these principles at all levels of education in a country. In other words true education is the only means available for dissemination of the ideals and philosophies that we want to govern the lives of a nation with. With this idea, we turn to a brief discussion of these principles in the following paragraphs.

Spiritual Principles for Education

In this section we would briefly touch upon the relevant teachings of Swami Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhiji and AMMA to figure out what these masters have said. We have already looked at a teaching by Mata Amritanandamayi at the beginning of this paper. Let us take a look at some of the sayings of Swami Vivekananda^{4,5}:

“A hundred thousand men and women, fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with eternal faith in the Lord, and nerved to lion's courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the downtrodden, will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of help, the gospel of social raising-up – the gospel of equality.”

“So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense pays not the least heed to them!”

These are strong words, no doubt, but that is precisely what is necessary, in order to shake away the complacency of the educated middle class in India and elsewhere. It is interesting to note that Swamijee considers that sympathy for the poor, the fallen and the downtrodden would give us the courage of a lion. Why should one require the courage of a lion if one wants to sympathize with the poor? Swamijee must have foreseen the tremendous

opposition one would face if one tries to bring in equality and help raise the downtrodden in society. This is perhaps the reason that he had sought people with strong faith in the Lord with a zeal for holiness. It is equally interesting to note that he expected these young men to preach the gospel of equality, social upraising, help and salvation, in the reverse order. He saw no difference between the search for salvation and service to the needy, to help them overcome their circumstances, and rise up in the social order. According to him, every educated Indian must feel the obligation to help the fellow Indian, by removing hunger and ignorance. He also hinted at implied social injustice, as he remarked that the educated have got their education at the cost of the underprivileged members of the society. It is not charity that he is expecting; he considers it to be the bounden duty of the educated Indian.

We can find echoes of Swamijee's words in the writings of Tagore and Gandhi. Tagore⁶ has said:

“In every nation, education is intimately associated with the life of the people. For us, modern education is relevant only to turning out clerks, lawyers, doctors, magistrates and policemen....”⁷

“We must try to understand how Indian genius expressed itself [...]. Unless we try to put these together and discover the integrating factors behind these diverse streams of thought and make them a subject of study at our universities, we would only be borrowing knowledge from abroad.”⁸

We now turn to Gandhiji for his views on education⁹:

“Man is neither mere intellect, nor the gross animal body, nor the heart or soul alone. A proper and harmonious combination of all the three is required for the making of the whole man, and constitutes the true economics of education.

Education is not an aim in itself but, rather, an instrument, and that type of education alone can be called real education which helps us in the building of sound character. Where education aims at the building of character, the old teacher-disciple relation is absolutely necessary. I would revolutionize college education and relate it to national necessities.”

These quotes show that all our national leaders in the pre-independent India visualized a true, holistic education for us, enabling such an education to lift the conditions of our masses, and strengthen our national culture and traditions. Education for the heart and development of the soul of the human being was never separated from education for earning a living.

Even today, our education system does not reflect the life needs of our people. We are still

heavily dependent on knowledge developed in the western world. We appear to be focusing only on the apparent *differences* within our nation. There have not been many efforts at unearthing the underlying integrating factors that have enabled India to survive millennia of onslaughts from all over the globe. The spiritual foundations of India are believed to be at the root of this strength and also the appearance of an unbroken stream of extraordinary spiritual reformers and thought leaders.

What are some of the characteristics of these spiritual foundations? The most important ones are perhaps a belief in the indestructibility of the atman, belief in rebirth and spiritual evolution of the soul till it attains moksha or liberation, a way of life prescribing the four purusharthas –dharma, artha, kama and moksha - which is rooted in spirituality but gives due importance to worldly desires and monetary resources in order to fulfill them, and above all, a firm faith in God and his divine wisdom and protection.

Lord Krishna says in Gita,

*"yadā yadā hi dharmasya
glānir bhavati bhārata
abhyutthānam adharmasya
tadātmānam' sṛjāmyaham "*

(Chapter 4, Verse 7)

The translation of the above verse follows:

Whenever and wherever there is a decline in Dharma, O descendant of Bharata, and Adharma gains ascendancy — at that time I incarnate in this world to counteract Adharma and to restore Dharma to its rightful place.

The above promise that Lord Krishna made to Arjuna is so deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Indian man that this is what we believe has helped India survive along with other beliefs, and can help the world today to survive. This famous Bhagvad Geeta verse lets people of this country know that the Divine always supports Dharma and this deep rooted knowledge and the consequent faith allows people to adhere to a Dharmic way of life as much as they can, and to help them tide over the problems when the times are adverse. Spiritual principles are the very foundations of life, and a revival of these principles in the lives of all citizens of the globe may offer a solution.

India has been a blessed land with an unbroken link of great divine incarnations, saints and sages. Amma, who is currently with us, is an important link in this chain of realized souls to have taken birth in this great country. She is reestablishing the teachings of the ancient Rishis through her educational institutions and other activities. In order that the teachings based on

these spiritual principles percolate down to the entire nation and the world, we need to examine the system of education and find out ways and means for spreading these teachings to the masses. The following paragraphs address this issue.

Higher Education and Nation Building

The role of education, and particularly that of higher education has been recognized everywhere in the world. Control of the higher education system has always been seen by the political class as a sure way of retaining political power. In medieval Europe, the Church tried to influence higher education, with a view to retaining its supremacy. “Princes and popes controlled the institutional standards of mediaeval universities” wrote Charles, C Barnabas¹⁰ in his working paper. Scientific discoveries caused the Church to slowly lose its grip over the system, and universities started taking shape in Bologna, Paris and Berlin. However, the governments of these countries wanted to have a say in the functioning of the universities. He cites Napoleon and US President Jefferson¹¹ as evidence of state control over higher education.

Lord Macaulay¹² had written to the then British Parliament proposing an overhaul of the prevailing educational system in India in 1835. This is available as Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835. We reproduce two interesting paragraphs from the said minutes.

“I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed, both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education.”

“In one point I fully agree with the gentlemen to whose general views I am opposed. I feel with them that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, --a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge

to the great mass of the population.”

(Thomas Babington Macaulay, 2nd February 1835)

William Cavendish Bentinck gave his entire concurrence to the sentiments expressed in this Minute.

At another part in the same minutes, Macaulay has stated, “The languages of western Europe civilised Russia”. We leave it to the readers to judge for themselves, the intentions and the attitude of Macaulay. However the point we are making here is established through these quotes: Higher education is seen as *the* vehicle for governing a nation, especially, a colonized nation.

In summary, historically, all over the world, political rulers as well as well meaning national leaders have looked upon higher education as an important vehicle for national growth as well as governance.

We believe that even after more than six decades of independence, our educational system has not changed much. The net effect has been that the English educated elite in India are still to regain their cultural roots, indigenous value systems and true independence.

We now report the essential characteristics of a teaching learning process being followed at Amrita University that is helping to develop many young professionals with strong value systems. Only a society where the majority of its citizens are driven by such values can hope to overcome the crisis facing the world today.

A Modern Gurukula at Amrita

The principles of sound strategic management are equally applicable to every academic institution. Every well managed institution is guided by an overarching purpose which then guides all its further efforts. In order to accomplish its purpose, it should formulate an effective strategy supported by an appropriate structure. However, a well sculpted purpose, strategy and structure would be useless unless the institution is supported by a talented and inspired teaching and non-teaching staff. Even the best teaching and non-teaching staff would fail to deliver the institution's purpose unless they are supported with all the material resources (well equipped classrooms, suitable infrastructure etc.) that they require in order to perform well. The teachers in order to be effective in the classroom and outside in terms of delivering the purpose of the institution would require a deep understanding of the purpose, strategy and structure of the institution, a deep sense of agreement with these three aspects of the institution and also a mastery of effective pedagogical techniques. So, technique of teaching also becomes very important when it comes to delivering the course content as well as the more subtle but desirable lessons (for example, values such as punctuality, integrity,

politeness etc.) that may form a part of the institution's overarching purpose. We at Amrita University are blessed to have everything going for us more or less efficiently in terms of the above mentioned dimensions. We are inspired by Amma's teachings and these teachings provide us with our overarching purpose. Amma says that there are two types of education, education for earning one's livelihood, and education for life, which helps one to live his/her life well and happily. Most universities in the world today imparting higher education focus more on delivering the first type of education alone, neglecting the education for life aspect. We at Amrita are very clear that we exist to provide education for life (i.e. value based education) rather than education for livelihood (professional education) alone. This provides our purpose. Everyone working at Amrita is aware of and shares this purpose. This overall purpose informs our university mission statement, which is:

“To provide value-based education and mould the character of the younger generation through a system of wholesome learning, so that the earnest endeavor to achieve progress and prosperity in life is matched by an ardent desire to extend selfless service to society, one complementing the other.”

This overarching purpose is supported by a well sculpted strategy of systematically exposing the students to both the theory and practice of spiritual teachings of Amma and other spiritual teachers. So, a module called cultural education is taught to all the First Year undergraduate students by proficient teachers, which exposes the students to the essential principles and values of ancient Indian way of life along with its glorious achievements. This helps to instill the spiritual values that these students would need in their future in order to lead fulfilling lives centered on Dharma along with a sense of pride in belonging to this great country. Similarly, all the Post Graduate students of the university are taught a compulsory course called Self Awareness and Personal Growth by very accomplished teachers with a lot of experience in this area. Spiritual principles from teachers from all over the world along with theoretical and practical Yoga form the core of this course. This is the only course at our university which is taught throughout the First Year of Post Graduate Degree Programs as well as during a good part of the second year. The sheer duration of this course is a part of a consciously chosen strategy by us at Amrita to send clear signals about how seriously we take value education.

The value education inputs given to the students are not confined to theory alone. They are given opportunities to practice these principles in practice. For example, every year on the day of the Onam, the students of Amrita provide Onam feast to over 5000 residents of the university at its Amritanagar, Coimbatore campus alone. The students do voluntary Seva or service in order to organize and execute this feast successfully. Similarly, students from all our campuses volunteer their services at Amma's Ashram at Amritapuri to cope with the enormous number of Amma devotees who come to take her blessings on the auspicious

occasion of her birthday on 27th September. At our Amritanagar, Coimbatore campus, many students of our Business school have been participating in a community outreach program at the neighbouring Ettimadai village under the able guidance of a senior faculty member for the last many years. These opportunities to serve the people selflessly help the students to internalize the spiritual principles of 'love' and 'serve' that Amma is striving to teach all over the world.

There are a number of other subtle rituals and practices which form a part of this overall strategy to influence the students and sensitize them spiritually. For example, the classes start in our university everyday with a prayer to the divine which is composed of sacred slokas (verses) from the Upanishads. The meaning of these powerful prayers invoking the grace of the divine before starting the auspicious process of learning the lessons of the day is explained to the students at the very beginning. This prayer helps to create a peaceful atmosphere all over the campus which is so necessary for efficient learning to take place.

The next aspect of the attempt to deliver a value based education at Amrita is the unique features of its organization structure apart from the structure of the curriculum which has already been explained above. Most universities have a Vice Chancellor at the top who is responsible for the overall management of the university. But at Amrita University, we have two positions at the top, a Vice Chancellor who represents the education for livelihood end of the arc, and a Pro-Chancellor who is a renunciate and a direct disciple of Amma representing the education for life end of the arc. There exists close coordination between the two, like the two wings of a bird. This unique innovation in its organization structure ensures that values remain at the core of all the initiatives that are taken at our university for expansion and growth. Similarly, there are a number of renunciates from the ashram working in different levels of administrative hierarchy of the university alongside normal salaried employees. Not only this, there are many senior faculty members at our university who are Amma's devotees and have had a very successful academic career all over the world and hence are in a very comfortable financial situation who do not take a salary for their services. They work alongside other faculty members who are on normal compensation systems like in any other university. There are some non-teaching staff members too from prosperous families who do not take any compensation. This spirit of selfless service shown by these people helps to charge our staff with an attitude of selfless service which helps to inspire the students in a subtle manner. As the saying goes, it is practice which impacts more rather than empty preaching alone.

As far as resources are concerned, we have a sprawling and beautifully developed 400 acre campus nestled among the hills of the Western Ghats, very well equipped modern classrooms, computer laboratories, impressive libraries, access to most of the major research databases like Proquest, Ebsco etc., playgrounds, gymnasiums, an Olympic size

swimming pool, and such other facilities that one expects at a top university. The material resources are complemented with a very highly qualified and experienced faculty members that Amrita has which is among the very best in the country.

This brings us finally to a discussion of innovative and effective teaching techniques that helps us to deliver the core purpose of our university to our students.

Stilling the Mind

We have taken this phrase from an elective course titled: “Managerial Effectiveness and Indian Ethos” at Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, taught by Prof. S K Chakraborty. Prof. Chakraborty taught the students in his class the practice of deep breathing exercises, coupled with a well directed thought process to go with each inhaling and exhaling process, and a deep awareness of the breathing process itself. Prof. Chakraborty asked the students to reflect on their experience, and share them in confidence with him, if they needed any help or guidance. It was optional. Many students shared a variety of their experience, but a common thread through all these experiences was a deep feeling of peace and tranquility within.

Prof. Chakraborty was a member of the Governing Body of Amrita School of Business. He had recommended that we may try to provide some experiential learning opportunities to the students. The school was following the practice of the Morning Prayer, as a part of the general system prevailing in all Amrita Institutions. A five minute period was introduced, before the Morning Prayer, with a view to providing the students an opportunity to have similar mind stilling experiences. At Amrita, all students are required to go through a month's Yoga lessons separately, and watching one's own breathing is a part of the yoga lessons. As such, it was felt that the students would find it natural to follow the breathing exercise at the beginning of every day in the school.

We offer the students a rationale for this practice also. We tell our students that our mind is *the* instrument to be used for all academic activities. Hence the ability to focus the mind holds the key to success. We also tell them that breathing is with us as long as we live. By focusing on our own breathing process, we can easily focus our mind, and daily practice helps. An occasion presented itself to a faculty member to demonstrate the efficacy of this practice as described below.

This faculty member was teaching a course on Energy Project Management to a group of students belonging to the Engineering School. This faculty member was located in the business school, and he introduced the practice of Morning Prayer and Mind Stilling Exercise at the beginning of the class. The students picked up the habit very quickly, and some of them stated in their e-mail correspondence with the faculty, how they liked the

experience. On a particular day, it so happened that the concerned faculty member forgot that he had a class, and was reminded of it through the mobile phone by one of the students. The teacher rushed to the class, and obviously he lacked composure when he reached the class. He sought permission to have a brief mind –stilling exercise for himself. The episode provided the students a live demonstration of the efficacy of the process.

Conclusion

We would like to take our readers back to the statement of the Chancellor of Amrita University: “Amma has a desire...” We recommend that every citizen on the globe makes a sincere effort to ensure that this desire expressed by Amma is fulfilled in his / her neighborhood. We believe that these spiritual paradigms are the *only* recourse that mankind has before them, for tackling the crisis. These spiritual principles only can motivate every individual to try to remove the fear of the oppressed, feed and serve the poor and needy, eliminate violence through the message of universal love and brotherhood, and participate in national and global rebuilding by offering selfless service for at least one day. Teachers have a much larger role in this process; they can first become a role model themselves, and thereby inspire their students to come forward to rebuild a beautiful world where AMMA's desire is fulfilled *every day*.

Exhibit I

Higher Education Forum (HEF) India: Code of Conduct for Faculty - EXTRACTS

At this point of time in history when there is a strong urge to reform, we should draft a code of conduct for teachers, for voluntary adoption by HEF members, which would touch upon commitment to excellence, fairness, equity, academic integrity, moral values and strength of character.

We wanted a more positive approach to the Code and also wanted to bring in what Indian tradition and philosophy had to offer.

We were captivated by the forceful and positive approach that is the hallmark of Swami Vivekananda's teachings. His thoughts were the guiding light for our group.

A written code will serve as a reminder about the great responsibility vested with the teachers- that of molding the young minds of this great democracy so that they become her worthy citizens.

“We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet.”

The Code encompasses the various attributes of character- truthfulness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and service orientation.

Two of its positives- i) it will be a self-imposed Code; and ii) the detailed Guidance to Practice which is appended to the Code makes it 'doable';

In the Indian tradition of Guru-Shishya Parampara,

Ethical Principle:

Teachers Demonstrate, Inspire and Guide, through their own conduct, that learning is a character-building and nation-building noble activity.

1. I will be trustworthy and build trustworthiness in my students by ...
2. I will earn respect and help students earn respect by ...
3. I will demonstrate and guide students to take responsibility for their actions by ...
4. I will demonstrate fairness in dealings by ...
5. I will demonstrate caring by ...
6. I will demonstrate that the knowledge gained is not merely for fulfilling materialistic ambitions but also to serve the society by ...

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