

Value Education : Relieving Peer Pressure, Addressing Culture and Stimulating Studies



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Rapid changes are taking place in India today. The changes are not just quantitative - in physical infrastructure and expansion of higher technical education, but also qualitative - in what we apparently value and how we relate to each other in family and in society. Students who come to higher technical education are naturally profoundly affected by it. It is the responsibility of the educational institution to develop a discerning ability through which the student is able to discern what is valuable and what is not - what is wheat and what is chaff. This to me is the first goal of value education. Note that the goal is not the giving of values to students but developing the "ability to decide" what is valuable, and if I may add, "courage to act" on it.

Many changes taking place in India are very visible. There is rapid rise of Consumerism. Media and advertisements are projecting new products and are using powerful weapons in their armoury to make people buy the products, even when they do not need them. Introducing glamour and creating a desire to have more than others are the watchwords (Neighbors' envy, owners' pride). There is also a concomitant rise in individualism, where relationships in family, with friends and in society are considered less important. Focus of the individual shifts to individual achievement and gratification. Worse still, the yardstick of achievement is reduced to "money" or amassment of physical resources, and intense competition as a means to reach there.

Bright and capable students enter some of our best institutions through an intense competition. Parents and society tell them in class 11 and 12, and some even earlier, that they have to prepare hard to enter IITs, NITs, IIITs and other premier engineering institutions and after that the life is made. Once they are in, they feel "life is made". This means to many of them that they will get good jobs at the end of their studies. Studying is not important. Infact, they have been told to study and work hard for an external reason ("life will be made") and internal reasons of joy and liking under such an atmosphere, have been given a go by. No wonder, students quickly lose interest in studies, once the external factor is not present.

Another aspect is that even those who enjoyed science and mathematics earlier, come under peer pressure that studies are not to be taken seriously. The hostel culture promotes lack of seriousness anybody seen as serious is made fun of. Along with this casual atmosphere, there is a new found "freedom" in when to sleep, what to watch on TV and internet, along with constant computer gaming and mindless browsing. Many are not able to handle this freedom in a responsible manner and the prevailing atmosphere promotes movement towards casualness. Those who resist are brought to accept the new "culture" violently through verbal or physical abuse called ragging, or through constant force of peer pressure.

I will take examples from my personal experience at IIIT Hyderabad to show the manifestations of the above. IIIT Hyderabad, a newly setup research university, introduced research even at the undergraduate level. Things went fine in the beginning, but then we noticed a change. Many students started displaying signs of irregular lifestyle and consequent missing of classes. The 24-hour availability of internet in labs as well as hostels promoted gaming and pointless browsing and chatting. This started developing into a lack of seriousness towards studies. Focus of students shifted solely to getting high-paying jobs, regardless of the quality of job, or their own personal interest and aptitude. In hindsight, it is not surprising, the society all around was telling them so. No wonder studies and learning were being dropped from the personal agenda of students. Undergraduate research which had started so well initially had hit an unexpected roadbump.

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Another manifestation was on the cultural front which I describe in some detail here. An annual cultural festival called Felicity was started by students, and soon the attempt was to get celebrities, rock bands, and hold late night DJ events, etc. Faculty tried to reason with students but failed to convince them that anything was wrong. Students argued that there was nothing wrong with their music or art, and faculty simply had a generation gap. Attempts to steer them in a different direction was seen as faculty trying to curb their freedom.

Around this time, faculty felt that students were not coming in with the right values or were falling into wrong mindset after coming here; and that something needed to be done about it. However, the received wisdom was that values are relative, they cannot be taught or incorporated in education. The only thing that can be done is to invite people of eminence who had contributed something good in their life, and ask them to give lectures or interact with students. The students would learn from the examples set by such people, and, of course, from those set by their own teachers. Various eminent people were invited as a part of this effort. One such person came and conducted a week long workshop on Jeevan Vidya in Nov, 2003. This is how a few teachers including the Director and two students at IIITH got introduced to Jeevan Vidya. For me, it was a liberating experience both in personal life as well as in life as a teacher/Director.

It became clear to me that here was something that could be reasoned out, was universal (non-denominational), and could be experimented with by a person. There was no preaching or dos' or dont's. There was no insistence on accepting any principle without critical evaluation and experimentation. One could take it as a set of propositions and try to verify them by experimenting with them or applying them in their own life.

Our way of dealing with students underwent a change. We started addressing the basic issues rather than problems per se. We realized that the main issue in a cultural or youth festival was not one of rock music or DJ but of peer pressure. Rather than controls and preachings on culture, the students needed our support and help to take independent decisions, and not those based on social and peer pressure.

An opportunity came very naturally. A panel discussion was organized with faculty, and students. The students said that the goal of Felicity was to show others how great IIITH was ! Celebrities were invited so that students from different colleges would come to Felicity and see what a great festival it was ! It was pointed out that no meaningful activity could have "show off" as its goal. When you do a meaningful activity well, it may result in natural appreciation, but the appreciation cannot be the reason for doing the activity. At the end, there was agreement that the goal of the festival was (1) to celebrate and enjoy, the way one would at a function at home, and (2) to provide a platform for bringing out cultural and organizational talent among our students. This policy was posted on the web-site. It was also posted that to guard against the tendency to "show-off", no celebrity would be engaged by paying a (high) fee, even when sponsorship amounts were available. It was not an issue of money but of culture that we want to set.

The next year a rock band was invited at Felicity by the students, although not by paying a high fee. The issue came up for discussion at the meeting of all the student organizer along with the Chairperson of Student Life Committee (SLC) and the Director. It was asked how many students out of those present listened to rock music. Ten out of fifty organizers present raised their hands. It included four or five who were part of IIITH rock band. At this point, some of the remaining students started asking why popular Indian music artists were not invited. Director and Chair, SLC intervened to stop the discussion and said that since the rock band had been invited one should proceed forward from here. Past can be analyzed later.

Two possible problems were raised by the Director regarding the rock show. First, it tends to promote alcohol and drugs, and secondly, it is associated with a show off. To the former, all the students organizers said that there is no such thing at IIITH, and they would all ensure that it does not happen in future either. To the latter they said they are doing it because they and many others like the music, and not to show off. They were asked to go ahead.

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A week before Felicity the students came to ask for bright blinking lights for the rock show. They were asked only one question: Is it part of the show or the show off? Interestingly the members of the rock band (who genuinely liked rock music) did not want the lights, but others who listened to rock music (possibly, to show that they are part of the in-crowd) wanted these lights to impress others. The lights were not permitted.

This example shows that a dialogue may begin on the problems, but by keeping the focus on the larger issue of values, such as “show off” and simplicity, the problem got “dissolved”. In this case, the principle of simplicity got established. (By the way, this principle would have to be followed by the Institute and faculty also in their own functioning. They also would have to shun show-off. It, actually, produces a liberating feeling in the whole Institute, a sign of freedom from peer pressure.)

Human values courses were introduced as a compulsory part of academic curriculum at IITM from July 2005 onwards. Soon after the first year students arrive on campus, they undergo a one-week intense workshop or shivir from morning till evening, with no other classes or academic activity. During the workshop, students examine their life goals, their achievements so far, their relationship in family, etc. The workshop is largely through discussion. Jeevan Vidya does not say what one should do but points out that to be happy, one would have to be in harmony with oneself and perform actions that are mutually fulfilling with family, friends, society, and enriching the nature. One evaluates one's goals thru a process called sahad svikriti (or natural acceptance). It is of great power and allows one to choose one's goals based on oneself. The positive effect of actions in fulfillment of the goals, gives further confirmation feedback.

The intense week-long workshop is followed by weekly discussions with first year students in small groups of 20-25 conducted by regular faculty. This is done so that students see value education as a part of normal academic activity, not something to be done by separate faculty. Topics are chosen to focus on the internal. The first discussion was on clothes and self-esteem. Why do we wear certain types of clothes jeans and branded tee-shirts? It soon emerges that it is due to peer pressure and the need to be part of the in-crowd. In such a case are we being free or are acting under remote control? Discussion soon moves to trendy cell phones and motor cycles. And to bigger cars and houses which are more relevant to the elders. It raises important questions relating to our self-esteem. If the source of self-esteem is external in how others view us, it is a losing game -guaranteed to generate pressure, and loss of freedom. It is also pointed out that this is the primary weakness that advertising is capitalizing on. Ads are full of how to feel special and gain others' respect and admiration. Youth are especially targeted by the consumerist and individualistic culture.

Many students remark that they have never been exposed to these ideas, and that these should have been a part of their education earlier in schools. Other topics related to managing anger, mutually fulfilling relationships, competition vs excellence, English as a means of communications vs means of respect, living in family and society, conservation of electricity and natural resources, and in general, acting responsibly with self-confidence and self respect. Many feel a tremendous sense of relief from external pressures. They also become more conscious of their relationships and how to enrich them. They start examining what they want to do in their life, and how much physical facilities are needed. However, this is only a beginning of understanding. How can it be put in practise in their life? They are told to watch themselves, their anger, their behaviour. Learning to introspect and learning to respond rather than react.

Many students also become more sensitive towards the consumption of natural resources in particular of, water and electricity. The fact that the earth itself is becoming “sick” (global warming, pollution, etc.) due to human actions, including indefinite physical goods, is discussed.

A much larger canvas, a canvas of life, gets opened in front of them. We are finding that a slow process is on among the students. They are also becoming conscious that a job is more than just money. Many more are talking about pursuing higher studies. They are also realizing the life is more than a job, and are becoming more responsible in behaviour towards their friends, and towards society around them. Most importantly they are learning to listen to their inner voice. The process needs to be aided and nurtured

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over weeks and months, and the right environment is needed to make it flower. We hope that many fruits will come out of these.

There is another interesting outcome. The faculty which has actively participated in value education has become more comfortable in themselves, in their family, in their relationships to other faculty and with students. Some of the most active researchers have participated in it and feel more fulfilled. Their involvement with their students had tended to be more uni-dimensional earlier.

Introduction of Jeevan Vidya in IITK has not been uneventful. When it was first introduced in July 2005, the first year students were teased by their seniors that they were being made into sanyasis or saints. The first year batch came under tremendous peer pressure. As a result, interesting batch dynamics came

into play. Some ragging cases came up in July 2006, which added a new dimension to that dynamics. They were successfully tackled not through punishment but through relationship. Because of lack of time, details are not discussed here (see writeup elsewhere). It has brought about a turning point in the application of Jeevan Vidya in the institution and has drawn the entire community together faculty, students and administration.

In most institutions, 10% of the students are quite responsible and serious irrespective of external influences. They work quietly because the prevailing atmosphere makes fun of them. There are 10% students who feel wronged (by parents, society or the Institute faculty or administration) and they stand in opposition. Usually, they are also quite articulate and capable, it is just that their energies have gotten diverted into opposing or acting in an unruly manner. It is these 10% who create an atmosphere of opposition and casualness, and the large majority of 80% comes under their influence.

Usual reaction of the Institute administration is the imposition of strict discipline and punishment. But this generates further opposition, and a large part of the

majority gets alienated. The key is to address the basic issues which Jeevan Vidya brings out so clearly, and deal with people through relationship rather than fear of punishment. This has been tried with resounding success in some instances at IITK. What I can say is that the process is on. The journey has just begun. It is bringing about a slow but sweeping change in the institution.

I have tried to touch upon many different facets in any institution - about research and seriousness towards studies, relationships among students, ragging, irregular and casual lifestyle, that is, culture in the hostels. All these get addressed by inculcating a sense of responsibility. It involves focusing on the self and introspection, and relating to the larger world. Value Education brings about a welcome change among faculty in their relationship with students, and among each other. The institution as a whole becomes more relaxed and hopefully, truly, a temple of learning.

I never knew what 'I' want to achieve, what is good or valuable for me? I was just following others, thus I never felt full confident about myself. Also there was lack of satisfaction within me. Another thing which made uncomfortable all the time was lack of good relationship within my family members, among my relatives and friends due to lack of understanding and trust. After attending three Jeevan Vidya Shivirs conducted by Prof. Ganesh Bagaria, I realized that most important thing for any human being is Knowing Self, and through that setting goals and objectives of our life. Exploring self has made me more confident and it helps me in taking decisions related to my future. Whenever there is some lack in it, I am little bit able to handle the situation.

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