

To Appreciate Excellence: The Core of Positive Learning

Jayant V Narlikar, Emeritus Professor at IUCAA, Pune delivered the Convocation Address at the 7th Convocation of Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar, Gujarat on 22 January, 2011. He said, “the successful time manager is able to prioritize the tasks great and small and schedule them so that there is minimum of wastage of time. The bad time manager is the exact opposite. Thus, when someone tries to impress me by showing his desk piled with files to demonstrate what an important person he is, I say to myself that irrespective of being important, the piles on the table show that this person is a bad time manager!”. Excerpts

The convocation is a significant landmark in the life of the graduating student who receives his degree as a token of having attained the level of knowledge required; no less it is a moment of satisfaction for his or her teachers for having produced one more scholar in their field. I am happy to be present on this occasion amongst you and extend my hearty congratulations to the graduating scholars as well as their teachers.

While the graduands rightly celebrate this occasion for having achieved a landmark that opens out avenues for a promising future, they should not forget their Alma Mater and their teachers. I may remind them of the couplet of the poet Kabir:

गुरु गोबिंद दोनों खड़े काके लागूँ पाँच
बलिहारी गुरु आपने गोबिंद देइ बताय

Kabir wants to know that if both God (Govind) and the teacher appear before him at the same time, whom should he salute first? He supplies his own answer: he should salute the teacher because it was with his guidance that Kabir could find the way to God. The graduates who have improved their value by their education should not forget who guided them to the successful state they find themselves in today.

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of my concerns about quality and excellence in higher education. To set the scene for what I wish to say, let me take you on a time machine back in time to the days in ancient India when King Raghu was ruling at Ayodhya. The work called “Raghuvansha” by the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa describes, in the fifth chapter, the following episode in Raghu’s life.

Having just concluded the “Vishwajit” yajna to celebrate his conquests, Raghu had given away all his wealth to the needy poor. At this stage Kautsa, a young graduate and student of the sage Varatantu arrived in his court with a request. Raghu received him with respect as he did all scholars coming to his court and asked the

reason for his visit. Having washed his feet, Raghu asked:

तवार्हतो नाभिगमेन तृप्त मनो नियोगक्रिययोत्सुकं मे
अप्याज्ञया शासितुरात्मना वा प्राप्तोसि संभावयितुं बनान्नाम्

“I am not satisfied simply by the visit of a respected person like yourself. I would like to serve you in some way. You have come all the way from your forest...was this because of the order of your teacher, or have you come at your own behest?”

Kautsa had noticed that Raghu had used water in a simple earthenware pot to wash his feet, obviously because he had given away all his gold. Now Kautsa had come for a very unusual need. He first described his requirement. When he had completed his education under Varatantu, he wished to pay something by way of Gurudakshina, that is the offering a student makes to his teacher by way of teaching fee. Knowing that Kautsa was very poor, Varatantu declined to accept anything, saying that the service Kautsa had rendered in his household was ample fee. However, Kautsa was not satisfied with this reply and began insisting, with the result that Varatantu lost his temper and asked Kautsa to bring him one crore gold coins for each one of the fourteen arts that he had learnt there. Clearly this enormous demand was beyond the ability of Kautsa to deliver. Knowing that there was only one king in India capable of meeting such a demand, he had come to Raghu, only to find the great king penniless. So he said:

त्वदन्यतस्तावदनन्य कार्यो गुर्वर्थमाहर्तुमहं यतिष्ये
स्वस्त्यस्तु निर्गलिताम्बुगर्भ शरदघ्नं नार्दति चातकोपि

“I wish you well. But what I need for my teacher, I must get from some other donor. For even the Chataka birds do not ask for water from an autumn cloud that has lost all its water.”

But, Raghu would not tolerate his guest going away with unfulfilled demand. So he decided to get the money from another campaign. As he had already conquered the Earth, he could not do so again. So he decided to

attack the gods in the heaven, in particular, to invade Kubera, the treasurer of the gods. Only there could he expect to find that kind of money. So he requested Kautsa to wait for a day and instructed that his chariot be got ready to attack Kubera in the morning.

However, such was his reputation for valour, that Kubera did not want to face him in a battle, and to forestall his attack, during the night he rained gold on the ground, outside Raghu's palace. So the next morning Raghu found all this mountain of wealth, much more than Kautsa's 14 crore of gold coins. He asked Kautsa to take it all; but Kautsa took only what he needed for his teacher, while Raghu had no interest in the remainder. The people of Ayodhya who were witness to this episode naturally had praise for them both.

I have chosen this story as it illustrates several ideals of India in Tretayuga. First we see Raghu's respect for knowledge, even though it appeared in the form of a fresh graduate. The story also tells us of Varatantu's desire not to charge fees to a poor student. (It is a different matter that he asked for the exorbitant sum only because he got angry.) Then we have Raghu taking the trouble of planning a campaign against Kubera, for meeting the request of a poor student. And we also see how Raghu's fame as a warrior had reached even the heavens. Finally we find the total lack of greed in both Kautsa and Varatantu in that neither was interested in the surplus money available.

Now compare the story to what would have happened in the present day India. Imagine that Varatantu is the Principal of a college and Kautsa a student there. To get admission to the college, Kautsa would have to pay a substantial capitation fee. Can he get a grant from the state to meet his educational bill? If he knocked on the doors of the Secretariat, who will listen to him? In the normal course of events there is no chance of his meeting the Chief Minister. But, while he is shunted from one office to another suppose he runs into the Chief Minister; Raghu by chance. Would Raghu listen to him and then say: "Look my treasury is empty, but tomorrow I will personally go to Delhi to meet the Central Finance Minister so that I can bring funds from him?" Suppose he does so decide and sends a fax to the FM Kubera informing him that he is coming with a request for funds. Would the Chief Minister; Raghu have such high reputation that the Finance Minister would satisfy his demand even before he left for Delhi? And if the Centre gives a grant in excess of the requirement, would either Raghu or Kautsa bother to return the excess?

Sounds ridiculous? Well my purpose in showing this contrast was to underscore the fall in values that has taken place from the mythical times of Raghu's to today's reality. There is a saying in Sanskrit: The king is respected in his own country; but the scholar is respected everywhere. Today knowledge and learning seem to take a back seat against money and power. Why have knowledge and learning lost their attraction?

Let us look at the other side of the coin. Surveying the present scene, how many learned scholars do we see who could really command social respect? Only a handful. How many teachers do you see who derive absolute pleasure from the art of teaching? Only a handful. King Dushyanta in Shakuntala said that when one enters a forest where *rishis* teach, one should do so in modest clothes as a mark of respect for the ambience. How many of our places of learning today have that kind of scholastic ambience that would prompt such an action? Only a handful. How many of our scientists today prefer to work on their research problems rather than exercise their authority like a bureaucrat? Only a handful!

A few years ago I happened to visit Japan for two months. This was my third visit to that country. Yet, each time I could not help being impressed by the accent on punctuality set by the entire nation. One example is the accuracy with which the Japanese trains follow their time table. Once I had to travel by making a change of trains at an intermediate station. There was a gap of eight minutes between the arrival of the first train and the departure of the next (connecting) train. I asked the secretary who had made the booking if the eight minute gap was not too short. 'Why?' she asked and added "the time is more than sufficient even if you have to change the platform". And she was proved right. The first train arrived on the dot at the scheduled time and I was seated in the connecting train with three minutes to spare. This, despite the language barrier that I had to surmount in locating the correct platform.

This stress on punctuality was typified to me by a poster on the wall in one of the underground train station in Kyoto. Indeed it was striking because it was written in Devanagari script. Even English is rarely seen in public hoardings and notices; so the appearance of Devanagari was a real surprise. When I studied it, I found that it was a shloka in Sanskrit:

क्षण संप्रदियं सुदुर्लभा प्रतिलब्ध पुरुषार्थ साधनी
यदि नात्रा विचिन्त्यते हितं पुनरप्येष समागमः कुतः

I noted it down and translated it. It said: "The most precious commodity called 'a moment of time' which

enables man to achieve his goals is here : If he does not look after his interests now, when is he going to get it again?"

I can think of no better way of expressing the need for putting the available time to the best use. Still I was curious to know of the origin of the verse. Fortunately a friend who was then the Head of the Department of Sanskrit and Prakrit Languages in the University of Pune, supplied the answer. The author of the verse was one Shantideva, a Buddhist monk.

The Sanskrit origin of the shloka suggests that it was created in India. It is indeed ironical that I should find it in Japan, whereas, its central theme of considering time to be a precious commodity appears to have been forgotten in the country of its origin. In India, would we rely on a train connection with a gap of only eight minutes?

But punctuality is just one part of time management. At any given time in our life we have some tasks to complete. Tasks can be great or small, of long or short durations, requiring varying degrees of effort. Ideally, one may want to do them all; but does time permit? Does one take on too many of them at the same time and finish none? I frequently hear complaints about unfinished tasks because time ran out. There are books to be written and sent to the publisher, but deadlines are long past. There are piles of correspondence waiting to be answered. There are activities waiting to be started, only crucial decisions are not yet taken.

In this connection you will find the following story very instructive. Once a teacher brought a jar to the class, along with stones, pebbles, some sand and water. He proceeded to fill the jar with big stone pieces. When he could put no more in, he asked the class if the jar was full. "Yes", said the class. "Wrong" replied the teacher as he proceeded to put in small pebbles which went into the many interstices. When he could put no more pebbles he repeated the question. "No" roared the class, this time aware that there was still some space left for the grains of sand. After filling as much sand as he could, the teacher asked again: Is the jar full? Again the class answered. "No", "Correct", said the teacher as he filled the remaining space with water. "What do you learn about time management, from this experiment?" The teacher asked. The class answered: "In between your major tasks there is always time to carry out your many minor duties". "Excellent!", said the teacher. "But there is more to it", he said and proceeded to perform another experiment. This time he started filling the jar in the

reverse order, first with sand and then pebbles. However, when he came to the stones, there was no room left for them! The moral? "If you spend too much of your time on smaller tasks, you will find that you have none left for your big and important activities!"

So the successful time manager is able to prioritize the tasks great and small and schedule them so that there is minimum of wastage of time. -The bad time manager is the exact opposite. Thus, when someone tries to impress me by showing his desk piled with files to demonstrate what an important person he is, I say to myself that irrespective of being important, the piles on the table show that this person is a bad time manager!

When I was a student in Cambridge University, I once had a discussion with an English friend about the class system prevalent in Britain. Although there are no castes in that country, there are classes. My friend told me that there are broadly four classes. The first one contains the royalty and aristocracy, the second one has politicians, top level bureaucrats, professionals and university academics, the third class has shopkeepers and service providers, while the fourth class is made of labour. When I expressed surprise that the academics were so high up, my friend told me that they are held in high esteem because of their high level of education; that they are held higher than government officials and industrial bosses even though they earn less. A Fellow of Royal Society in Britain or a Fellow of the French Academy will command great social respect, even though they may be in a middle income bracket and exert very little authority. Why? Because they have the great assets of high education, creativity and originality. They have achieved excellence in their fields through these assets.

It is this pursuit of excellence that brings a sense of job-satisfaction and respect from society, more so than money or authority. I can narrate the example of a mule contractor who provided mules to carry building material up Mount Wilson, near Los Angeles, where a large (100-inch) telescope was being built, back in the second decade of the twentieth century. He wondered, why someone was building an observatory atop a mountain which was till then inaccessible to motor vehicles. So when the building was built and the telescope was put in, he wanted to come and look. What he saw fascinated him so much that he gave up the contractor's job and became a janitor in the observatory. Gradually he began assisting the astronomers with their observing and soon became an expert observer himself. This is the story of

Milton Humason, who later worked as a professional astronomer with Edwin Hubble. The studies of galaxies by Hubble and Humason led ultimately to the startling discovery that the universe is expanding. From a mule driver to a distinguished astronomer is a story of pursuit of excellence.

We have the stories of Srinivas Ramanujan, Satyendra Nath Bose and Meghnad Saha, and more recently of Amartya Sen...all pursuers of excellence in their fields. I recall meeting Amartya Sen when I was a fresh graduate (like you!) from the Banaras Hindu University, preparing to go to Cambridge. Amartya had then become a Fellow at Trinity College (-the College of which he later became the Master-), and was visiting India. As he happened to be passing through BHU, my father sent me to talk to him in the expectation that I may pick a few useful tips from him. Meeting a person who had achieved great success at young age, was indeed greatly inspiring as his example showed what can be achieved with hard work in pursuit of excellence.

One may say that the story of Raghu that I narrated in the beginning, belonged to the Tretayuga and should not be compared to today's Kaliyuga. However, even today one can aspire to those ideals and this is what I want to convey to those who have been awarded degrees today. Yes, it can be done. Certainly we can learn from the examples of some centres of excellence in today's world.

So my message to you who have received your degrees today, is to learn to appreciate excellence wherever you see it. The Sanskrit verse from Uttar Ramacharita says:

घुणाः पूजास्थानं गुणिषु न च लिंगं न च वयः

That is "merit is appreciated by the meritorious, regardless of age or gender". Strive for excellence, regardless of what field you choose to work in, and you will never go wrong. There will be others who will appreciate your efforts. □

(contd. from pg.10)

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