

Excellence in Higher Education

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This morning we are going to reflect on what excellence means in higher education. Let me at the outset state where I stand in this discussion while simultaneously being respectfully critical of the mainstream views. I will later argue that the mainstream views are seriously inadequate to lead us out of the serious social and ecological crises our world is likely to face.

I do not subscribe to the generally held views on excellence which have to do with competition, where some win and others lose, and where the only goal is to find a career in the all pervasive market economy. In this approach excellence is motored by the fear of the other; fear that the other will beat you. I believe that true excellence must come from within. It is a state, or rather 'a process', of passionate fulfillment that right effort and involvement produces within oneself.

But we should begin this reflection with more commonly held views. Perhaps President Abdul Kalam's understanding of excellence can be cited as a good example of what most would consider as appropriate. Speaking at the 150th year celebrations of Madras University the President said that universities would have to be continuously innovative, making use of modern technology. He added that research and enquiry, creativity and innovation, use of high technology, entrepreneurial and moral leadership were synonymous with the notion of a good educational model. Being a technology buff, as so many of us are, he went on to say:

"Universities should equip themselves with adequate computing equipment, laboratory equipments, and Internet facilities... the teacher will become even more important and the whole world of education will become teacher-assisted and would help in 'tele-porting' the best teacher to every nook and corner of the country and propagate the knowledge. The virtual university created between Universities of Madras, Mumbai and Kolkata is a good step forward in this direction for knowledge sharing and outreach in the remote areas."

Commenting on the President's address a former Vice-chancellor of Anna University, M. Anandakrishnan, stated:

"University systems in the State are now highly politicised, especially when it comes to appointments and hence it is highly appropriate that the President drew attention as to how intellectual achievements are possible only with a degree of autonomy. Autonomy would ensure a quality control in the system."

Few educationists will contest President Kalam's criteria of what it takes to provide quality education. Even if they do not address the more fundamental question of the relevance of education his remarks would be considered to be right on track. He has emphasised enquiry, creativity and innovation, use of high technology, entrepreneurial and moral leadership.

For those of us who have been exposed by the worst in the system of higher education we know very well the limitations of mugging by heart to pass examinations. We know how much of higher education is mechanical. In this approach the spirit of enquiry has no place and the imagination is killed.

The President also talks about the need for high technology. For my part it is clear that it is impossible to strive for excellence today without access to the internet. I am sure that many students in Bangalore will have the possibility of using the net either at home, or in a cyber café ,or even possibly in their college. This is certainly not the case with the vast majority of students in India coming from poorer backgrounds and studying in colleges that are less endowed.

It is also important to inculcate the entrepreneurial spirit in students, for this is indispensable for producing leaders who have the enthusiasm and energy to start new ventures and explore new horizons in business, technology, medicine, research and other areas.

The vice-chancellor I have quoted underlined the need for autonomy in higher education. Today our universities and colleges are beleaguered with over-bureaucratization, excessive governmental control, shortage of finances, and rampant politicization. Appointments to teaching positions within many universities are made on the basis of caste, money power and influence rather than on merit. One has also heard about how a doctoral thesis can be written by somebody else for a fee.

The President has also emphasized the need for morality in the quest for excellence. Living in a country like India we are constantly put into situations where we participate in corruption and wrong doing, even when we don't wish to. When we have a context where most of our leaders are routinely corrupt, and where serious criminal cases are pending against several of them it might sound hypocritical to talk about ethics and good morals. And yet no society worth its salt can function without a sense of right and wrong. Excellence cannot be divorced from ethics.

Too often the notion of excellence in education conjures up the image of the mark sheet. And yet as the educationist Ken Bain reminds us, "The modern system of grading -- the idea of assigning a number or letter to someone's learning -- is a fairly recent invention in higher education" which "gained increasing popularity only in the twentieth century as the culture sought ways to certify competence in an increasingly complex and technical world". We are all aware that a rigorous system of certification has little to do with excellence in education, even if this is the general criteria most of us go by. You can

achieve 'excellence' in today's world and still be a moral and emotional wreck.

How do I see education? To me education is not an uncreative and mechanical process of gathering and storing 'information' that we pass off as knowledge. Computers can do this better than us. I am sure that colleges like St. Josephs are more than aware of this. Real education implies transformation and not a mere transmission of facts and ideas. The old fashioned clerk, for example, transmits what his predecessor did. He cannot be creative and make his own decision after duly studying the circumstances. Unlike the experience of the clerk education must transform us all the time and we should be incapable of repeating the same thing even once, since our creative and innovative faculties will not let us fall into the trap of dead habit.

All authentic education is a flow of reflection and action, even if action for a student must largely take the form of intellectual challenges related to issues around us. There is never a static or dull moment in a genuine educational process. We are alive and alert all the time. This is an aliveness that is quickened with imagination and compassion. It is also an aliveness that knows that it must be equal to the task of solving the complex social and ecological problems that confront us. It is within this perspective that the call for excellence in higher education must be approached, conceptualized and practiced.

The quest for excellence has to do with acquiring knowledge and skills in the most creative way possible. But we often disconnect excellence from relevance and look at it only from the point of view of knowledge for the sake of knowledge or knowledge for success. Relevance has to do with students larger priorities about themselves and the world they live in.

Of course personal effort is very important to this pursuit. As the Buddha said:

"Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart to give yourself to it "

The goal of higher education is not merely one of helping a student to identify her abilities but to see how it can be creatively developed further. How can the abilities of students be developed in a manner that is real and comprehensible. How can the mind , the imagination and the emotions get involved? **A Chinese proverb says, "Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand".**

It is only when education is synonymous with the rigorous **acquisition of knowledge and skills that are linked to both personal transformation and the transformation of the world around us** that we begin to understand what excellence in higher education might be like.

My argument is made easier because the Jesuit fathers who run this institution have already given considerable thought to what an excellent educational institution might mean today. In attempting to outline what the purpose of Jesuit higher education in India should be, Fr. Rudolf C. Heredia of St. Xaviers college, Mumbai states:

“More specifically, the challenge facing Jesuit higher education today in India is to achieve not just an academic excellence, but one that is socially relevant as well. The institutional expression of such relevance, at a first level, must be in terms of the people we have opted to serve. Thus, admission criteria must express our option for the poor, and not be based solely on a class-biased merit system that negates this. For a "meritocracy" will be as unjust as an aristocracy, in a class-caste-ridden society such as ours, where equality of opportunity is severely constrained and access to good education is limited from the earliest stages.

At a second level, besides the students we select, the graduates we produce must be, in Fr. Arrupe's words, "**men for others**" and "**agents of change**" for justice and faith. (Fr.Arube was the Jesuit International Chief some years ago) Course content and administrative structures are but means to be geared to these pedagogic goals. Obviously, there are the constraints of the system, particularly acute in the affiliating universities in this country. **But the challenge is precisely to use what freedom we have to create the freedom we want, rather than find alibis for continuing with the status quo.**

At a third level, such in-house goals must be complemented with out-reach programs in terms of an extension service that is compatible with the pedagogic commitments of an educational institution. This is sometimes called "service education," which really amounts to education through service. The institutional goodwill and the professional and other resources of a prestigious college can indeed make a real contribution to the local community and beyond. The specific contribution could vary from making institutional facilities available to the neighborhood, to advocacy programs, and engaging faculty and students on issues of social concern.”

Fr. Heredia goes on to quote another study that reveals "the conflict between two organizational goals: (a) the pursuit of academic excellence, (b) the promotion of greater social justice." Fr. Heredia of course does not wish to see these two goals as mutually exclusive. For him the real challenge is **the dialectic tension between a critical intellectual quest and an effective commitment to education for justice.** This, he believes is the real creative challenge for higher education in India in the 21st century.

To my mind Fr.Heredia has come up with a relevant definition of what excellence in higher education must be. It is the combination of a critical intellectual quest with a commitment for social justice. Let us note that Fr.Heredia has carefully chosen his words and mentioned social justice instead of social work or charitable work.

A lack of social justice implies that the structure of our society, our very democratic process, excludes a section of society from the fruits of development. Therefore what the poor and the excluded are asking for is to be given what is rightfully their due. They don't want our charity or social work. When you give somebody fish to eat its charity or

social work, and he becomes dependent on you. But when you teach the person how to fish and create conditions where he can obtain his fishing tackle or net, he becomes autonomous and keeps his dignity. This is authentic social transformation.

But today another important element must be added to the notion of social justice and that is the ecological dimension. Today our world is plagued by the twin problems of social exclusion and ecological collapse.

Social exclusion: the example of the woman picking up rice grains; eating rats in Tamilnadu, when our granaries are full; farmers committing suicide.the water problem on Tannery road

Ecological collapse:

To develop the kind of excellence that will save life on our planet we need to inculcate certain attitudes and values. And this has to do with whether you strive to be an individual or person. Let me explain.

On being a person.

Does excellence have anything to do with the dog-eats-dog mentality that has come to symbolize our global civilization. I am going to borrow from a distinction I have made elsewhere between being a person and being an individual. I firmly believe that excellence has to do with being a person rather than an individual. The individual cannot care; only the person can.

Let me explain.

There is this story about a teenage ant, flush with energy, which helps to understand the difference between the individual and the person.

This teenage ant wanted to make something of his life. Young people search for ideals to follow and our ant was no exception. On this particular day he walked down the main shopping boulevard to see if there was anything that could inspire him. Of course there were all the well displayed shops, selling things that teenagers are attracted to. But our ant wanted something more.

As he strode past the well displayed shops he suddenly pricked up his ears to catch a mesmerizing chant emerging from the bottom of the boulevard. It was like nothing he had heard before. Drawn by the haunting quality of the chant he hurried in the direction it emanated from. With each step the chant became stronger and he could see the outline of a structure, further down, that seemed to resemble a church or a temple or a mosque.

He now began to run, feeling sure that this was what he was looking for. He did not know what to expect, but the outline of the church or temple or mosque and the passionate and rhythmic chant convinced him that he was going to find the answer to his questions.

As he got closer he noticed that the structure was not a church or temple or mosque, but a hill of turbulent ants. There were hundreds of thousands of them and they were in a heightened state of excitement. They were jumping over each other, elbowing and kicking in frenzy. He could now make out the words of the sacred chant he had heard in the distance. The words went: 'Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top!'

The teenager was overwhelmed with emotion. He jumped on to the hill and began kicking and screaming as he tried to head for the top. Soon he began to chant with the others: Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top! He felt an extraordinary surge of energy rush through him. This was the vision he had been searching for, and now he was fully a part of it.

The story goes that one ant finally kicked his way to the top. When he got there he looked around in dismay. "But, there's nothing here! There's absolutely nothing up here!" he exclaimed.

"Hush," said the ant who came after. "But don't tell anybody!" Obviously, staying at the top only made sense as long as the others below believed there was something special up there.

The historical significance of the story needs to be explained further. An intellectual stream of great import, known as The Enlightenment, emerged in Europe in the 18th century, which profoundly altered the notion of the human being. Up to then the churches, the feudal lords and the restrictive guilds held a stranglehold on human advancement. The liberal and intellectual currents of The Enlightenment, with their emphasis on reason and intellectual progress, took the human being out of the shadow of the church, the feudal structure, the family and the clan. The natural child of the Enlightenment was the philosophy of Individualism that declared that the individual was an end in himself/herself and this alone was the supreme value. All individuals were in some sense morally equal, and no one would ever be considered solely as a means to the well being of another. Individualism also justified a certain degree of selfishness.

Individualism, which at one point in time was a progressive current, finds itself today in crisis, because of its identification with the fiercely competitive attitude of 'win-lose'. It is an axiom of post-industrial society that some people will win and others lose, that some will rise to wealth and fame while others will be trampled upon and even eliminated.

Today the individual is geared to compete from primary school through university to professional life. She or he is geared to reach the top. The prevailing vision of human existence is vertical, to climb over each other to get to the top. Only one set of human drives is to the fore: those of power, possession and competition.

Other human drives, the horizontal ones, concerned with being a person, of caring and nurturing, fellowship and interconnectedness, are neglected and showing signs of atrophy.

A person is certainly an autonomous being. But she is also an interdependent being, and her destiny is interwoven with the destinies of others and the very earth herself. The person is one who is aware that there is nothing there at the top, that the quest for excellence cannot be confused with the paranoia to get to the top. She knows that excellence comes from our ability to pay attention to detail and value 'rigour' in all that we do. She also knows that excellence comes from being connected with our neighbour and with the earth. We need not be aggressive or competitive to excel.

The original meaning of competition was 'running along with others'. If we need to compete at all, we need to return to this original meaning and give up the present understanding of eliminating the other.

But given the contradictions of our societies how do we go about acquiring skills and knowledge that will give us a profession and simultaneously becoming a decent and compassionate human being? Its not an easy question to answer when the goals of excellence are tilted to make you to enter the fast lane to make the fast buck. But let me make some tentative suggestions that we can later discuss. I am certain you have an important contribution to make to allow us to proceed further. But here are my ideas on the subject.

I think we are asked to embrace paradox. Can we beat the system at its own game and still be compassionate human beings? Can we strive for excellence in acquiring knowledge and skills without being aggressively competitive, and perhaps not be competitive at all? For example can we learn for the sheer pleasure of learning, for the sheer kick it gives us to be totally involved in whatever we are doing?

Or to put it even better: Can we become critical insiders in the system knowing that the dominant paradigm of development will lead us to sorrow, infinite sorrow, and therefore we have to combine excellence with relevance, that in actual fact excellence and relevance are not two different things?

To rephrase the Buddha:

"Your work is to combine excellence with relevance and then to give yourself to it with all your heart and all your mind."

Can we do this?

Can we put one foot in the system and another foot in changing ourselves and the world around us? Can we become critical insiders in the pursuit of excellence ?

I do hope we can give a little time to this discussion.

Let me conclude with a story from the life of Ramanuja, who lived not from Bangalore, in the city of Melkote.

In the old days, all over the world, the highest quest was to find God. A seeker after god approached Ramanuja and asked him to help him find God. He said that he had tried very

hard and not succeeded. Ramanuja asked the man if he had ever loved someone. The man looked startled at Ramanuja's inane question. Here was he trying to excel in finding God and Ramanuja was side tracking the issue by asking an unconnected question. Some what irritated the man replied that he had not done this as he was concerned with a more important quest. Ramanuja repeated the question, asking him to think carefully, whether he had not loved somebody even a little. But the man was persisitent and said that he had never loved anybody. Then Ramanuja said that he had come to the wrong person for help, as he did not see how anybody could experience God without having loved anybody.

For our purposes this morning maybe we need to only retell this story by substituting God for Excellence. The question that immediately comes to mind will be: Can we really achieve excellence without caring for others?

I am going to end this discussion by restating what I have begun with: Excellence is a process that comes from within. It is a state of passionate enjoyment that right effort and involvement produces within one. And I will further add that excellence in each one of us can be beautiful only when it meets excellence in others.

I am thankful to St.Josephs Commerce College for the honour of allowing me to give this keynote address. I believe that this college allows space for critical insiders to develop. Here is a college, in Fr. Heredia's words, that tries "to use what freedom we have to create the freedom we want"

Thank you very much once again.