

# **THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE**

## **Need for Moral Values to Indian Youth**

**J. S. Rajput**

Youth signifies and represents ideal-ism and hope. Every generation of young persons charts out its own course to realize its dreams and aspirations in life. Meanwhile it is the perpetual responsibility of the elders to assist the youths in growing up and in becoming familiar with the eternal human values. Further, they need acquaintance with different facets of human quest that has led to generation, creation, dissemination and evolution of knowledge resulting in better understanding of the forces of nature, the world around us, and the way civilizations evolve and march ahead. They must prepare themselves to chalk out their new goals of life they wish to pursue and the contributions they intend to make to society. The youths are to be taught to paint the vast canvas of life with ideas and activities that could help them visualize the future they are to create for themselves and their fellow men. They need to strive to know what is real and what is unreal. They could also be guided to appreciate that the search for truth is the ultimate goal that one realizes only after understanding the transitory nature of all that is constantly changing around every moment. An acquaintance with the history and heritage of India could give them a feeling of continuity and motivate them to assume responsibility to take the lineage ahead. Above all, cultural moorings and scriptures may motivate and instil in them a sense of possession of the sublime, godness and beauty, which they need to assimilate and internalize.

The world is continuously on the march. The 21st century represents a transition from 'information society' to the 'knowledge society'. Knowledge alone can transform even a slack and lethargic society to join others in dynamic endeavours for progress and development. No society can remain stagnant and isolated and hope for survival these days. What matters is the level of general awareness and willingness coupled with determination to utilize knowledge for the welfare of the 'people', ie themselves. It is well understood that universal education and greater participation in higher education is the road that every nation must tread at this stage. They do need leadership and guidance in early stages. Millions of Indians imbibed the seemingly impossible goals put forward by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle. They gladly accepted sacrifice, sufferings and personal injury of various kinds. No generation can pass on the eternal values of life like truth, integrity, idealism, service of others and moral codes of conduct to the next generation without itself presenting concrete evidence of having adhered to these in their own lives. There must be examples for study, scrutiny and adaptation and then, finally, every generation has to learn for itself, prepare to delineate what would be the best in the times ahead. Education along with the family and the society could prepare every generation to make the correct and appropriate choice. Apart from dedication, commitment, acquisition of competence, proficiency in acquisition of knowledge and willingness to upgrade it continuously, it would also be equally, rather even more, important to internalize the need for disciplined exercise of human faculties. The moral crisis being faced by every nation at present arises out of unwise, materialistic and undisciplined application of human faculties. All awareness and acquaintance with high morals, ethics, values and principles is of little consequence unless sustained efforts are made by all concerned to achieve their internalization and then imbibe a determination to stick to them even in circumstances that may indeed be testing and demanding.

The 20th century was the century of science and technology. It gave mankind enough know-how, knowledge and skill that empowered them to control the forces of nature. A possibility emerged in which, with an equitable distribution of the natural resources, every human being could live a decent life, and the world could be freed from hunger, poverty, misery and drudgery. What the world really got was two World Wars, the brutal and cruel destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, massacre of millions in Germany and also in USSR and China. There was violence spread over the globe all around. There was a Mahatma Gandhi, a Martin Luther King Jr, an Albert Schweitzer and also Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. There were illumined minds that strived hard to propagate eternal human values. There were

also those who had not been imbued with the basics of humanity and the eternal human values. Things changed fast. There were positive developments like end of colonialism and apartheid, restoration of rights to women, establishment of the United Nations and others. In India, caste system and untouchability were discarded; acceptance of diversity, India's greatest heritage and asset began gaining strength. Young persons from India have proved to the entire world that even learning in deficient and deprived conditions, they can match in effort, commitment and intellectual abilities with the best in the world. Indians have established their superiority in science, technology and lately in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The West is now looking towards India, which has the demographic advantage as around 65 per cent of its population are below 30 years. It is time to realize the value of every human life—some prefer to call it human resource—and the need to give them chance and opportunity to prove themselves in non-exploitative conditions.

A very significant point to be noted is that, at the time of the beginning and subsequent growth of science and technology in Europe, there was little acquaintance with the Eastern philosophy and thought amongst the people in general and also amongst the scientists. Scientific advances influence the socio-cultural and spiritual values, hence these cannot be viewed in isolation. The growth of science and technology has mostly resulted in materialistic gains at the cost of spiritual quest, which alone provides fullness to the human endeavour and is crucial for the very survival of human beings. Materialism leads to the weakening of the sense of adherence to eternal human values. It creates an imbalance between man and nature. Overexploitation of natural resources has already reached non-reversible and non-renewable stages in several areas. The consequences of these are visible in terms of several new concerns that the youth of tomorrow shall be facing: the global warming, the ozone hole, deforestation, environmental degradation and serious issues of pollution, adulteration and toxification. The dilemma is best explained by a simple and familiar example. The government policies recommend prohibition and incur expenditures to promote the idea. Surprisingly these very governments try to earn more and more revenue from liquor sales! Such liquor shops are invariably located in areas that are inhabited by the poorest of the poor. And practically all these governments swear by the name of Mahatma Gandhi, democratic values, and their 'dedication' to serve the poorest of the poor!

The 21st century began as usual with unmitigated violence and cruelest of mass killings in human history, which overshadow the outstanding breakthroughs in human welfare. It finds itself face-to-face with terrorism and fundamentalism. There is no paucity of scientific breakthroughs and technological advances to overcome most of the challenges being faced by the human beings, what is missing is the wisdom and compassion to do so. Knowledge proliferates in all its glory but wisdom languishes in some hidden spots only. While the visibility of globalization and transition to a global society is apparent, challenges before the future generations have increased manifold. The world is getting ready for a far more complex transition than any of its earlier transitions: from the caves to forests, from forests to nomadic, pastoral, industrial and then post-industrial society. Globalization unhinges cut-throat competition in a shrinking world in which the gap between the developing and the developed nations is not decreasing but widening. The distrust amongst faiths and religions is on the rise. The citizens of the world have all become neighbours. They still have to learn how to become 'neighbourly'.

When Mahatma Gandhi wanted education 'to draw out the best out of the body, mind and spirit', he possibly understood the lack of emphasis on skills and spiritual aspects in education. If he were to witness the level of this neglect today, it would have appalled him! 'My life is my message' is one of the most valued of his statements that presents a code of moral conduct before all of us and particularly before the icons of the young whom they emulate for 'learning', and for reshaping their lives! The political leadership offers a very discouraging setting. The way elections are conducted and the type of people who become representatives of the people and project themselves as the saviours of democratic values perplexes the youth. What they observe generates more disinterest than the eagerness to enhance their thirst for democratic values. The easy entry of 'tainted' and criminal

elements into the corridor of politics and power seems to sharpen their frustration. The manner in which the business of the Houses of the Parliament and state legislatures get disrupted rarely presents a worthwhile example to emulate in their future life. Corruption is practically institutionalized and the most horrifying aspect is that of its inroads into the realm of education—both in schools and in higher education. When the Prime Minister of India expresses concern that about 60 per cent of universities and 90 per cent of colleges are functioning at a below average level, there is a case for serious rethinking on what are we depriving our youths of.

Expansion in every sector generally leads to dilution of quality if necessary precautions are not taken. India greatly needs an early expansion of higher education institutions, but it can ill afford any further dilution of quality, particularly the neglect of moral values and principles that are essential to prepare an individual for a purposeful journey in life. Can the Planet Earth survive if education fails to bring about a symphony of 'Self, Society and Nature'?

India is now getting a taste of reality. While the number of billionaires in India is increasing every month, people living below the poverty line is estimated at 300 million. Even those above this 'line' do not lead an enviable life. Is India not facing a crisis of 'ideology of progress'? Can this country continue to ape the Western concept of progress and retain its own identity? Is India ready and equipped to face the challenges and onslaughts on its culture, languages, and diversity that it has nurtured and preserved as an asset over the centuries? With the passage of time these questions are likely to acquire larger magnitude. The inability of the present generations to act as the trustees of the future generations is evident. Our institutions also appear deficient to appreciate the emerging aspirations of the youths and respond to these with adequate moderation, wherever necessary.

Take the instance of stressful learning. Can any society ignore the increasing numbers of suicides before and after examinations, child abuse and molestation by teachers, violence within campus, fake degrees, and so much more? Even one such case must wake up our conscience and impel us to think of remedial measures. These problems, however, cannot be solved merely by issuing official circulars and even by punishing the guilty, which rarely happens. The maladies have taken deep root. So the solutions must emerge from careful scrutiny and logical inferences that are based on a comprehensive view of how human beings grow up and how they can be inspired to lead a meaningful life. All these developments call for a sound rethinking of values, ethics and morals which may lead to the internalization of humane elements and inculcation of a sense of need to grow up in inner strength and moral external actions.

What can be done

In one of his discourses on 'Purpose of Education' Dr Radhakrishnan summarizes the theme beautifully:

If men make history, ideas make men. What is our objective with regard to the training of youth? Are we to prepare them for life or for death? Do we send our children to school, young men to colleges, to make them behave like beasts of prey? When we look around and see what is taking place in academic centres, how we are imposing on . . . youth false ideas, how we are debasing the minds and corrupting the hearts of the young, making them crazy with the lust of cruelty and power, do we not feel guilty of using the noble instrument of education for ignoble ends? What is our purpose in university education? Is it the Nazi ideal of military efficiency? Is it the Fascist ideal of 'work, obey and fight'? Are we to train youth for class struggle as Communists demand? Will system of education based on such ideals help us to create a new and better order of society? The totalitarian States look upon human beings as aimless, drifting, soulless creatures, who without any mind or will of their own can be driven like cattle or moulded like clay by those who appoint themselves as their rulers. We are not taught to use our understanding, but to yield like animals to our instincts and appetites . . . . To make us soulless, to degrade us to the level of animal cannot be the purpose of education'.

(Radhakrishnan Reader, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, pp. 509-10).

Even after a gap of over half a century, these words sound prophetic for the system of higher education, which ought to prepare the future generations for leading others in the society towards a far more fulfilling and fruitful life. Higher education should make the young ones 'apprehend the eternal values', and enable them to 'appreciate superhuman virtues and the simple decencies of life'. The purpose of education which stands reduced to the single objective of getting 'marks / grades in annual examinations' deserves to be viewed in totality and is best expressed in the following words of Dr Radhakrishnan:

We must develop the freshness of feeling for nature, the sensitiveness of soul to human need. We must foster the freedom of the mind, the humanity of the heart, the integrity of the individual. Even from the nurseries, we must train human beings by unconscious influence and conscious effort to love truth, beauty and goodness. (Ibid, p. 510)

There was a surge of high hopes amongst the newly independent nations. They had before them the scientific and technological advancement of unprecedented magnitude. These could transform the world into a place free from hunger, ill health, misery, drudgery and poverty. National goals were being identified in terms of an equitable social order. The Marxists world was putting up attractive propositions before the 'have-nots' that the doors of equity and equality would be opened soon by the single key that was in the possession of only the Marxists-Stalinists-Maoists. People were willing to believe that a world free from distinctions of caste, colour, creed, culture, language and such other divides was emerging fast. Gradually, however, they realized that the instrument of education was nowhere near such a goal. It was only in March 1990 that the significance of education crystallized globally and the World Conference on Education for All resolved to extend universal elementary education to each and every one! The issue that was and is still unresolved is—what should be the model of education for the specific culture or the nation and what should be the content of that education? In other words, what would be the place of 'man' in that education?

Developing nations, mostly burdened with transplanted systems of education were generally unable to put in place an alternative system that could be 'rooted to culture and committed progress'. India is no exception. Gandhiji made a famous statement in 1931 'daring' anyone who could achieve universal elementary education in India even in the next hundred years following the then existing model. 'I have my own plans ready' said Gandhiji. He elaborated these very clearly and with superb confidence. If the system was rooted to culture, it just could not discard moral and ethical values that are ingrained in the Indian ethos, an ethos of universality and acceptance of diversity. India needs to examine, and higher education institutions have a responsibility to do so, why the continuity of the indigenous processes of creating, generating, disseminating and utilizing knowledge for universal welfare were not, or could not be, reviewed after independence? Why were these not synchronized with the modern scientific knowledge coming from different places? If the village was made the nodal centres of development, things would have been different. Greater production and still greater involvement of individuals in the social good could have put India on a higher pedestal in terms of social cohesion and respect for each other. We would have been better prepared for a democratic order.

This is possible even now if the education systems are redesigned to focus on the development of every individual as a citizen, a producer, and a social human being. An individual committed to values and excellence grows up only when the systems and the society care for him and provide opportunities for the integrated development of his physical, mental and spiritual abilities. The Constitutional guarantee of providing equity and equality of opportunity has a meaning only if every individual is given not only an opportunity to blossom in full but is also supported wherever such a need exists. Over the years, we have provided best of the schools to a select few; we have universities and colleges of which one could be proud. Young persons emerging out of these have brought glory and fame to India in different sectors in the country and also outside the country. For the

majority of young persons, however, we have only ill-equipped and shabbily functioning schools and universities. Imagine the magnitude of the cognitive capital of India if around 40-50 per cent of young persons in the age group 17-23 years were participating in higher education as compared to just around 11 per cent at present! Further, if the system was geared to Indian culture and committed to progress with all the modern knowledge, the quality of this capital would have been several shades higher and more relevant to the nation. Large numbers of young persons do not find themselves as part of the process of 'India's development and progress'. This isolation would not occur in a system that aims at 'man-making education'. This is what Swami Vivekananda realized and elaborated on several occasions. Any effort towards improving the efficacy of the systems preparing young persons must cast a fresh look on its basic premises and their relevance in the present world.

### Decline in moral values

Decline in moral values is a global phenomenon. To check the slide and reverse it requires global initiatives in which every individual has to play his / her part. In the glamorous world of consumerism, the race for unlimited accumulation is formidable, hence moral values are generally given a short shrift. Ends alone matter most and means are free-for-all. The neglect of purity and morality in the means adopted inevitably leads to further fall in moral inhibitions. Moral and ethical values are inextricably linked with purity. Humanistic values upheld by an individual are a combination of moral, ethical, and spiritual qualities acquired. In the days of economic and material development, the rise of violence all around is phenomenal, though not unexpected. Economic interests that lurk behind policies and perceptions lead to military actions against nations, resulting in unfathomable misery to children, mothers, elders and everyone including the flora and fauna. This aspect highlights another area of action on the part of those engaged in the process of developing the youths. Obviously, education is not the only sector that can take total responsibility, but it certainly has to accept the major share of it. Most of the policy formulations, nationally and internationally, take only a partial view of economic and materialistic 'development', which is considered synonymous with 'progress'. Such a stance encourages violent behaviour. An attitudinal transformation, therefore, is necessary to enlarge the focus of consideration to which education can contribute substantially. The realization that violence must be checked by all means seems to have dawned upon educational policymakers globally. We are often coming across the term 'Peace Education' used by the international agencies. This could be one of the alternatives. Preparing children to internalize the strength of non-violence is now on the agenda of schools and institutions of higher learning globally. This the right direction, for education for non-violence has to become an integral part of the process of teaching, training and learning. Universities, social and religious organizations, political parties, organizations promoting sports, the corporate sector and all others must accept responsibility in this matter. None can internalize the value of non-violence without having accepted Truth, Peace and Love as essential ingredients of a non-violent approach and behaviour. Obviously, such an individual will automatically adopt the path of 'righteous conduct'. And that is 'Dharma', common to all faiths and civilizations. It has the strength to unite and assimilate all types of divisive forces. Only those who imbibe moral values can be Dharmic and role models. Only they can be really secular.

### Youth icons

Who are the icons of the youth today? They come either from the film world or they are sports persons, mainly cricketers. The craze amongst the youth for adopting their lifestyle, and copying them in all possible ways has multiplied manifold and this obsession is stirred up by the electronic media which creates a make-believe world of glamour and reckless consumption. It is almost impossible for them to think of those who live in a different world spending twenty rupees per day. Millions and millions are not lucky enough even to be in that category! The youth icons from the glamour world mostly stand snatched away from their social and moral responsibilities. They are willing to endorse any product, which they may never use themselves in their lifetime. They do so without an iota of hesitation, what to say of any remorse! One may recall the rare instance of courage of conviction and

commitment to the next generations, when the world badminton champion Pulela Gopichand refused to fall in the trap and refused huge monetary offers for such endorsements. Who remembers him? Why can not our schools and institutions organize a campaign on how to resist market pressures that are destroying the capacity of the youths to make the correct choice against the consistent bombarding of advertisements in the name of helping them 'to make the right choice'? Consumerism is an absolute poison that thwarts the process of value inculcation. The market forces are pumping enormous sums to create a desire among people for unrestricted consumption. Are human beings just consumers and mere market elements for certain multinationals? The youth must be trained in deciphering the implications of 'sustainable development' and the stark fact that it shall remain just a myth till the idea of 'sustainable consumption' is not pursued vigorously as an element of teaching / learning process.

Go back to the 40s or even 50s. Who were the icons of the youth? They were men and women of character who sacrificed their self-interests and suffered 'for others', for the nation, for the welfare of their fellow men and women. They also included people who strived hard for interfaith amity, global brotherhood and welfare of humanity. What makes an individual forsake a life of affluence and luxury and adopt a path that leads to tremendous personal risks and suffering? It is the moral fibre of the individual. What makes the difference between a person and another is—how and how far it has been developed, nurtured and strengthened! The very conduct and approach of all those with whom the young persons interact make the maximum difference. The level and extent to which the examples of real achievers and heroes are presented to them in the idiom of the day can certainly help them to make the 'right choice' of their icons and hence, the path that they intend to follow in their life. Our education systems have long neglected these aspects. The way we present Indian history, heritage, and culture to our youths leaves much to be refined, modified and updated. The great contributions made to the growth of world civilization by ancient India is yet to be explored fully and projected onto those who deliberately attempt to ignore and distort these facts. Such efforts must begin from the institutions that train teachers and must extend to schools and colleges through in-service and specific orientation programmes at the earliest. The young of India must internalize a sense of pride in their ancestors for their tapasyà to explore the mysteries of nature and to create a symphony between man and nature. It must also motivate them to set higher goals in their life ahead.

Of course, it is neither easy nor necessary to persuade the young ones to discard the materialistic pursuits altogether because the world of values and ethics does not envisage a celebration of poverty and misery. Indian philosophy recognizes the need for production and increase of wealth as one of the essential 'purushàrthas. If someone establishes a production centre, provides jobs, earns legitimate profits and follows the rule of law, he deserves recognition and appreciation. The problem arises when a venture begins with a wrong premise, proceeds by breaking the existing laws, indulges in corrupt practices and does not hesitate to exploit human beings responsible for the successful functioning of the enterprise. The next generation of such an entrepreneur is likely to distance itself farther away from the value-based approach. The common man in India suffers on so many counts solely because the basics of creating a society that respects right conduct and morality in public life and also in the life of individuals stand grossly neglected. Happily, there are instances of young professionals from top institutions who are refusing lucrative offers to work abroad for the multinationals. Instead, they prefer to work in India. Such motivated individuals are moving to rural settings and transforming the lives of thousands of families, if not more. Only those who have acquired a strong moral fibre pave the way for a desirable transformation of the nation.

How to proceed further

A large number of organizations, individuals, and institutions are now working to nurture moral and ethical values among the youth. An attempt was made around 2000-03 to study some of the prominent initiatives that have successfully attracted young persons to the moral dimensions of education. Organizations like Sri Sathya Sai, Ramakrishna Mission, DAV, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and several

others must continue to remain aware of what others are attempting and achieving.

Institutions that train the teachers can raise the standard of education. There are institutions that have realized their role and responsibility in regard to value education and have made sustained efforts to incorporate and internalize these aspects in their process of teaching and learning. If the institution itself is being conducted in a manner that student teachers see adherence to moral conduct all around in actual practice, then such an environment can create an everlasting impact. The conditions prevailing in such institutions are not generally very encouraging. The only practical and prompt alternative is the networking of good institutions with the upcoming ones.

Moreover, programmes to boost public awareness shall have to be organized by those who have the know-how. People need to be reminded of their responsibility towards fellow human beings, the Nature, and towards future generations. Moral aspects must become visible components of all the in-service orientations in the organized sectors. For the benefit of the youth, orientation of parents is also equally significant.

The advances in ICT and the reduction of physical distance and time in human interactions have all the potential to bring people really closer. Unfortunately, this is exactly what is not happening. We see distrust and mental distance increasing all around. Whatever be the factors contributing to these trends and howsoever difficult be the conditions to overcome the obstacles, these have to be resisted with thoughtful strategies that can free the world of apprehensions and fear of exploitation and 'otherness'. Youths of today are obviously far more exposed to outside world and also gullible to external influences than, say, their counterparts of six or seven decades ago. They need to be assisted in understanding what is good and acceptable and what must be rejected. Difficult situations do arise when the young persons note contradictions between what is preached and what is practised. Take the case of prohibition, smoking, adherence to work culture, respect for punctuality by the teachers and several other interactions that do not always leave a positive impression on their mind.

Preparation of literature that responds to the group needs and also stage-specific and age-specific requirements is indeed a prime requirement now. Several institutions like the Ramakrishna Mission, Shri Sathya Sai, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and others have made exemplary contributions to fulfil this need. The dissemination of their experiences on a large scale is of course an issue related to resource support. Actual utilization will also depend on the strength of such material to withstand commercially generated materials that are designed to fill the coffers and care little for the subsequent results. Considerable research base would be needed to enhance the quality of materials that may be prepared and disseminated.

One more thing. It is not easy to appreciate the everchanging interests of the younger generations. If they are to be guided properly and made aware of the moral and ethical values, it has to be done in the idiom of the day that they like. The debate that ensued a couple of years ago that with the coming of videos, print material may get relegated to the background is practically over. Both have their place and could be complementary to each other in actual situations. Material development, revision and upgradation, therefore, have to be an ongoing activity with as large a participation as could be achieved through institutional networking and professional collaboration. The larger context of textbooks and curriculum preparation, development and renewal shall continue to have a paramount impact on renewed interests of the youths in moral values. A professional dialogue among the leaders of the society and the academics to arrive at a consensus on educational policies and innovations must be pursued vigorously.

Lastly, every effort needs to be made to 'link Indians to India, its culture, history and heritage' as opposed to what the British explicitly decided around 1835—to subjugate India, 'Indians must be delinked from India'. The levels of Indian insight into the spiritual world of quest for the unknown deserve a serious review by every young Indian. The local and indigenous knowledge traditions are

often ignored in the glitter of modern advances, though its significance is realized globally. The values it creates contribute to the strengthening of the moral fibre of the young individual. Can anyone understand India without getting acquainted with the Ràmâyana and the Mahàbhàrata? And could anyone, having gone through these epics resist the call of exploring further the wisdom and values contained in ancient Indian literature? Can anyone understand the continuity of Indian civilization without understanding the developments of ancient India in symphony with the enrichment that followed in the medieval period and modern times?

India is to be understood by Indians first. Only then the world shall understand Indian excellence in morals and spirituality. Only then we shall be in a position to recall the famous words of Arnold Toynbee that to save the world from catastrophe, it has to follow the path of Ramakrishna and Gandhi. Only the morally strong can advance in spirituality, which incorporates adherence to truth, non-violence, peace, righteous conduct and love.

\* Professor J. S. Rajput is the former Chairman of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE). He is also the former director of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). This article is based on the text of his lecture delivered at the Institute on 14 March 2008.