

Step III: Visions and strategies for transformation

Thematic thread: Organizing society

Conference topic: Transforming education

Keywords: Integrated education – human values – university as role-model – awareness – spirituality

Abstract

Transforming Education in the Degrowth Society

From a utilitarian perspective the purpose of education is to develop competent and creative individuals, useful to the society. Individuals who could contribute to the physical, intellectual, and aesthetic development of the society. Individuals who would be aware of their social, economic and cultural environment, and could, with self-confidence, make necessary adjustments to meet a constantly changing environment.

From whatever point of view one judges the purpose of education, the current system of education around the world leaves much to be desired. The emphasis in educational policies has been on academic achievement, preparing one to face the job market, and on gaining economic competitiveness at the national level. This system has been painstakingly designed to serve the market rather than society and it gives excessive emphasis on earning a living rather than on the blossoming of human excellence and values that help individuals to live together.

What is needed now...

...is a paradigm shift in education. What is needed now is education that fosters human values, the good qualities inherent in man.

This kind of educational system has been developed in the late 1960s in India by the Indian spiritual teacher and social reformer Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Sathya Sai schools and colleges teach not only secular academic knowledge but also character development, human values, spiritual self-knowledge and responsibility for health, society, nature and environment.

By now, 99 Sathya Sai schools have been established in India, and 45 schools with more than 5.000 students in 26 countries all over the world. Sathya Sai University in Prasanthi Nilayam (Andhra Pradesh) in India was recognised as a Deemed University by the Government of India in 1981. There are four campuses offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses with research facilities for doctoral candidates. The University is a non-profit, autonomous institution. The admission policy is open, based on an entry examination and admission is granted purely on merit. No consideration is given to caste, creed, income, region, religion, or language.

Students come from different states in India, and a few from other countries, the medium of instruction is English. The University charges no tuition or entry fees for any of the courses offered. Besides, it offers free medical treatment to all staff and students and provides scholarships to deserving students to meet hostel expenses.

This University was the first in India to offer a five-year integrated course leading up to Master's degree. Reforms in syllabi are frequent and help to keep the academic programmes vigorous and dynamic. Evaluations of students' learning are conducted on an ongoing basis as also at the end of the semester. Other distinctive features include completely free education, implicit discipline, emphasis on education in human values, a successful synthesis of spirituality with modern science and technology, a mandatory awareness programme, commendable teacher-pupil ratio and an international sports centre.

Integral Education – Integrating Social Responsibility, Spiritual Education and

Academic Issues

The University combines spiritual with secular education in all its curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. This integral education helps to develop all aspects of the human personality - physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual, resulting in a well-rounded personality. There is a consistent endeavour to bring out value-orientation in students through every subject taught in the University, be it a part of physical sciences, biological sciences, social sciences, commerce, or management. The teachers are chosen with care to play an important role in this process of value education. Many of them are alumni of the University, dedicated and well-versed in integral education. They take active part not only in classroom instruction but also by providing every help, guidance and general counselling to the students whenever needed.

A key component of integral education is the Awareness Course, which is a unique feature at the University. A mandatory course for every student, it introduces spiritual education by providing an intellectual and rational foundation for the spiritual way of life. At the undergraduate level, the course is conducted over the first six semesters in the campus and covers philosophy of education, unity of religions and faiths, ethos and values and their relevance in the current milieu, life and its quest, and the study of classical literature espousing fundamental truths.

At the post-graduate level, the focus shifts to topics like Globalisation vis-à-vis Internationalisation, Sustainable Development, Environmental Issues, and Impact of the Media. Students are encouraged to discuss ways in which the high ideals can be translated into daily reality, particularly in the chosen profession. In professional courses, the main curriculum itself includes value-based courses such as Value-based Management, Self-Awareness, Personality Development, and Leadership. The Awareness Course supplements the value inputs given in the core courses.

The Awareness Course is multifaceted: it is interdisciplinary in that it cuts across all academic lines, it is cross-cultural as it includes the contribution of all great cultures, and it is inter-faith as it brings out the unity of the world's all great religions. Perhaps the most important contribution of the Awareness Course is that it helps to develop Self-confidence in the students. The students learn to rely not only on the knowledge and skills acquired at the University and their physical and intellectual abilities but on the higher Self, resident in every heart.

Character – Goal of Integral Education and Prerequisite for Alternative Models of Society

The outcome of integral education is best reflected in the positive character development that takes place in the students within a remarkably short period of time after they enter the University. The University maintains a fully residential system and community living in dormitory-type hostels plays an important role in imbibing habits of sharing and caring, and the qualities of patience and perseverance among students from very early days. The warden of the campus and many teachers, some of them alumni of the University, live with the students under the same roof. They act as role models for the younger students and participate in many activities that are designed to develop an integrated personality of the students.

Physical education is greatly encouraged, and each campus is well equipped with playgrounds, gymnasium, and training facilities. The emphasis in all these activities is to develop a "healthy mind in a healthy body", imbibing a sense of cooperation rather than competition.

The campus life also provides ample opportunity to nurture the talents of students in music, dance, drama, and public speaking. A strong social conscience is also fostered in the students who are expected to share responsibility for service in the campus and in local villages. Evaluation by the University is not merely in academic learning but also in social service activities, sports and cultural events, elocution, and discipline. The teachers at the University regard themselves as co-learners and are exemplars of unity in thought, word, and action.

Implementing awareness, character and human values is essential for shifting to the degrowth society and for improving social welfare at the same time. The Sathya Sai University may well serve as a role model to adopt the philosophy of integrated education to European societies.