

# Leadership and Autonomy in Educational Institutes can Create Wonders

**Anil D. Sahasrabudhe**

Chairman, All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)

## Introduction

Given the academic environment prevailing in the country today, with several key reforms being undertaken by the Government of India, MHRD, AICTE, UGC, NCTE, new education policy in the offing, etc., leadership and autonomy in educational institutes is a persistent issue. In the context of educational institutes, it is a very much contemporary topic to ponder over.

## Background of Leadership in Education

As Swami Vivekananda puts it “Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man”. It simply means, each individual is divine and has huge hidden potential, which only needs to be first identified, brought out, nurtured and allowed to blossom. This is what a guru does to each of his disciple, right from ancient times of gurukulas to Nalanda, Taxila, Vikramsila and modern residential school system. Each guru was a leader in his own right and commanded respect and also was autonomous to design the curriculum catering to each individual student. Somewhere down the line, we missed this basic tenet and got entangled in clerk producing rote learning education system.

Regarding bringing out the divine within, I wish

to give the most recent example of Hima Das, a 400m gold medal winner for under 20 and a great hope for India in athletics in the future. Hima was spotted by Dipon Das, an athletic coach not even two years ago while this young girl in early teens was playing football with boys in her native village Kandhulimari Dhing in Nagaon district of Assam. Who would have imagined that she will bring the first athletics gold for India in international arena and glory for India but for the spotting of talent in her by Dipon and nurturing it over the next one and a half years. Same is the case of some of our best cricketers like Sachin Tendulkar and Mahendra Singh Dhoni. In academics, we all know the story of the greatest mathematician of the world Ramanujan.

It is interesting if we look at the story of founding of Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, a premier institute of India. Swamiji and Jamshedji had hardly any acquaintance but were travelling on a steamer ship from Yokohama to Vancouver on May 31, 1893, Swamiji to attend World Conference of religions in Chicago and Jamshedji hunting for modern steel plants. Both had intense discussions on modernization and industrialisation of India, higher education, research etc and Swamiji asked Jamshedji to

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consider starting an institute for carrying out research in India for becoming self reliant in the future. Swamiji also advised to take the best from the West and the Eastern philosophy while setting up an institution of excellence. On return both had lot of exchange of ideas and Sister Nivedita was involved in helping drawing up a plan. Unfortunately, Swamiji passed away in 1902 and Jamshedji in 1904. But their dreams came true five years later in 1909. JRD Tata, Maharaja of Mysore and British Government made a true P-P-P model to emerge while setting up IISc.

### **Modern Education System**

In today's education system, we are producing clones, who can mug up the contents from a text book or notes of a teacher, reproduce the same in the examination and get high marks, without even understanding the answers written. Why has it happened so? The trend is that right from nursery and primary schools, an answer written by a student rationally, innovatively in his or her own words, may be with a few grammatical errors, but with thorough understanding fetches very low or zero marks. Secondly, many a subjects, taught by some of the teachers are so uninteresting that even a topic in which a student was interested earlier starts hating the subject. Thirdly, inherently, some students do not like some subjects while they are too keen on some others. Our model of one cap fits all is so unworthy, that we create machines for reproducing answers rather than indulging in higher levels of learning, such as understanding, analysing, synthesizing, applying, creating and

innovating. This is what modern day Bloom's Taxonomy talks about. The next issue is about holistic development of a student that encompasses not merely academic curricula, but a whole lot of co-curricular and extra curricular activities and life skills viz Debates, Sports, Music, Drama, Dance, Fine Arts, Painting, Sculpting, Pottery, Embroidery, Stitching, Gardening, Agriculture, Cooking, Carpentry etc.

Then comes set of communication skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening, where listening is the most important one. Most of the times, we tend to stop someone from expressing himself as we lack listening skills. Last but not the least ability to solve problems, working in teams, effective leadership, time management, empathy, honesty, integrity, sensitivity towards society, people, animals, inanimate objects, nature, mother earth etc. are as important to be dealt with in educational institutes as any other academic courses because students graduate into citizens and society and nation are shaped by them later.

In management, quite often a famous term 'VUCA' world is used which means, volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous world. The examples are the crisis of Lehman brothers of 2008, demonetisation in India in 2016 and so on. One has to grapple with the situation as it emerges.

### **Role of Leadership in Academics**

It is indeed a challenge to deal with so many issues by academia. Some opine that it is impossible to do all these things in a limited

period of 2 to 4 years that the students are in the institute, but there are others who have exemplified that it is indeed possible. What makes such a difficult thing possible?

Two important factors are cardinal principles of leadership; and need, scope and opportunities from autonomy, which will be illustrated here.

Leadership is a very important facet in educational institute. There are umpteen examples wherein a poor leader has spoilt or ruined the institute, while examples also exist wherein excellent leaders have turned around poor institutes into excellent institutes. If we look at the first three universities set up by British in 1857, viz. Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, they are nowhere in the top universities of India today. The selection of VCs based on considerations without weighing merit of the candidates and leadership qualities has led to the deterioration of quality of education in universities. On the other hand, there are universities like Punjab University and IISc, which are more than 100 years old, who have maintained their excellence and are amongst top universities in India. Then there are examples of B.E. College of Shibpur and College of Engineering, Pune (COEP) started in 1856 and 1854 respectively, which were great institutes till 1950s for over 100 years, but started slipping and were in poor shape by the turn of the century. They could be resurrected back to the old glory, thanks to good governance, leadership and autonomy. The COEP could be turned around to its old glory in a matter of 10 years from 2005 to 2015 through grant of autonomy and choice of an excellent Board of

Governors chaired by Dr. F. C. Kohli, father of software industry in India. I was personally associated with its journey and I will narrate some startling examples from my own experience there.

Let's now focus on a corporate story related to Sumant Moolgaonkar, former chief of TELCO (now Tata Motors). In tribute to his contribution, Tata Group named one of their vehicles as SuMo. TELCO was developing its new truck model. Mr. Moolgaonkar used to take lunch together with his subordinates in the office. Suddenly for a few days, he started going out for lunch, and all staff suspected that he must be going to a 5 star hotel for lunch, but later it was learnt that he was going to a *dhaba* on the outskirts and having his lunch there in the midst of truck drivers, incognito so that he would understand the problems in the present model of Tata trucks and improvise the same. This is true sign of dedication to ensure customer satisfaction. There is another incidence of repairing the seats of Air India plane by JRD Tata when he was travelling on the flight of Air India which was owned by Tatas then. Simplicity, caring for employees, stakeholders and others is a hallmark of good leadership which is a part of Tata code of ethics to be followed by all their employees.

### Role of Autonomy

In the academic arena, quite often, many institute heads and faculty crib about not being able to do what they wish to do due to restrictions imposed by regulators, universities etc. In

academic circles, what is cherished is autonomy, freedom to pursue research in the area of one's own interest, independent thinking and innovations. Recently enacted IIM bill and UGCs regulation on graded autonomy have brought distinct freshness in academic world in India. AICTE has also planned to bring graded autonomy regulations to standalone management institutes in the immediate future.

Two things came out distinctly, that are, need for autonomy and leadership. The autonomy can be granted by the Government, or UGC, or AICTE or a university to its affiliated colleges or institutes based on an application made by the institute and no objection from affiliating university. Here there are multiple challenges in getting autonomy for colleges. There are cases where college faculty and staff are not interested and oppose autonomy due to unknown and unfound fears of increased workload, losing jobs etc. There are cases where management of the institute is unwilling to seek autonomy because autonomy brings accountability and management sometimes finds it easy to operate under the brand value of university rather than creating its own brand. There are also instances, wherein university does not grant no objection because university does not want to let go prized institution from its possession. In any case, process of getting autonomy starts with permanent affiliation after having existed for more than 10 years, accreditation of courses, NOC from the university and the state government, application to UGC, visit of an expert committee of UGC, recommendation

and approval by UGC and finally university issuing the autonomous status.

### Implications of Autonomy

What does full autonomy imply?

a. One can design one's own curriculum, number of credits, types of courses, mandatory generic core, discipline core, discipline electives and open electives. The students can be given choice of electives; freedom to choose; introduction of new courses in upcoming areas of study like Data Analytics, Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, Robotics, Deep learning, Cloud Computing etc. The curriculum can also have flexibility to make internships mandatory and may also encompass industry interactions along with mini projects, main projects and socially relevant projects.

Unnat Bharat Abhiyan, Skill India, Start up India, Swachha Bharat, Digital India, Smart cities have a role in the curriculum, making students self confident and helping them solve nation's and societal problems. Recent Smart India Hackathon run by AICTE with the support of MHRD was a classic example. More than a lakh students submitted their ideas to solve 300 plus problems of different central government departments and state governments, shortlisted 1350+ teams of 6 students each and two mentors working in 26 different centres for 36 hours non-stop was a record by itself creating the world's largest open innovation model. This year, apart from software hackathon, a hardware hackathon was held for 5 days at 10 different centres, wherein a hardware

prototype was developed by students which can now convert itself into startups.

b. An autonomous institute can select faculty of their choice to cater to the designed curriculum. Teaching-learning experiments can be made, class room teaching on blackboard, power point based classes, learning through internet, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), flipped classes, case studies, discussion classes, hands on practice and so on may be considered as pedagogical innovation.

c. Examination system can also be of different types for evaluating student outcomes. In today's world, with new way of accreditation system which is outcome based rather than input based, type of examination has to be different. Gone are the days of going by inputs like number of classrooms, buildings, laboratories, books in the library, computers, internet etc. It does not mean these infrastructure facilities are not required. They are certainly necessary, but emphasis is on how these facilities are used, what students are doing, how teachers are empowering students, how students are learning outside the classrooms in teams, applying the knowledge and so on. Hence quizzes, open book exams, seminars, data collection, analytics, critical thinking, team work, problem solving ability, projects for testing higher level of learning are significant.

Sky is the limit as far as academics is concerned and an autonomous institute can not only compete with other institutes efficiently, but can raise the bar for itself year after year and achieve excellence. The autonomous institutes could involve in nation building in their own way.

d. The autonomous institutes can award their own degrees, they can have foreign collaborations for student and faculty exchange, can charge fees as per the need of the curriculum and its delivery without indulging in profit, permit faculty members to do consultancy through which both faculty and institutes get benefitted.

e. Autonomous institutes can have their own admission process, set of rules for students, staff and faculty. Thus there is freedom in several domains with very few restrictions from the Government except in terms of following constitutional provisions.

Such institutes can easily be able to get full cycle of accreditation effortlessly since all policies are aligned for achieving outcomes based on the institute's own vision, mission and set of goals. Such institutes will figure in the top ranks of NIRF and global ranking too. These institutes will also have an excellent track record of placements with their students having all desired employability skills, entrepreneurship skills and leadership.

### **How to Achieve Excellence through Leadership and Autonomy**

We often talk about out of the box ideas; moving from inside the box to outside the box. Inside the box, vision is limited, as soon as one goes outside the box, entire globe is visible.

Who all can achieve this? An institute with a good leader. Now the question is, can the leader be created by training or leaders are born as leaders. Both statements are correct to the

limited extent as there are classic examples of both varieties. In fact, born leaders are very few—Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel to name a few. Shivaji Maharaj was both a born leader and was trained well by his mother Jijabai and teacher Dadasaheb Kondke.

One can always create leaders by proper training. Shri S. Chandrashekar, Chairman of Tata Sons, Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft and Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, they were all moulded by some or the other Gurus. In academics, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Dr Radhakrishnan are classic examples of leaders. What distinguishes them from others is the qualities they had.

Six qualities of great leaders are: (1) obviously they lead, they are committed to a cause and work with passion; (2) essentially they are the role models; (3) they plan well and make a list of things to be done within time limits; (4) they listen to others; (5) they are not too rigid and amenable to develop and evolve themselves; (6) they delegate the work with full powers and accountability and finally despite being very busy, enjoy life, music, drama, films, painting etc.

Amongst the above traits, one trait which is important is their respect for others and therefore that of listening to others carefully, critically analysing strengths of team members and make judicious decision of allotment of work. They are friendly with the team members so that any member of the team will not be afraid of approaching the leader with a problem, or a

different way of solution.

### **The Case of COEP**

Here I would like to bring my experience of COEP as a director for 9 years. Imagine, a student of civil engineering who has just completed first year comes and says that he would like to work on a pico satellite and launch it by our space agency ISRO. In most cases, he would be dissuaded, with comments like “you cannot do it, it's not possible to ask ISRO to launch it, its too expensive”, etc. But when Abhishek Bawiskar returned from his summer internship in IITB and made this proposition, he was asked to form a team and given all institutional support and in 7 years UG students of different disciplines and different classes (first to fourth year) working from one batch to the next, made history. Their SWAYAM satellite was launched by ISRO. Another student, Chinmay Joshi came with an idea of e-slate which will reduce the burden of carrying books and notebooks by school children, a faculty room was allotted for him to work at any time of his choice. Another student, Shashwat Pradhan, now CEO of Emberify working in niche areas such as Mobile Apps, AR, Machine learning had started a startup in the very first year initially to help fellow students in computer programming and later games for left and right brain winning several Blackberry awards for innovation and was earning US\$5000 from his second year in college. The three world records created by students that of most students jumping on a single rope 14 times simultaneously by 136 students, the longest painting which was 600m

long, solving Rubik's Cube by 3248 students within half an hour etc. are testimony to creativity and ability to accept challenge. Winning of BAJA competition in Indore year after year, finding a spot within top 10 in US competition, Robocon and many other competitions excelling better than IIT and NIT students was possible by just giving freedom with responsibility.

The World Bank funded TEQIP project monitoring team has selected this college for its good governance model over NITs and 200 odd Govt colleges in the country. According to the Chairman, Dr F C Kohli, being a member on the Board of Governors of a college is different from being on the Board of Directors of companies where one just attends meetings once in a quarter, but in institutes' Boards, one has to totally be involved in its progress by contributing at least 100 hours a year apart from routine meetings, so that the Institute may get the benefits of one's expertise.

### **Conclusion**

An academic leader has to develop following traits in his team of faculty, staff and students like core employability skills, life skills such as knowledge, hard and soft skills, critical thinking, complex problem solving ability, people management, articulation, integrity, reliability, flexibility, ability to learn, empathy, creativity, awareness about society and surroundings, environment, etiquettes, culture, response to change etc. Collaboration, Cross disciplinary work, Cooperation, Cross cultural attitude and

Core Competencies.

AICTE on its part has started several initiatives such as regular curriculum revision, teacher induction modules, faculty development programmes, three week long student induction, examination reforms, mandatory internships, industry institute interaction, innovation cell, entrepreneurship and startup support eco system, hackathon, National Doctoral Fellowship apart from QIP, several awards for industry interaction, clean campus, Chhatra Vishwakarma award for student projects, best startups from colleges, to name a few.

Students and teachers alike have to become life long learners. MHRD supported, AICTE developed MOOCs "SWAYAM" platform is available for anyone, any time to learn from the best in class in India, from any device, free of cost. Best use of this platform should be made. AICTE has also planned both leadership development programmes and mandatory semester long 6 module teacher induction programme for technical college teachers. Last but not the least, we need to bring and nurture values and professionalism amongst students by first person approach, leading by example.

We often talk about demographic dividend and Young India. In a nutshell, if we wish to be a developed nation with all rounded power, we need excellent leadership programmes and autonomy for institutes. Then 21st century and beyond will be reserved for India.