Liberal arts education for enlightened citizens

C Raj Kumar, June 19, 2014, DHNS:

A meaningful employment is one of the important goals of higher education, but it will be a mistake to consider this as the only goal of any educational experience, says C Raj Kumar.

The higher education system in India is undoubtedly going through an important transition.

There are huge challenges relating to the university system which has unfortunately not been able to promote excellence in higher education.

This has led to steady deterioration of academic standards and research prowess in many higher education institutions.

While much of this problem is related to lack of vision, inadequate number of qualified faculty members available to teach and pursue research, poor governance models and archaic regulatory structures, there are also substantive issues relating to courses and degrees offered, which is worthy of serious examination.

One of the consequences of this crisis in the higher education system has led to calls for focusing on employability as the sole objective of education.

In recent times, there has been a systematic attack on the study of liberal arts and humanities not only in India, but also in other countries where there has been an established tradition that has promoted liberal arts education including the United States.

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Need for Liberal Arts Education

Given the lack of quality liberal arts and humanities colleges in India, there is a need to have many such schools to deepen democracy and produce an enlightened citizenry that is able to adapt itself to the changing demands and circumstances of the contemporary world.

While India is poised to address the educational aspirations of over 800 million people who are less than 35 years of age, there is an urgent need for promoting liberal arts and humanities education.

Acquiring knowledge

Liberal arts education promotes intellectual curiosity, which is critical for the growth and development of any individual in a society.

It helps in the process of creating knowledge and sharing perspectives about some of the most fundamental issues of our society.

It helps people come to terms with the past, develop an understanding of the present and prepares them to charter ideas and perspectives for the future.

The need for acquiring knowledge in a range of subjects including philosophy, history, literature, sociology, anthropology, psychology while pursuing interests in music, theatre, performing arts and fine arts is the hallmark of a liberal education.

Understanding heritage

One of the important goals of education is to work towards achieving enlightened citizenship.

Education needs to promote a greater degree of civilizational understanding. India has a rich and long tradition of promoting civilisational understanding through education.

The inspiring institutions of higher education in ancient India – Takshashila University and Nalanda University promoted liberal arts and humanities education long before any other institution in the world.

Takshashila University established over 2,700 years ago had over 10,000 students from around the world and studied subjects as diversified as the Vedas, philosophy, grammar, politics, astronomy, future, music, ayurveda, agriculture, surgery, and commerce.

Takshashila University is probably the oldest liberal arts college of the world. India needs to revive this rich and inspiring cultural and educational history of promoting transnational humanities education.

Citizenship is about people taking responsibility and enlightened citizenship cannot be achieved unless people receive a sound and rigorous education in liberal arts and humanities.

Skills for advancement

Liberal arts education provides opportunities for students to develop a range of skills that are essential to become lifelong learners.

In fact, the skills relating to reflective reading, critical thinking, effective writing and verbal communications are central for professional advancement.

Liberal arts education gives due emphasis to inculcate these skills in students as these are relevant not only for the next job that the graduate of a college will aspire, but for a long time to come.

The future of education will depend upon how effectively we are able to impart knowledge, skills and perspectives that will make promote versatility and will be able to empower them in a variety of professional

endeavours.

Benefits of studying liberal arts

A liberal arts and humanities education foregrounds and fosters critical thinking capacities in students – a behavioral aspect that is more and more in demand today, across industries.
We no longer live in a day and age where technical skills and specialization per se are sufficient for growth in the working world.

In today's competitive world, an individual may have technical skills of a certain kind, but if s/he doesn't have the requisite analytical acumen to communicate and articulate views or weigh the pros and cons of complex issues, they are not going to be useful in the working world beyond a point.

This is where a full-rounded education in the liberal arts makes an individual a complete personality, with the ability to bring in a broad range of knowledge and insights to any task at hand. The need for advancing multidisciplinary education is profoundly felt in India, given our strong commitment to democracy and pluralism.

Deepening of democracy requires investing in education that advances the values of democracy alongside the self-criticism of values.

The critical study of these values will inevitably mean a stronger focus on humanities education. It is not possible to deepen democracy without students being given an opportunity to understand these values through a serious study of humanities.

It is also important to change attitudes of all stakeholders in education, including primary and secondary education, leading to higher education.

The obsession to make choices of study and careers purely on the basis of employability and immediate financial gains and nothing else has neither led to employability, nor enlightenment.

Promoting employability

Liberal arts education creates opportunities for students to develop knowledge and critical thinking abilities that is the hallmark of good

education.

Unfortunately, India doesn't have a number of liberal arts colleges.

Even the colleges that do have a few degree options in liberal arts and humanities do not fully understand and appreciate the pedagogical foundations of liberal education.

There has been far too much emphasis on specialized education with a view to focusing on specific area of interest and not to challenge the boundaries of knowledge and thought processes.

Employers are not only looking for people with knowledge, but would expect graduates to be problem solvers; who can read and reflect effectively; who can write and communicate persuasively; and who can be sensitive and appreciate the complexities of the society and humanity that we live today.

Career Options

A liberal arts and humanities education equips students with the analytical inventiveness and versatility of mind which makes many careers possible, whether in business, consulting, academia, government, NGOs, journalism, creative industries and numerous other professions including civil service. *Professor C. Raj Kumar, a Rhodes Scholar is the Founding Vice Chancellor of O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU), Haryana. JGU has established India's first transnational humanities school, the Jindal School of Liberal Arts & Humanities (JSLH) and offers an undergraduate programmes in liberal arts and humanities in collaboration with Rollins College, Florida.*