

# The Pursuit Of Excellence

A lecture by

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*Information about the "Indian Centre for Encouraging Excellence" may be obtained from Mr. N. H. Athreya, Sahakar Bhavan, Bombay-77.*

## The Pursuit Of Excellence

### What is leadership?

Unlike Jestling Pilate who asked a similar question and would not stay for an answer, fortunately Dr. A. W. Airan of the Wilson College who posed this question at the commencement of his lecture on "The Pursuit of Excellence" under the auspices of the Indian Centre for the Encouragement of Excellence provided a thought-provoking definition, which was the starting point of a considered analysis of some of the ills that afflict our society. Dr. Airan did not stop with the diagnosis, he suggested some radical prophylactic measure too!

To go back to Dr. Airan's definition: "A leader is one who strives for excellence in any chosen walk of life." The accent was on the word "strives": it meant a positive effort, even a struggle. It also meant that the effort was not an individual one. The leader had to develop relationships with his fellowmen so that they too joined in the struggle for excellence.

The quest for excellence did not stop at a point. To achieve excellence, one had to aim at something very high even though the goal appeared beyond one's reach. There was something exciting in anticipating what was to come. Keats' poem, "Ode to a Grecian Urn" expressed that feeling — the shepherd is about to play the pipe and the onlooker wonders what that tune would be.....

*"Heard melodies are sweet,  
But those unheard are sweeter..."*

The pursuit of excellence sometimes brings us to a state of mind when we attain a feeling of satisfaction, an entry

into the world of fantasy. There is a quiet feeling of satisfaction. But the accent is on the word "Quiet": there should be no gloating. There were some dangers in the quest for quietness, modern young men in America sought short-cuts in this quest through L.S.D. and other drugs. What we are after is a dynamic quietness.

There were two more things to be remembered in the pursuit of excellence — the means should not be such that they sully the high aims we strive for. The means should be as pure as the goals you achieve.

Another thing to remember was that excellence could not be achieved in a vacuum. You have to go out in the world and struggle. Discipline and hard work were necessary, so also, acceptance of the cruel realities of life.

After this general introduction, Dr. Airan turned to the field of education. Here again, he started with a question "How relevant is the concept of excellence in the contemporary, commercially oriented mass culture of today?" Old days were different, when the teacher was an idealist, carrying on his vocation in ideal surroundings. Today things were different. The teacher was as much concerned about material things as anybody else — his salary was an important factor. In the circumstances, how relevant was the traditional concept of education? Today, with advertisement being the order of the day, people come to accept the most advertised article as the best article.

Today the days of kings are gone; but one can recall the days when kings

were kings and courts were courts. The courts were the centres of excellence. Great artists, dancers and poets — they were all associated with the courts of kings. Where are the kings now? Today the mass is the king!

The dual aim of education is (1) to impart knowledge in the sense in which Plato meant it and (2) to teach our students how to think (not memorise). We must also remember what Plato said was the aim of education — to appreciate values.

There are many factors which affect the effect of education.

(1) **The pace at which knowledge is increasing:** In this we can even use the much-heard of word, "explosion." Knowledge multiplies itself several times every year. "My job as a teacher would be over if I am able to convince my student about the obsolescence of knowledge. The student then will know that he will have to be on his own," said Dr. Airan.

(2) **The mode of imparting this knowledge:** There are two agencies for this — the human agency and the gadgets evolved by man. (Gadgets cannot be considered by themselves as they were as good or as bad as those who invented them). Very often teachers too proved inadequate for the task.

(3) **Demand of specialisation:** We are not able to draw a clear line of demarcation between specialisation and the training of technicians. Very often the two are confused. If specialisation meant the training given to a man to go deep into his chosen subject then it was a means of promoting excellence.

Speaking about the "bedrock of higher education," Dr. Airan said that we are having an outmoded concept of "University." These are no longer the places of universal concord. As a matter of fact, our academic and research

universities are taking studies farther apart. For an instance, we have a National Laboratory for physics in New Delhi and a National Laboratory for chemistry in Poona — one separated from the other by two hours of jet flight.

Moreover, the academician is not given the due importance. In this, the press too played a part. In a function to which the academician is invited, he goes and gives out his considered thoughts on the subject. But the press reports only the politician or any other important person who makes a speech and the academician is dismissed with the words "he also spoke." Thus the academician loses a means of contact with the larger society.

Again, academic issues are resolved in India — and perhaps only in India — by voting strength.

Society is also a very significant factor in either creating a proper image of excellence or of distorting it. The press too has a part to play in promoting excellence, by publicising such activities.

Research and work on worthwhile projects would flourish much more if these were sponsored by industrial units and the like rather than by Government.

Dr. Airan concluded his lecture with a reference to the film, "The Agony and the Ecstasy," which picturised the genius of Michael Angelo. The film shows Michael Angelo entering a pub and ordering a glass of wine. He finds it sour; he shows this to the landlord who immediately takes an axe and breaks the cistern letting all the bad wine flow out.

That must be the attitude of those who go out for excellence; Destroy the bad and the ugly so that you can build anew the good and the beautiful.

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