

## An Ethical Education for Urban Professionals

Today, as a consequence of rapid growth, Indian cities are in a mess. They are overcrowded polluted and their meager infrastructure is highly stressed. Roads are congested and traffic seems unmanageable. Social services and amenities are nonexistent in most towns and local governments seem unable to cope. We seem to be descending into a downward spiral of urban ills, stagnating urban productivity and underdevelopment. Will we ever be able to make our cities efficient, livable and sustainable? Will we ever be able to make them abodes of happy and flourishing lives?

When asking such despondent questions, it serves well to remember that when the West first urbanized, its cities also fell apart. Nineteenth century London and Paris were also unmanageable messes - overcrowded, polluted, unhygienic, filthy and congested. Slowly, over a century, Western nations were able to transform this situation. Starting from small beginnings, they were able to provide more and more people in cities with better and basic infrastructure, transport, housing, schooling, health facilities, and recreation. By doing this they were able to pull off the trick of simultaneously making city lives more and more comfortable, healthier and happier, and, making cities more and more productive.

How were Western nations able to transform their cities? Why did Western cities not get mired in a vicious downward spiral of unsustainable urbanization and economic stagnation? These are difficult questions to answer. However, one thing is certain: an array of specialized new professions such as city planning, urban design, public health, environmental engineering, city management and transportation planning had to be invented and put in charge to manage the transition.

Inventing new professions meant demarcating and establishing new domains of knowledge pertaining to cities, undertaking research to find solutions to urban problems, establishing professional institutions to create and manage new professional identities and, most important of all, training professional to go out there and tackle real and urgent problems.

Training professional requires equipping students with specialized knowledge and development of their intellectual, technical, communication and collaborative skills. This is well understood and accepted. However, it is often forgotten that professionals are truly effective only when they are profoundly motivated by a sense of purpose that reaches beyond themselves and when they

are able to bring their ethical sense to bear on their work. Successful management of India's urban transformation depends crucially on our ability to train professionals who are driven by a deep desire to use their knowledge to improve human wellbeing and who are able to use their moral compasses to guide themselves.

How does one accomplish this? How can one impart an ethical education? Is it at all possible to train students' moral faculties and to build in them a sense of social purpose? Of course it is. Many institutions manage this very effectively and, if one were to carefully examine what they do, the answer is not very complicated. Successful institutions clearly understand that no amount of lecturing and exhorting students to behave ethically is ever effective.

The only way of imparting an ethical education is to immerse students in an institutional culture that allows them to exercise their ethical faculties; an institutional culture where, ethical issues are not presented as settled norms merely to be followed but presented as dilemmas to be debated and discussed; an institutional culture that encourages students to think their own stands thorough through; an institutional culture that encourages students to think their own stands through; an institutional culture that respects them regardless of the answers that they come up with; an institutional culture that provides them with role models of teachers themselves grappling with ethical dilemmas.

The only way of imparting a deep and abiding sense of sense of purpose in students is to provide opportunities for students to make a difference. It is only those who have experienced the satisfaction of seeing how their own efforts can bring about change and improve the lives of less fortunate people, who, when they grow up, will have the confidence and sense of purpose to try and change the world. Institutions that hope to impart a sense of purpose have to ensure that students have opportunities to question, challenge and change the very institution that is meant to shape them.

Bimal Patel, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2014

Published in 'State of India's Environment – 2015  
Down to Earth