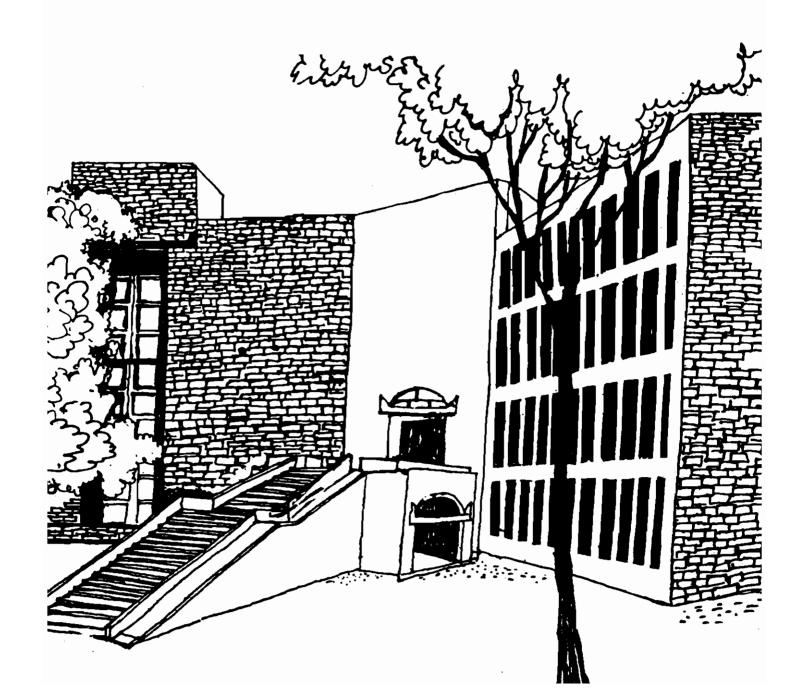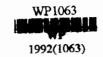# Working Paper

THE GURU-SHISHYA RELATIONSHIP: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

By

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The main objective of the working paper series of the IIMA is to help faculty members to test out their research findings at the pre-publication stage.

Abstract

In this paper we trace the historical basis of the Guru-shishya relationship and explore its implications for modern education. Our hypothesis is that this relationship is rooted in a religious and spiritual basis and that this has influenced the nature of various relationships including the ruler-ruled, employer-employee and teacher-taught relationships in post independence India. We analyse the conflicts arising out of holding on to a deeply ingrained cultural value in our contemporary secular society. We also suggest how to start the process of resolving these conflicts in our educational institutions.

The Guru-Shishya Relationship:
Some Implications for Educational Institutions

In 1947, when India became independent, the Congress sent its workers through the length and breadth of the country to inform the people, many of whom had no access to modern means of communication like radio and newspapers, that India was at last free. Many of our countrymen responded by asking "Who is now going to rule us?" It did not occur to many of us that no one else was going to rule us, and that we were going to rule ourselves.

Various explanations can be put forth about this reaction among the people. One can argue that illiteracy, poverty, centuries of subjugation and foreign rule had placed the idea of self rule beyond the realm of possibility for most of us. Or, one can argue that the very idea of democracy was very recent and had not really taken root in most of the world. Historically, the masses all over the world had always been ruled by a small powerful elite.

A historical perspective

However, prior to the epic age in India, history seems to indicate that the society then prevailing was highly evolved as indicated by the development of the Sanskrit language, the religious and philosophical discussions in the Vedas and the Upanishads, and some of the concepts of marriage and society as written down in these ancient texts. They all indicate a reasonably enlightened and democratic society. There is hardly any mention of any kings or dynasties.

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One argument is that the society at that stage was primitive, tribal, nomadic and pastoral. Hence concepts like private property, individual rights and so on did not exist. What existed was a group or tribal identity, which was defended against other tribes or groups. However, some of the profound philosophical speculations or revelations (depending on one's viewpoint) contained in the literature of those days, particularly in the Upanishads, belie the notion that the society was primitive.

Therefore, we see that although some of the ideas like freedom from foreign rule, democratic functioning within small groups, common property and so on existed, by the time we reach modern India, many of these ideas are no longer part of the collective consciousness of the masses.

This raises another useful line of analysis. Historically, our culture has emphasised through scripture, tradition and practice, the critical role of the teacher or the Guru. The scriptures extol the Guru as a visible representation of the ultimate Godhead, who the disciple ever holds in reverence and gratitude for freeing from the thraldom of the senses and liberating him or her from the dreary cycle of birth and death. Tradition has crystallised this into various practises like holding one's parents, elders and teachers in respect, touching their feet, not arguing with them, and accepting their dictates without murmur. For instance, we have two classical examples of this from popular mythology, that forms an essential ingredient of the collective consciousness of the people. The first is from the

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Ramayana, where Sri Ramachandra, the human incarnation of Vishnu, the Godhead of preservation of the universe, readily and cheerfully goes into exile for fourteen years into the forests of southern India, with his young and delicate wife in order to uphold the promise given by his father to his step-mother. The second instance is from the Mahabharata, where Ekalavya cuts off his right thumb in deference to his Guru, Dronacharya's wish. There are many other instances where the unquestioning acceptance of authority is extolled as an exemplary virtue in the disciple.

Some of these ideas seem to have been translated into acceptance of power and authority even if it is not directly from the teacher or the elders. Thus the rural masses had largely accepted the hegemony of the minority ruling elite in the countryside in spite of oppression. The masses in India were more content or passive (depending on one's viewpoint) through the centuries. In other countries discontent among the masses was either met with harsher measures as in Eastern Europe and China, or a channel for the energy of the people was discovered in overseas trade and subsequent colonisation of foreign countries as in Western Europe and Japan. Although we do have instances of overseas trade and colonisation in Indian history by some of the Southern kingdoms, its extent was much less than that in other countries. One can perhaps hypothesise that the masses in India were traditionally less rebellious and outward looking than in some other countries. The reasons for this do not immediately concern us here. What is relevant for our purpose is that obedience and conformity

is viewed both by authority and the masses as a desirable virtue. For instance, an accepted way of describing a virtuous young man in south India is to call him a "God fearing" person.

Education in nineteenth century India

When we come to the nineteenth century, we can pick out 1836 as one critical year when Lord Macaulay introduced the English pattern of education in our Universities, perhaps to provide the English with educated clerks to help them manage the task of ruling India. That was one of the beginnings of mass education in India. There were at least three major departures from the past. One, education was no longer confined to religious institutions. Along with this, the teacher was no longer a religious person, priest or monk, but a secular individual, employed by the Government. Second, this type of education was now, in principle, available to anybody. Education in the traditional sense was only available to the upper castes. Now the University system had thrown it open to everyone. Third, Western ideas about Science, Mathematics, Democracy, Religion and Philosophy were freely debated by the educated elite. These educated elite were a critical factor in the success of reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj.

Once again, the traditional, institutionalised reverence to the educator, who was previously a priest, mullah or a Father, was now transferred to the secular teacher in the University. This was again transferred to the employer, the largest single institution being the government itself.

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We must recall that around this time, authority in the peoples' collective consciousness had already been crystallised as `mai-baap', or father, mother, and all in all. Only a small percentage of the educated elite came from the ruling elite, and most of them carried over this notion of `mai-baap' to the University, and later to the employer.

But another process was at work which challenged some of our traditional values. The very process of education was opening our minds to western ideas of democracy and individual rights. There was the conservative resistance to such processes, and there was the euphoria of the educated as expressed in whole hearted acceptance of all Western ideas, including Christianity in some instances, and rejection of many things that were held to be sacred. But interestingly, both the conservatives and the educated liberals in the middle of the nineteenth century agreed on one issue: the overall desirability and goodness of British rule. The one from traditional reluctance to challenge authority, and the other from a whole hearted endorsement of Western values and institutions. Significant questioning of authority had not yet begun.

But things were bound to change and they did. The Congress was formed, various groups started agitating for freedom, and ultimately India was free. Simultaneously, there was exposure to modern scientific developments, technology, and for a significant few, greater economic prosperity. This gave the significant few both the intellectual and economic freedom to question. Analysis of power and economic

relationships was possible for larger numbers of people at a deeper level, revealing blatant injustices in many institutions and processes. Naturally this challenged our traditional notion of authority as 'mai-baap'.

The conflict between traditional acceptance of authority and the new questioning of authority spurred by education in the widest sense of the term and by economic deprivation and disparity had set in. Some of the forerunners of this process were the Congress movement itself, the Dalit movement spearheaded by Ambedkar, the rise of trade unionism with the active encouragement in some cases by the Government, and increasing student involvement in politics.

Post independence India

We attempt to analyse the influence of the processes of mass education, scientific and technological development, greater economic and political freedom and exposure to ideas from all parts of the world due to vastly improved communications on the traditional Guru-Shishya relationships in India. An illustrative anecdote is a traditional thread wearing ceremony in a middle class, urban household in post independence India. The teenaged boy who was to be baptised into the second stage of life, namely, that of the brahmachari, was eager to go through the ceremony. He would cross a major milestone on his journey towards adulthood, and be the centre of attraction for one day, and receive gifts from elders, relatives, neighbours and friends. The ceremony includes receiving the sacred Gayatri mantra from the father or priest, who is viewed as the Guru. In gratitude for this

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initiation, the disciple bends down and touches the feet of the Guru. However, our friend refused to do so and created a major embarrassment for the family.

This illustrates the conflict rather sharply. On the one hand, the initiate is willing to be baptised and gain acceptance into society. But on the other hand, he is not willing to accept authority completely. This illustration can be seen again and again in our educational institutions. Our students seek acceptance and approval from the University or Institution in terms of greater respect for their intellectual and other abilities, and better marks or grades. At the same time, they are not willing to unquestioningly accept the authority of the University. This is often expressed by strikes, agitations, boycott of examinations, and confrontation with authority represented by the teachers or Gurus. The reasons for this are too complex to come to any definite conclusion regarding cause effect relationships, but the process is undeniable. In contrast, such confrontation with teachers is markedly less in Western countries that have not traditionally emphasised the Guru-Shishya relationship. There have been some agitations, as in the anti war protests in University campuses in the United States in the sixties. But the crucial difference is that the agitation was not coming out of the teacher taught relationship. Our teachers are also very much part of the same ethos, and react to confrontation by emphasising once again the unquestioned authority of the Guru. Even in our most elite educational institutions, invariably patterned on some American or Western

European Institution, this conflict between the traditional notion of the Guru-Shishya relationship and the pressures on this notion in a modern industrialised world is apparent in the students and the Professors.

Cutting through the various processes mentioned earlier like mass education, scientific and technological developments, greater economic and political freedom and exposure to ideas from all parts of the worlds, one fact seems to stand out rather clearly. We have not been able to completely discard our traditional notions or values of the Guru -Shishya relationship. Whether that is desirable or not is a separate issue. What concerns us here is that a centuries old value is deeply ingrained in our people, *both teacher and taught.* If we are to flow with that momentum, the momentum of a tradition that goes back thousands of years, it might be interesting to examine some questions.

The traditional Guru-Sishya relationship

Let us go back and trace some of the beginnings of this relationship. If we accept that the earliest beginning was in the scripture, let us examine what it has to say. It laid down thousands of years ago, in the pre epic period, the ideal qualities for both the student and the teacher. Thus, the teacher is one who is well versed and knowledgeable, who is free from greed and selfish motivation regarding the student, and whose only motive in the teacher taught relationship is the welfare of the student. Thus, he seeks neither power nor control over the student. Even if he initially accepts the

students dependence on him, the teacher ultimately strives, to make the student independent.

The student on the other hand is one who is eager to gain knowledge, is disciplined, sincere and truthful. Even the scripture does not lay down any blind acceptance of the Guru. In fact, it exhorts him or her to test the Guru by the standards mentioned earlier. If the Guru is indeed worthy, then the student gives him whole hearted obedience and reverence. The relationship is thus conceived as one of mutual affection, with concern for the welfare of the student on the one hand, and respect and gratitude for knowledge received on the other hand. It might be worthwhile to examine in what context the scriptures laid down these guidelines. But what concerns us here is the process, and its implications for today.

It is interesting to note that as this 'ideal' is translated into action, especially on a large scale, there is bound to be some departure from it. The earliest formal education was largely religious, spiritual and scriptural, perhaps confined to a small minority. These ideas were then passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. Thus much of our earliest dissemination of ideas was based on the scriptures, and in all probability carried out by religious or spiritual persons. One consequence of this seems to have been the carry over of this Guru-Shishya paradigm into various other relationships like teacher-taught in a secular context, ruler-ruled and employer-employee. Another perhaps inevitable consequence with the passage of time, and the involvement of

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larger and larger numbers in the educational process, is the departure from the 'ideal' both among the teacher and the taught.

Implications in the modern context

As mentioned earlier, we are examining the consequence of 'flowing with the momentum', or accepting for the time being our deeply ingrained notions of the Guru-Shishya relationship. Suppose we accept the scriptural guidelines, not as a religious dogma, but as a reasonable approximation to our own ideals. We then need to examine in what ways the context has changed from those ancient times.

In the modern world, one critical difference is that education is largely secular. The standards to which the religious Guru and the spiritual aspirant are held is bound to be different from the standards in a secular context. For instance, in the religious field, the accent is on moral and spiritual values like truthfulness, personal integrity, non-covetousness, unselfishness and compassion. On the other hand, in secular education, the emphasis implicitly is on intellectual enquiry, rigour in thought processes, understanding and describing the physical, mental and sensual reality and processes. At the same time, as a society, the paradigm we hold is the one derived from the scriptural description of the ideal Guru, disciple and their relationship. This is certainly a source of conflict. The student is caught between his implicitly held notions of the ideal Guru, and what he or she is seeking from the secular Guru. Culturally he or she imbibes the values of an ideal

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student as one who is obedient and conforming, whereas the processes of modern secular education seem to demand questioning, enquiry and intellectual rigour. The student, who often is subconsciously seeking a role model as a Guru, is often disappointed because he or she is looking for some of the moral values like concern for student welfare in the secular Guru, who has strengths in completely different dimensions.

The secular Guru is also part of the same ethos. For him or her, the ideal student is one who is respectful, obedient and unquestioning, especially of authority, whereas experience tells him that students are quite different. On the other hand, the Guru is also caught between the culturally held values like responsibility and concern for student welfare, and the demands of modern secular education like depth of knowledge and intellectual rigour.

This conflict expresses itself in various ways. One often repeated pattern is mutual recriminations, followed by cycles of revolt on the one hand and greater exercise of authority on the other.

Another critical difference from the ancient times is the much greater exposure and knowledge base of the student. Even before he goes to the teacher, he already knows many things, not all directly related to what he hopes to gain from the teacher. He or she thus knows something from various mass media, like T.V., cinema, radio, newspapers, magazines and books. Even in his school going years, he is able to pick up many things outside the teacher taught relationship. By the

time he is in his teens, he might discover that in some narrow fields, he is better informed than the teacher. If he is going for higher education, he is almost certainly bound to feel that he has a lot of information, and a little knowledge that the teacher does not have. On the other hand he recognises that the teacher is much more knowledgeable in various other things. This often creates a certain sense of self respect and confidence. In contrast, in ancient times, the only knowledge was scriptural, and the student was completely ignorant when he came to the teacher. The modern teacher also recognises this fact but is also well aware that at least in his own field of knowledge, he is much better off than the student.

Naturally, this leads to conflict with our traditional notions of the Guru-Shishya relationship both for the teacher and the taught. One source of conflict then seems to lie in the following: our ingrained notion of a Guru who is knowledgeable, and a student who knows very little is confronted with the obvious reality that no teacher can be all knowing, and the fact that more and more students are becoming more and more knowledgeable. This conflict does not exist in the Western countries, because they have no ingrained notion of the teacher taught relationship.

This conflict is expressed on the one hand by demands for more respect often expressed immaturely or in a manner perceived as threatening by the teacher, and on the other hand by increasing attempts to control and re-establish supremacy.

A third source of conflict is a lack of consensus on what kind of educational institutions we want to create. We

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are in the process of grafting Western models of institutions with values like intellectual enquiry and questioning into a cultural milieu that has not yet assimilated these values. Thus we simultaneously hold notions of an institution as primarily a means of imparting knowledge from teacher to taught on the one hand, and as a means of encouraging enquiry and research on the other. A more recent notion is that of an institution as an active player in the larger soceity. We have not always been successful in harmonising these various ideals. This conflict has major implications for higher learning, research and contribution of educational institutions to soceity. It expresses itself often in mutual hostility, manoeuvring for greater autonomy by the research students and greater controls by the teachers. Often the very purpose of research is sidelined and energy is spent on managing these conflicts.

Freedom and responsibility

There are other issues involved like commitment of both teachers and students to learning, excellence and quality of academic work. That is no doubt one of the key variables in this process, but it is also the least understood. At one extreme we have the idea that by tightening control mechanisms, everything would fall into place. This idea is perhaps derived from ingrained notions of authority being supreme. At the other extreme, we have the archetypal liberal outlook which always seeks to shift responsibility from the least powerful group, namely the students, to those in

authority. Obviously there are no clear cut answers to this. But any reasonable analysis would like to understand some of the following issues:

1) What data do we have to support one hypothesis or the other?

2) What benefits accrue from tighter control mechanisms in terms of ensuring better standards and seeking to put the responsibility fairly and squarely on the individual? What price do we pay in terms of rigidity, stifling of originality and creating a sort of fear of questioning with its attendant cycles of hostility, rebellion and repression? Is the goal of the institution to ensure conformity, or to promote learning?

3) What are the benefits of greater freedom from norms and controls? Does it necessarily lead to creativity and better quality of work? Is it desirable to grant unfettered freedom without attendant responsibility? Is learning really promoted by a *laissez faire* policy? Do we need to evolve mechanisms for inculcating a greater sense of responsibility and a greater love for learning ?

4) Do we need to imbibe simultaneously the values of individual freedom and responsibility? If so, what processes do we evolve to achieve this? If the goal in the teacher taught relationship is to ensure better learning and creativity, do we need to provide a better environment in our institutions? Can we say that once this environment is available, the responsibility for learning lies with the student?

As students we might need to ask ourselves some of these questions, and define for ourselves what is our responsibility. The implicit contract we have accepted as students is that we have come to the Universities to learn. If that is our responsibility, what are we doing about it? To what extent can we go on blaming the system or the institutions?

As teachers we need to ask ourselves whether we are consciously striving to achieve the goal of quality learning. Are we caught in traditional notions of our status as teachers? Do we accept that in the modern context we are only one of the many sources of learning for the student and that in many fields of knowledge the student is possibly better informed than us ? Is it possible that we are sometimes putting too much pressure on the students ? Is the perceived lack of commitment among the students only due to laziness and incompetence, or are there other issues involved ?

Future courses of action

These issues raise some questions. If we accept that our deeply held notions of the Guru-Shishya relationship conflict with the demands of a modern secular education, what processes do we evolve to harmonise these ideals? Do we overthrow outdated tradition, and if so, how? Do we re-introduce cultural, moral and philosophical learning, and if so how? Do we seek a balance, retaining some of the old values and replacing others by some of the modern ones? Is it worthwhile for our educated people at this point in time to recapture and

rearticulate some of our cultural underpinnings as a nation?
If so, how do we do it?

A viewpoint

We attempt to present one viewpoint among the many that are bound to exist in any democratic society. The first hypothesis is that it is simply impossible to roll back the clock, and reject outright some of our deeper cultural values. The second hypothesis is that we would like to re-imbibe values like intellectual enquiry and questioning.

In fact, it is possible to argue that this intellectual tradition already existed in the pre-epic period as indicated in the Upanishads. But the questioning was different from what is often the popularly held notion of questioning in the West. The popular notion of criticising society, authority and institutions for the sake of expressing one's point of view can be replaced by questioning *for the sake of learning*, to know the truth in the external world and in the inner mental, psychological and psychical worlds. As a culture, we have not encouraged the first type of questioning, but have rich traditions of encouraging the second type. We might like to recapture that aspect of our culture. In the very process of that type of questioning some of the obvious societal and institutional injustices would be ironed out. But it would be an evolutionary process rather than a bitter revolution. The disadvantage of this is that it is a slow process, and many individuals would suffer in the meanwhile.

Some illustrations might clarify this point further. In the Katho Upanishad, the youthful protagonist Nachiketa, is expelled to the abode of Death by his irate father. The father's authority to do that is never questioned by Nachiketa. In fact he prays for the welfare of his father. But once he meets Yama, the God of Death, Nachiketa begins one of the most penetrating enquiries into the reality of life, death and the ultimate destiny of man. The Guru, Yama no doubt tests him, but far from being displeased by this persistent questioning, he is extremely happy to meet such a wonderful student, and openly showers praise and blessings on him.

In fact the very format of the scriptures, including the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads is that of questions and answers. But the questioning is always for the sake of knowing the truth, never for the sake of fault finding or mere criticising.

The question remains whether this process of re-emphasising truth seeking questioning, whether the truth is sacred or secular, is good enough to rectify some of the obvious injustices in our society and institutions. The ancient answer to this has been that the individual need not be concerned too much with social reform, and should seek his or her own self development. However, that is often not a good enough answer to many of us today, as it was not for Mahatma Gandhi and many others. But here also it seems that Gandhi's strategy of co-opting, including and assimilating sections of our society into the mainstream has been more successful than an openly hostile or confrontational attitude. He forced the

privileged to think and to question some of their own prejudices. Very often we do not realise that in India, with a history of thousands of years, we are not fighting so much exploitation or injustice, as we are the dead weight of deeply ingrained tradition.

We are therefore in a framework in which the traditional and modern values conflict, and in which the impetus of tradition is tremendous. Fighting tradition with modernism will perhaps not work. Such a direct confrontation will only raise further conservative reactions and conflict will escalate. Perhaps we need to be more traditional than the traditionalists and more modern than the moderns. In other words, we need to seek that from our ancients which meets the requirements of a modern education.

Perhaps one underlying value we need in our modern education is search for meaning and truth defined in its broadest sense. By that we mean understanding the world as it is without intervening veils of prejudice, ideology and tradition. But this is precisely our own ancient heritage which seems to have got distorted into later traditions and ideologies. It is worthwhile to recognise that our earliest scriptures, especially the *srutis* i.e., the Upanishads are only trying to understand this world and any reality that lies beyond. It is only the later puranic age in which notions of god, soceity and so on were elaborated. These *smritis* were held secondary to the sruti, and were explicitly recognised as being only of contemporary value and not of the nature of eternal truths. Unfortunately the weight of tradition and its

fierce preservation in the face of foreign invasions has distorted all that.

At the same time, it is useful to state explicitly what is the underlying value in 'modern' education. Its motive force is not merely material progress, although it includes that, but rather an understanding of contemporary reality and the application of that understanding for the benefit of the individual and soceity. Ideally this understanding would be free of all distortions caused by mental prejudices, biases, ideologies and self interest.

If we are to re-establish this truth seeking, we might think of setting in motion some processes in the educational institutions. These could include re-introducing some of our cultural underpinnings by means of courses in history, philosophy and analysis of various stages of our development as a soceity. To avoid ideological debate as to what constitutes correct history or philosophy, at the school level, we could introduce the lives and teachings of some of the key figures in our history irrespective of their religion or politics. This also has the benefit of providing various role models and perhaps some inspiration to the young minds. At the school level the emphasis could be on exposing children to our heritage. It is only later that education can start the process of questioning the value of that heritage. To re-emphasise, this heritage is very powerful and unless we are aware of it we cannot come to terms with it.

At the same time, we need to encourage original thought, and evolve means of accepting and rewarding it. This demands

that our institutions are robust enough to contain a wide variety of dissenting opinion in harmony. Otherwise original thought is likely to be stifled. Therefore a value we might like to imbibe in higher education is that dissenting opinion within and across groups like teachers and students is to be respected. This could be done by means of strong taboos regarding suppression of dissent as in the West, especially the United States, or by a more positive and holistic educational process that inculcates respect for various shades of opinion. That is no doubt a difficult process, but it has already been achieved in many institutions in the West within the parameters of their own cultural values. One can think of structural solutions like consensus based decision making and other checks and balances in the educational institutions. However, in the long run only a deeply held soceital value will ensure a lasting improvement.

More concretely, our pedagogies might like to include presentation and discussion of various conflicting ideas, opinions and ideologies on a variety of subjects like politics, religion, caste, history, women and so on. It has many benefits. Firstly, students recognise that there are many points of view on any issue. Secondly, people do not always agree and one need not be unduly perturbed by it. Thirdly, this very process will undermine traditional notions of authority because there are so many authorities and so many viewpoints. Further, it is hoped that in the long run the process of coming to grips with different perceptions of reality will encourage people to stop criticising various

points of view and turn the mind towards truth-seeking and practical solutions. Not rebellion but better performance. Not detruction but construction. Not any attempt to force reality into ideology or tradition but attempts only to know the truth. Once the value of questioning for the sake of knowing the truth is re-established, not only will educational institutions benefit, but perhaps soceity as a whole will also benefit. At the same time it might help satisfy the psychological need of young people to question, channel their energies in positive directions and minimise conflicts between traditional values and modern realities.

In conclusion, we say that although there are many perspectives based on which we can evolve a modern education system, we are looking only at the relationship between the teacher and the taught and how that relationship is influenced by our heritage. Further, there could be various ways to improve that relationship, but our approach is to inclucate two values from our heritage which meet the needs of modern education: a search for truth and a respect for different shades of thought.