

Book Review

A Foundation Course in Human Values
and Professional Ethics: Presenting a
Universal Approach to Value Education
through Self Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Key words: *Universal Human Values, All India Council of Technical Education, Self-Exploration, Existence and Coexistence*

The book titled “Foundation Course on Human Values and Professional Ethics” serves much more than its intended mandate of working as a text book for the course Universal Human Values (UHV), taught in technical and professional colleges coming under the purview of the All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE). Written with the main objective of evolving an effective and universally acceptable methodology for integrating value education in the existing curricula of technical and professional degree programmes, the book holds promise for anyone seeking answers and skills to live a meaningful life. The success of the book lies in ability to bridge the gap in the current education system that prioritises skills over values and fails to address the issues faced by individuals in their relationship with themselves, their families, the larger society and with nature in its entirety. With a focus on developing the right understanding of human reality, the book helps the reader to verify and validate through self-exploration, the proposal that continuity of happiness and harmony is possible if we internalise the simple truth that existence is coexistence, thereby facilitating transformation towards a holistic world-view characterised by 'human consciousness'.

INTRODUCTION

This book is co-authored by R.R. Gaur, an alumnus of IIT Madras, Rajul Asthana, an alumnus of IIT Delhi and G.P. Bagaria, an alumnus of IIT Kanpur represents one of the finest academic interventions in independent India, as it sets out to redefine the content, purpose and pedagogy for students and teachers of higher education. Intended as a basic text for teaching human values and professional ethics, the book takes upon itself the ambitious mandate of outlining a modus operandi of not only understanding the meaning of life, but also developing a methodology of living meaningfully. It appeals to students, teachers and curious readers alike, as it sets us on a journey of self-exploration and education.

Though initially intended as a teaching aid for colleges and universities imparting technical education, the book has now achieved a near cult status, given the fact that more and more schools, colleges and universities are making value education an integral part of all their courses cutting across domains like engineering, medicine, law, pharmacy, architecture, management, humanities, sciences and commerce. Accordingly, the All India Council of Technical Education has launched a massive teacher education programme to prepare faculty members to start teaching the course Universal Human Values (UHV).

BACKGROUND

As acknowledged by the authors, UHV as a course draws its inspiration from the universal vision of value education developed by the thinker Revered A. Nagaraj who developed a new school of philosophy called Madhyasth Darshan that takes an integrated approach to understand existence. Unlike science that rejects consciousness as esoteric and spirituality that describes the material reality as an illusion, Madhyasth Darshan combines the two seemingly opposite approaches by accepting both. Thus, human beings are treated as a coexistence of the body, that represents the physio-chemical material reality, and, self, that stands for the abstract dimension of consciousness. With this neat co-opting of two dissimilar and antagonistic approaches to life, Reverend A. Nagaraj goes on to propound Sah-astitvavad that explains the need to place human life and activities within the context of other life forms and the entirety of nature. As the most evolved of all life forms, the human beings thus become responsible and accountable for all their actions as they impact not only each other, but also the entire existence around them. Seen from this vantage point, human happiness acquires a complexity that is understood at the four levels of individual, family, society and self. Reverend A. Nagaraj then goes on to build a comprehensive system that promises continuity of happiness and prosperity based on mutually fulfilling relationships and lays the foundation of an undivided society.

CORE CONTRIBUTION

The book invites the reader to examine proposals related to “exploring, understanding and living a fulfilling life” (pp xiii) by discovering and expressing our innate humaneness at all the

four levels of individual, family, society and nature. Thus, UHV as a course and this book as a foundational resource provides the wherewithal to readers to enjoy happiness and harmony in continuity and seek answers to questions related to the role and purpose of human existence. This proposal-based pedagogy offers a refreshing alternative to the traditional teaching methodologies based on the defined roles of the teacher as the imparter and the student as the acceptor of knowledge. Since a proposal offers a choice, the student and the teacher both become co-explorers as they verify and validate the statements within and are empowered to accept or reject them, as per their personal experiences. This takes away the stress of passive consumption of knowledge as the teacher and student both become examiners and co-creators of their own content.

The book thus becomes a manual for life skills that equips the student with the ability to frame questions and seek answers pertaining to a diverse spectrum of issues ranging from family discord to environmental pollution. Traditional educational offerings have been more or less devoid of such content and have chiefly focused on strengthening the theoretical base of observed reality and skill development needed to earn a living. UHV offers a holistic learner centric approach that only prepares a student to earn a living but also teaches him how to live. The authors have based their work not only on the theoretical constructs of Revered A. Nagaraj, but also on the extensive field work done in the form of training workshops and actual classroom sessions over more than three decades. The content has been imparted to people from all walks of life including students, teachers, corporates, professionals, families and common citizens. Apart from more than 40 Indian universities with more than 4000 institutions spread across India and some institutions in SAARC countries, UHV has generated interest in Bhutan, as it is found to be aligned with their concept of gross national happiness. By providing simplified content, this book offers a platform for completing a foundation course after which the reader can continue her journey through immersive and deeper self-explorations.

Divided into four sections having four chapters each, the book gently leads the reader into a discussion on “the need, expanse and implications”, (pp 2) of UHV, followed by questions on purpose of education, the importance of values over skills, self-exploration as a process and an understanding of basic human aspirations of happiness and prosperity.

Section II talks about harmony at various levels and introduces the basic precept of Madhyasth Darshan as it explains human being as a co-existence of body and self. With this new understanding, the reader is taught to discern between the physio-chemical needs of the body which itself is a physio-chemical entity, and the abstract needs of self which is consciousness. As the reader develops a comprehensive understanding of how to ensure harmony at the levels of individual, family, society and nature.

Section III helps reader to grasp the right understanding as the base for holistic technologies, production systems and management models to ensure ethical professional conduct; ultimately leading to humanistic traditions and universal human order.

Section IV consists of appendices, glossary and further reading suggestions. Each chapter offers exhaustive assessment tools in the form of questions, exercises, projects and models to aid the reader's self-exploration.

To help new faculty members, there is an additional resource titled The Teacher's Manual that assists with classroom strategies and session planning. First published in 2010, the book is now available in its second edition since 2019 and seems to be growing in popularity.

CONCLUSION

With the New Education Policy of India placing added importance to value-based education, it is likely that the authors will be called upon to soon provide customized content for undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses. In its current format, the book serves as a reliable and authoritative reference for the teaching and learning of UHV, it will help the cause further if the authors provide, say, examples related to the legal practice to law students, green marketing to management graduates and ethical accounting to students enrolled to become chartered accountants. As more and more colleges begin to fulfill the government requirement of integrating UHV across domains, there is bound to be a sizable growth in the number of students and practitioners of UHV. With its emphasis on linguistic simplicity and conceptual clarity this book is ideally suited for integrating values in our existing education paradigms.