

Institutional Distinctiveness

Our institution draws its social relevance and intellectual inspiration from the work done in the locality by a mendicant sect of monks (the Udasis) who migrated from north India (Punjab to be precise) and settled not far from where our institution now stands, on the banks of the river Bhagirathi. Fondly remembered by the commoners in these parts for their quiet dedication and tireless service, the red cloth they used to drape themselves in, and still do, gave them a generic title of 'Lal Baba'.

The renunciation of earthly pleasures and a single-minded devotion to the betterment of the lot of fellow human beings endeared these ascetics to the local people. Our institution was originally founded by this sect of monks to ensure that everyone – the destitute, the poor, the backward and the orphaned – had equal opportunities in securing higher education.

The concept of asceticism shows the unity of efforts through which an individual desires to progress in his moral, religious, and spiritual life. The original meaning of the term refers to any exercise, physical, intellectual, or moral, practiced with method and rigour, in the hope of self-improvement and progress. Notwithstanding the great flexibility that characterizes the application of asceticism, the concept always alludes to a search for perfection based on the submission of the body to the spirit, recalling the symbolic distinction between exterior and interior life. Years have flown down the river Bhagirathi and our institution is no longer owned by the mendicant order or the trust which first birthed this college. However, the original driving force of adherence to the interests of the common folk, of standing by the weaker sections of society, of espousing the cause of the 'underdogs', the uncared and the near-forgotten, has been re-emanant in our new avatar as a higher education institution.

Following the evolution of the concept of asceticism within different historical and social contexts, it is possible to see its strategic importance within the social sciences, especially in regard to understanding the contemporary world. Aside from the combination of physical and intellectual exercises, which have always had their own social relevance, asceticism refers to the complex relationship between nature and culture, as well as to the classic relationship between faith and reason; such aspects are the fruit of a continual and dynamic negotiation that develops within concrete social and cultural contexts.

Sociology has always showed great interest in asceticism as particular forms of religious cohesion that developed through the centuries. Interest in these issues remains alive even in the contemporary world and sociologists find it not only within new religious experiences but also in connection with different fields such as caring for the body or political activism.

Max Weber contrasts asceticism and mysticism, specifying that the former considers salvation as the result of human actions in the world, while the latter refers to a particular state of enlightenment, which is reached only by a few select people through contemplation.

Asceticism calls people to actively dedicate themselves in the world to incarnate the spiritual values in it, in the mystical perspective the world loses importance in order to give way to a union with God. The logic of mysticism is to run away from the world, while the logic of asceticism has a belligerent attitude toward the world full of sin. Although popular reductions of the term 'Udasi' often look

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pejoratively at the 'world weariness' or indifference the term might mistakenly be perceived to connote, and the resultant apprehension in our institution, at least initially, to embrace this powerful ideal, have now been overcome.

Asceticism is a broad sociological category where a systematic and methodical effort to subordinate natural and worldly instincts to spiritual principles is put in place. Even though the world is a place where humans can sin, it is also the concrete situation where the virtuous person fulfils his vocation with a rational method. According to the such a definition of asceticism, the individual, in order to find confirmation of his own state of grace and privilege, lives his existence in the world as if he were an instrument chosen by powers above.

Asceticism, when it is put into concrete practice in the life of a socio-religious group, like the order of monks from whom our institution draws its name and motivational sustenance, can become a forcefully dynamic element of social and cultural transformation, instigating reform or sustainable and necessary change in the world.

The major point of interest in this conceptualization of the mentoring role played by the sect of monks in our institutional life, even when physical circumstances have changed beyond easy comprehension, is that it changes the very definition of a higher education institution. No longer does a higher education institution in such a dispensation merely serve doses of impersonal knowledge to its stakeholders. The college becomes a refuge, a healing place, an atelier for stifled aspirations and a nursery of dreams. Cold, hard statistical evidence barely touches the tip of what our institution has been trying to achieve through the years. Eschewing the path of meteoric and heraldic preening of academic excellence in the world that is hungry for the bright and the buzzing, our college, almost silently carries on its dogged pursuit of education for all, and enlightenment and happiness for all through curricular teaching. In this we have not shifted from the principles of our founder mentors.

Our institutional distinctiveness, therefore, goes beyond the concrete, contemporary context, carrying forward the idea of worldly asceticism, a social dedication that evinces one's actions as being connected to the ideas of equality, justice, and solidarity. Such an identity is no longer perceived as being directly dependent upon a religious sect that had been the guardian of its inception. The more we evolve, the more we shall remain true to our cherished ideal. In a climate where the erosion of values is a general truth, we hope to be its last bastion, if possible.