

Catholic identity and Jesuit educational mission in South Asia

Frazer Mascarenhas S.J.

Abstract

South Asia has three major issues confronting higher education: excellence, expansion and accessibility for marginalised groups. Catholic and Jesuit Higher Education have made a significant contribution in these very three areas. The Catholic policy on Education 2007 calls for a “second freedom struggle” of providing relevant and quality education to the marginalised communities. Jesuit Colleges share in this vision. The separate Jesuit identity comprises of a quest for excellence in all-round formation and in academics, integrity, value clarification, social outreach and human rights education, inter-religious sensitivity and environmental consciousness, spirituality and networking. An excellent opportunity for networking among Jesuit Institutions across the globe presents itself.

Introduction

South Asia is a land of great natural and cultural riches. It has suffered the consequences of many years of colonialism, internal strife and discrimination, corruption and extreme poverty. It covers the countries in the Indian sub-continent, including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Since the Jesuit presence in Higher Education is almost exclusively in India, with the exception of one College in Nepal, this article will refer mainly to India but the situation is not very different in the other countries of the region. The Higher Educational scene in India is characterized by a few institutions of excellence spread over the subcontinent, a large number of institutions with a mediocre or poor quality of education and generally a lack of opportunity for a vast majority. Only about 8% of the relevant age group gains access to higher education and large sections of marginalised groups like women, tribals or indigenous people, dalits or lower caste groups and minority communities are left out of the system. There are only about 350 Universities in India (for over a billion population), following the earlier British model of affiliation, with about 18,000 Colleges affiliated to these. Many of the older Colleges are funded by the Government but all the recent institutions that have come up in the last 20 years are

privately funded, with higher fees and often run as businesses for profit. The three major issues confronting higher education in India, therefore, have been nationally identified as: excellence, expansion and accessibility for marginalised groups.¹

Christian Education

In such a situation, Catholic and Jesuit Higher Education, has played a major role particularly in India, in the 63 years of the country's independence and earlier, in addressing each of these three challenges: Jesuit educational institutions have a reputation for excellence – acknowledged by the wider community by way of academic ratings, popular perception in the media, demand for admissions and a host of eminent alumni/ae; they constitute a large share of the total higher education seats in the country – much out of proportion to the Christian population in the country; and they all function with a preferential option for the marginalised and on the principles of inclusive education. In a country with a majority of Hindus but with a multi-religious tradition and with a miniscule population of Christians, the Christian institutions of education stand out as distinctive. In fact it has become current in the country to refer to good schools as “convent schools” and it is prestigious for parents to send their children to any school run by Catholics. In higher education a similar reputation prevails and Christian Colleges are known for quality, integrity and an all-round formation of the human person.

Jesuit Higher Education

Jesuit Colleges in the country are reputed to be among the very best in the land. The Jesuits run about 25 Colleges of Arts, Science and Commerce, several Colleges of Education, an Engineering College, Centres for the Mass Media, Institutes of Management and other Technical Institutes and Research Centres. Many of these are Government funded, they charge low fees and are able to cater to our Jesuit target groups: Christians and the marginalised communities of the

region. Jesuit Colleges are Minority Institutions, under provisions in the Constitution of India, and the purpose of Minority Institutions is to promote the community they are associated with. Hence they are able to recruit 50% of their students from the Christian community. According to Government policy, another 25 % are reserved for the economically and socially backward groups and these even receive subsidies from the Government. The remaining 25% are from the general community. There are variations in these percentages, dependent on the regions the institutions are situated in.

Catholic Education Policy

So what exactly is distinctive about the identity of Catholic Education in India? The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has recently come out with a document entitled, "The National Catholic Education Policy – May 2007" on the theme, "Catholic Education and the Church's Concern for the Marginalised". It states that, "Our Mission in Education is to provide: An Education, of quality and relevance to all, and in particular, to the marginalized sections of society; an education that frees persons from social conditioning (such as caste, class, gender and other culture-linked prejudices); that leads the young into the sacred space of the human person making them aware of the inalienable human rights of every individual and group. This helps to foster pluralism, cultural and religious diversity, individual and collective freedom and respect for and appreciation of differences." The Education Policy pleads for, "an Education that humanizes and contextualizes, by assisting the students to raise essential questions concerning the meaning of life and of their role in society; that enables the youth to understand the implications of economic policies and structures, political decisions and the media - that play a critical role in shaping people's lives especially those of the poor; and an education that encourages the young to take up the social responsibility of citizens as individuals and as groups

to engage in proactive measures to bring both transparency and accountability; that energizes the young to take up the task of contributing to nation-building; that thus forms the young to evolve as men and women of character, competence, conscience, compassion and commitment, and an Education which nurtures an encounter with God”.² The stress of the document is clearly stated as on evolving an “Education Policy that focuses on providing quality and relevant education to the marginalized, especially the children of our Dalit and Tribal brothers and sisters” – thus addressing the specific and urgent needs of our subcontinent. In fact, it goes further to state in the Epilogue, “This policy has highlighted the hope and the strategies to make the Catholic community participate in the second freedom struggle that is now taking place and make a substantial contribution to fashion a new seamless Indian society, as envisioned by the Constitution of India, across the many present borders.” (Art. 7.2)

Jesuit Reputation in Higher Education:

Jesuit Higher Education is at the forefront of the Church’s mission in the subcontinent. Jesuit institutions often set the benchmark for Higher Education in the region, as well as in the country as a whole. A national magazine, India Today, in its yearly poll of the 10 best colleges of the country over the last 20 years, invariably features about 3 or 4 Jesuit colleges, with one of our Colleges often enjoying the top position. The University Grants Commission, the central governing board for Universities and Colleges in the country, featured most of our 25 institutions of higher education in its list of the top hundred, “Colleges with a Potential for Excellence”. Similarly, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has given the highest rank awarded – Five Stars and A+ rating to most of the Jesuit Colleges in India. But it is perhaps our students and alumni who do us proud by reaching levels of excellence in their fields, including the post of President of India, Attorney General for India, Chief Ministers of some

Indian States, Ministers in Government, top surgeons, lawyers, scientists, social activists, educationists, industrialists and persons of eminence in almost every field of activity.

The Jesuit Educational Mission

The educational mission of the Jesuits in the region could be characterized by certain distinguishing features which merit elaboration:

1. The quest for excellence in humanistic and all-round formation.
2. Academic excellence and research as an intellectual apostolate.
3. The integrity shown in campus culture.
4. Ignatian Pedagogy and Value Clarification.
5. The social analysis and outreach which is at the core of our education.
6. Human Rights education, Gender sensitization and Pro-Life stances.
7. Inter-religious dialogue and common action.
8. Environmental sensitisation.
9. Prayer and spirituality.
10. The transformation of the neighbourhood and networking with civil society.

Excellence

The quest for excellence in all our activities makes the Jesuit College stand out from the rest. With importance given to the intellectual, the cultural, the social and the spiritual, a humanistic and all-round education is attempted. Opportunities abound on campus for the discovery and developing of all the God-given talents of the human person. Parents often remark about the flowering of their children in a few short months/years. The student discovers that there is something that s/he can excel at. The creativity, energy and commitment that flow from

them when this happens, are things that bring joy and accomplishment.

Academic Excellence

Academic excellence is seen in the importance given to class-room work, going beyond the syllabus, student participation in research, seminars and publications, and in the quality of these activities. Many of the high performers in the University evaluation system come from Jesuit colleges. Many of the Jesuit Colleges have been able to invest in Research Laboratories and Research Institutes which play a leading role in the region. The examples from St. Xavier's College Mumbai include the Blatter Herbarium, the Caius inter-disciplinary Laboratory, the Nadkarni-Sacasa Laboratory for Chemistry, the Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, the Xavier Institute of Social Research and Action, the Xavier Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged and the Department of Inter-Religious Studies – and at least two of these are internationally known. Such institutes inculcate in the students a love for the subject beyond the classroom, teach them critical thinking, inspire out-of-the-box solutions and enable a research that is socially relevant.

Integrity

A reputation for integrity is something hard to come by in today's opportunistic world. Jesuit Colleges are known for being above pecuniary enticements, for their transparency in dealings and for their opposition to corruption. Jesuits may be faulted for other things including their autocratic ways or lack of consultation, but hardly ever for lack of integrity and dishonest dealing. In a country where capitation fees (extra amounts as bribes for securing admission into the institute) are common and very easily offered and accepted, the Jesuit College stands out as beyond such enticements. Hence the poor have the courage to approach the College for their needs. A reputation for upholding values is therefore of great witness value – spirituality in

action.

Values

The Ignatian Pedagogy of Value Clarification within the discussions in the various disciplines is a methodology of teaching-learning that is seriously attempted in Jesuit Colleges. It is unfortunate that the subcontinent has the reputation of encouraging rote learning, rather than critical and original thinking and reflection. However our Colleges are able to generate critical reflection through the pedagogy of Context – Reflection – Action, feeding back into Reflection. There are many ways in which this is done, starting with class participation and discussion, and moving on to seminars, field visits, guest lectures, debates and panel discussions, research assignments and other means of provoking reflection. Value clarification within the content of the discipline itself becomes possible and desirable. In addition, several Jesuit Colleges have official Value Education sessions, for topics that may not be covered in the individual disciplines.

Justice

Social Analysis and Outreach are equally distinctive of Jesuit Colleges – done in a structured and elaborate manner. Fr. General Kolvenbach’s exhortation some years ago has been taken seriously, “When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection.”³ From the Shepherd Programme of St. Joseph’s College Trichi, to the Stand Programme of Loyola College Chennai, to the Social Involvement Programme of St. Xavier’s College Mumbai, and a host of other such locally adapted programmes, Jesuit Colleges encourage students to learn through direct involvement with the harsh realities of South Asian society. We realise that these

should not be optional or peripheral, but at the core of every Jesuit University's programme of studies. A lot of commitment is needed for such a programme to be successful, as it goes against the tide of opinion even of a section of the lay faculty and a section of the students themselves. However, several students appreciate the fact of it being made an integral part of our curriculum, because they realise the enrichment they receive and that they may never have opted for it on their own.

The commitment to justice at the core of the identity Jesuit Colleges portray in the subcontinent is also seen in student recruitment policies, where an option for the disadvantaged - economically, socially, physically or even mentally - is very clearly evident. Jesuit Colleges have their own ways of ensuring such recruitment, either through Government quotas or through Jesuit policies favouring such sections of students or through the starting of evening sections meant especially for working students who would not otherwise have the advantage of higher education. The policy does not stop at recruitment but extends to financial subsidies, remedial education, language laboratories, soft-skills development and other measures directed to ensuring a level playing field for the disadvantaged.

The surprise that has resulted is in the fact that quality has not suffered inspite of such recruitment policies. Jesuit Colleges continue to remain at the top of national and regional polls as far as quality is concerned and admissions are ardently sought by the most elite sections of society – politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and even the business class who may otherwise have preferred to send their children abroad for higher education.

Human Rights

A corollary to the justice commitment that has just been elaborated on is the fact that the Jesuit College stands for Human Rights. A prime example is St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad,

where the regional government has unleashed a series of discriminatory measures against religious minorities in the State, including the covert support to the genocidal violence against the Muslim minority a decade ago. At that time, one of the few institutions that opened their doors to these victims to afford safety, was the Jesuit College and related institutions. The Jesuits there continue to oppose the discrimination inflicted by the Government and some of the Jesuit spokespersons are even in physical danger. Jesuit Colleges across the country take stands in favour of human rights for all.

Gender sensitisation of our faculty and students is a specific area that calls for initiative on the Jesuit campus. Women's Development Cells are mandatory in Indian Colleges but they could be formal and dormant associations. By choice and much effort, the initiatives for gender sensitisation are carried on in as effective a way as possible in Jesuit Colleges across the country.

While Human Rights and Gender Issues find support from civil society, the Church's view on pro-life issues is not popular among the populace in the subcontinent. Hence it becomes an even more crucial task for Jesuit Colleges to take a stand on issues like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and the like. This stand has to be justified on intellectual grounds (not merely moral and religious) and hence Higher Education has its task cut out for it. Jesuit Colleges attempt to provoke critical reflection on the Right to Life as an inalienable right, on the basis of which all other rights stand, and an attack on the right to life will have consequences of immense negative significance for humanity.

Inter-religious dialogue

In a subcontinent torn apart by religious violence, discrimination and prejudice, it is important for Jesuit Colleges to build bridges among communities, provoke critical reflection, familiarize students with the beauty of other religions and inspire common action for a better

quality of life for all. The Jesuit College is particularly advantaged in this because of the secular atmosphere created on campus (inspite of Christian Minority Educational Institution Status), with a microcosm of Indian society consisting of all the religious communities gaining presence among the staff and students. Special care of the Catholic students is done in an unobtrusive manner, with the core of activities being directed to all religious communities. In India, for instance, the Jesuit-directed All India Catholic University Federation – AICUF, although inspired by Christian scriptures and theology, is open to students of all communities and involves students in issues of justice in a non-partisan manner. General classroom sessions for inter-religious sensitisation are fruitful, especially if they involve a sharing of personal meaning. After one such session in which a film featuring Arnold Toynbee on the Four Major Religions was shown to students, the group recommended that every student in the College should be made to view and share on the film – so taken up were they with the beauty of other religions. The Jesuit College also serves the function of serious research on inter-religious issues and of attempts towards a serious dialogue. Several Jesuit Colleges have departments or institutes of Inter-Religious Studies.

Environment

Perhaps what Copenhagen has taught us in December 2009, is that there is plenty of talk about the urgency of environmental issues but not enough committed action. The Jesuit College has to demonstrate this. Fr. General Adolfo Nicolas' recent comment on the lack of an awareness of God's presence in the world has an application on the ecological crisis. The present human lack of awe and reverence for the natural world, viewing it purely in instrumental terms, contributes to the over-exploitation and abuse, and the pollution of, the world's God-given natural resources. Unless an awareness of the sacred is brought back to our consciousness, the

world community does not have much of a chance of becoming co-creators of the environment, as God intended. The Jesuit College finds a part of its identity in leading the action for the environment with a reflection on this need for God-experience in our world. In addition, concrete action on campus – for demonstration effect – is worthwhile, as many campuses have already initiated by way of the use of solar energy, vermiculture, power-saving appliances and the general campaign against wasteful use of resources. Initiating and joining in campaigns to protect the environment are also useful in raising the awareness and inspiring practical intervention. As institutions of learning, the research component on the environment, interdisciplinary in nature, is a part of the essence of the Jesuit College identity.

Spirituality

Organised religion does not seem to have much to show by way of positive effect in raising the quality of life in today's world. In fact, organised religion is seen as the bane of humanity, bringing discord, division, hatred and violence of the worst type. And yet the people in the Indian subcontinent are deeply spiritual and have a rich God-experience expressed in the different religious traditions present. Jesuit Higher Education is called to embody a true spirituality, that brings humanity together in community and that bring a true God-experience. This is the challenge: to be contemplatives in action, in a way that the 21st century person can understand and resonate with. This spirituality has to be expressed in inter-religious terms, with all-faith prayer services, celebration of the various religious festivals which the Indian Government declares as public holidays, making available a privileged space for prayer and quiet reflection on campus for people of all faiths to use, and other such creative encouragement to spiritual practice. While the Jesuit and Catholic character is seen in the campus culture, in the Principal as Head of the institution and in specific activities exclusively for Christians, the

spirituality expressed aims to make every religious group feel at home.

Networking with civil society

Recent theology tells us unequivocally that the Kingdom is not limited to the Church. In our globalised world, this is seen more and more as incontrovertible truth.

Networking with civil society in achieving the tasks of the Kingdom has become crucial. In the Indian subcontinent, this networking has become necessary even for our survival, given the violence being directed against minority communities in diverse parts of India and elsewhere, whether in the Indian States of Gujarat or Orissa or Karnataka or Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. We need civil society to back our institutions and communities against violence. The recent violence against Christians in the subcontinent is very real in our consciousness. But more important is the fact that achieving our goals of justice, human rights for all and true spirituality, needs linking up with other individuals and groups of goodwill. Our faculty, in fact, is often overwhelmingly non-Christian and this is one form of networking we can hardly avoid. Our alumni achievers too are largely from other religious communities. In addition, the Christian effort is a drop in the ocean in our subcontinent. We literally need to be the fire that kindles other fires and the timber that gets kindled by the fires other groups light. There are a multitude of groups, of different religious persuasions or of no religious affiliation, which are working for Kingdom values.

Allowing the use of our campuses for the campaigns, dialogue and awareness sessions and other activities of well chosen civil society organisations is one way of supporting and getting support from them. As an institute of higher education and as part of the Jesuit intellectual apostolate, critical reflection with others on the situation in the world is appropriate and challenging. This could be dangerous at times, as the administration and the elite may not

appreciate such crucial support. In addition, inspiring our students and faculty to join movements that bring liberation and increased quality of life to our countrymen and women, especially to the marginalised, is another way of having a multiplier effect. Hence networking is a means to achieve our goals we can scarce ignore.

Jesuit campuses have also reached out to the neighbourhood to attempt transformation of the lives of people. St. Xavier's College Ahmedabad has long invited children and others from the marginalised slum communities in their areas, to take over a part of the campus and its facilities in the evenings, for educational activities of an informal nature. Other Jesuit Colleges do other things to involve the communities in their neighbourhood.

Conclusion

The identity of Jesuit Higher Education is a complex subject which explores the dimensions of faith and justice in engaging culture and religions. Jesuit institutions of higher education in the subcontinent have profited from networking with each other in yearly meetings of Heads of Institutions and Rectors, in developing this identity and in sharing best practices in living up to the common identity. A lot of inspiration has come from between Jesuit colleges in different regions.

The lack of networking among Jesuit Institutions of Higher Education across the globe is a matter of surprise and consternation, given the excellent opportunities that globalisation and the communication revolution offer. Most Jesuit Colleges in India have extensive collaborations with other Universities across the world but hardly with Jesuit Universities. Developing the common Jesuit Identity for Higher Education would be a fruitful area for research and common action. Research collaboration on topics like inter-religious dialogue, inclusive education, global economic and justice issues, and a plethora of related subjects, would be very effective, given

our common mission and ethos, and our global reach. Jesuit institutions would be enriched in authenticating their international Jesuit identity and they could make a very valuable contribution to understanding and transforming our globalised world.

Dr. Frazer Mascarenhas S.J.
Principal, St. Xavier's College,
Mumbai – 400,001. India.

Endnotes

¹ Report to the Nation: 2006-2009. Chapter on Higher Education: 62-77. National Knowledge Commission, Government of India, Dharma Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi -110076

² Paraphrased from, All India Catholic Education Policy, May 25, 2007. CBCI Commission for Education and Culture, CBCI Centre, 1, Ashok Place, New Delhi – 110 011.

³ The service of faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education. Allocution by Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, at Santa Clara University, October 6, 2000.

Addendum:

1. What elements would comprise an authentic international identity of Jesuit Higher Education?
2. What are the areas of research collaboration and collaborative degree programmes that would make fruitful networking opportunities?
3. What areas of global advocacy would Jesuit Institutions of Higher Education be able to fruitfully take up?