

How to Build an Ethical Society

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There is no dispute that society needs ethics. One without ethics is doomed to extinction and how successful a society is depends to an extent on how ethical it is. But trouble begins once we try to determine how a society or its members can become ethical.

All religions ask their followers to be ethical. But neither is ethics prevalent only among believers nor totally absent among non-believers. Some of the finest human beings are skeptics, non-believers or straightforward atheists. What is more, many believers cheerfully indulge in a lot of wrongdoing in the name of their religious beliefs. Religious wars and communal riots come easily to mind. So it is no good saying – be religious, that will make you ethical. It may or may not.

This makes us look at a secular ethical code that cuts across religions and even includes non-believers. The idea is that all members of society can be urged to abide by this ethical code for the society's health and betterment. There are two problems with this. One is defining such a code. It is not just difficult to have agreement on this, even more so to codify it.

Once there is some agreement on what the ethical code should contain, it may be wiser to leave it uncodified. That will eliminate a lot of unnecessary disputes. It is easy for people to

follow an idea or ideal the best way they see it. After all, it is something which you must first feel with the heart and then put into action through the mind. It is only subjective beliefs which we hold dear to ourselves and which give us the greatest peace and courage.

But the biggest challenge, even after we feel we have general agreement on the broad outlines of an ethical code, is how to propagate it. There is, of course, no question of trying to enforce it because ethics is not like the law which allows no exception and discretion. It is when religious diktats and social norms get mixed up that you get entities like the Taliban which use religious sanction to legally enforce an entire way of living.

So how can we propagate an ethical code which people can follow voluntarily, up to the extent they like and the way they see it? In short, how do you teach ethics or ethical behavior?

Here again we can make a distinction. Ethics towards one's own, be it family or clan or nation, is easy to define and propagate. There is little problem in defining or propagating what it takes to be a good parent or patriot. Those who fall down are easily recognized and socially sanctioned.

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This brings us to the heart of the matter, or that part of it which we need to think over – how to promote ethics in public life? To repeat, it is not about remaining within the law or being a good parent or patriot, as over all that there is little dispute. A corrupt minister or officer, or someone like the Satyam proprietor who was cheating all the other stakeholders in the business, have broken the law and the law should take its own course.

It is about being ethical in the remaining space. How to be a good resident in the neighbourhood, how to stand up for someone weak, how to be a good colleague in office, how to be a good public servant beyond the call of duty (that is what a public servant has to be) and how to be fair towards business associates?

Ethics is all about being fair, kind and social. It is about whether I dump garbage on the street, or waste water even though I may have paid for it, or fail to come to the rescue of a road accident victim while passing by. And the key issue I am addressing is – how to teach such ethical behavior?

Let me now set out what I have come to believe in after nearly four decades in public life as a journalist. I don't think ethics can be formally taught. I remember the social studies classes we had in high school. The teacher uttered a string of homilies which we all knew were right but found so very boring. We were told almost nothing that was new and were no better off for having attended the classes.

The same holds true for higher studies. I remember once being told by Amartya Sen, the Nobel prize winning economist, in an interview that while morals was an important part of economics in relation to public policy, you could not train capable economists who would formulate better public policy by, say, including

a paper on ethics in the undergraduate economics syllabus.

So how do you propagate ethics, create ethical citizens? My sense is that we learn a lot from our upbringing, background and examples of what we see others do. My father was a poorly paid subordinate judge who did not even socialize with lawyers (it was not at all illegal) because he felt that it may expose him to ethical conflicts. If he attended a lavish dinner and could not reciprocate, that may amount to being 'entertained'; if he could reciprocate then the question would be, how could he afford to throw a party like that.

My mother would go out of her way to be kind to poor people. I grew up in a boarding school founded by Christian Missionaries where it would be routine for a teacher to pick up a piece of paper, thrown away carelessly by someone, put it in the waste paper basket and move on. I first became conscious about the plight of old people who have no one to take care of them by reading about a person who started an old people's home.

We best pick up ethical ways when we grow up in an ethical tradition. It is like a stream from which you can drink. If there was no stream then the question would not arise. Conversely, not all those who can do drink at the stream.

The final question is how do you plant the seeds of an ethical tradition. After all, someone or a few have to show the way. It is here that social revolutionaries and reformers come in. You may become a national icon and get into history books like Raja Rammohun Roy or Swamy Vivekananda or you may be an unsung neighbour who never fails to help when there is a crisis in your family. All that these pathfinders, famous or unknown, do and say, their entire lives, are a lesson.