

What the world’s finest universities do not teach



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On 30 May, I was at the Cambridge Union in conversation with Professor Jaideep Prabhu. In that hall, where Churchill and Hawking have both been heard, the audience before me was made up largely of economics and management students. But one thing became clear very quickly. However sophisticated the education, there comes a point where no theory helps and no degree comes to the rescue. At that point, the question is no longer about the world. It is about the questioner. A one-hour session stretched into conversations over nearly two days.

And what I saw at Cambridge, I saw throughout the tour. At Oxford, in the British Parliament, at the London School of Economics, and in public dialogues. The lack was the same. People know a great deal, but they do not know themselves. What do the world’s finest universities teach, and what do they still fail to teach?

Let us begin fairly. Western higher education has immense strengths. It has reason, analysis, and intellectual honesty. Science has dignity because it does not rush to conclusion. It says: first I will observe, test, verify.

On 8 June, at Oxford, I was speaking on the second mantra of the Ishavasya Upanishad in a setting connected, a century and a half earlier, with Max Muller’s role in introducing that very text into the Western scholarly world. On 12 June, at the British Parliament, I spoke on “Asato Ma Sad Gamaya.” Universities know how to study the world, but the most important question is left untouched. In the statement “I know,” who is this “I”?

That is where education remains incomplete.

If you inform a person about the world, but never examine the one gathering that information, education remains incomplete. If the eye itself is distorted, then whatever it sees will also be seen wrongly. All outer knowledge then ends up serving inner distortion.

So the real problem is not a lack of information. The real problem is the condition of the knower.

Knowledge is value-neutral; the user of knowledge is not. A tool is neither good, nor bad in itself. But if the one holding the tool is inwardly distorted, the tool becomes a weapon. Technology then serves exploitation. Economics serves greed, politics serves domination.



On 2 July, in a conversation with the Cambridge-trained biologist Dr Rupert Sheldrake on consciousness and the limits of science, the same point became even clearer. Science asks what a thing is, and how it works. But science, by its nature, does not investigate the one asking those questions. As long as science remains within its domain, it is honest and beautiful. The trouble begins when the limits of science are declared to be the limits of reality itself. Then science turns into scientism. And scientism is very useful to the ego. It allows a person to say: only what is outside is real.

That is where the real trouble begins.

At the London School of Economics, in a dialogue with Professor Jonathan Birch on animal consciousness, whose research contributed to UK law recognising even octopuses and crabs as sentient beings, I offered the example of a drunk driver. If a man is driving drunk and we keep improving the roads, softening the barriers, and speeding up the ambulance, will the basic problem be solved? No. There may be some relief, but the root remains untouched. In the very week I was in London, there were severe heatwaves, yet the discussion kept returning to new technology, not to the appetite producing the heat in the first place. But one question is still avoided: who is the one doing all this?

The same point came up again in my conversation with PETA’s senior vice-president on 3 July. The exploited may change. Sometimes it is the animal, sometimes the river, sometimes the forest. The exploiter remains almost the same: conditioned, fearful, acquisitive, violent ego. Unless education touches this ego, education produces civilised barbarism. The outer polish remains.

Now let us turn to India.

India has had the language of self-knowledge. The Upanishads are here, vedanta is here. India’s real contribution was this: before you know the world, see who it is that is knowing. The Ishavasya expresses this in two words: vidya and avidya. If you pursue only avidya, only outer knowledge, you remain in darkness. If you cling only to vidya, in a merely verbal sense, you fall into deeper darkness still. One crosses only by carrying both together. The fault lies not in outer knowledge but in the blindness of the one using it.

And India’s tragedy is this: we have repeated this wisdom far more than we have lived it. We have turned it into identity, ritual, sentiment, convenience, and display. What could cut into a person, shake him, and transform him, we set aside. What could become spectacle, we kept.

So this is not a question of East versus West, nor of one civilisation being superior to another. The West knows the outer world very well, but falls silent on the knower. India had the language of the knower, but now often uses that very language to sustain the machinery of ego. Yet in both places, human beings remain frightened, greedy, lonely, and insecure. The real issue is not civilisation, it is consciousness.

Even the students of Oxford and Cambridge, brilliant in their fields, can sense that something remains missing, some lack that neither degrees nor money can fill. But their education does not tell them that what is missing is the cleansing of the eye and the clearing of intent. Because if the knower himself is fearful, greedy, and inwardly unclean, then even the best knowledge will finally serve ego and violence.

So what do the world’s finest universities still not teach?

They do not teach you to ask whom your education is serving.

They do not teach you how to examine the knower.

They do not teach you that achievement without self-knowledge also becomes destructive. They teach the world well. They do not ask who is receiving that knowledge. And until these questions enter the centre of education, universities will continue to produce brilliant, accomplished graduates, while the human being remains a cause of destruction for other species and for the Earth itself.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life