

Reflections on Life, Education, and Self-management*

B. Shekar[#]

*Quantitative Methods and Information Systems Area
Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, Bangalore*

Abstract

This article is a discussion on matters connected with life. We touch upon issues related to personality development and education. In today's world, many a time we really do not know why we are doing certain things. Hence there is a pressing need to understand elusive notions such as success and happiness, and place them in perspective. We earnestly make an attempt to understand and pragmatically interpret such notions for a common layperson. Finally we touch upon education. We try to look at education from a wider angle in an unconstrained manner. This in turn leads to the surfacing of pitfalls present in our current education system. These problems are unfortunately connected to non-trivial problems present in other spheres of our society. Hence there may not be exclusive readymade solutions for problems present in our education system. Only a holistic approach may take us toward possible solutions. We indicate some general directions that may be worth looking at. However, these are only directions and need to be explored further before being concretized.

The views expressed in this article are based on the author's experiences, and are not necessarily unique. They have been elaborated in a lucid manner for easy assimilation.

Prashant Sree (Host): It's a matter of great pleasure to have Professor B. Shekar of the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) as a guest in this edition of The PERFECT Show. He is an alumnus of Regional Engineering College (REC), Tiruchirappalli (now known as National Institute of Technology (NIT), Tiruchirappalli). Prof. Shekar has kindly consented to share his experiences, and views on life. I am

grateful to him for agreeing to be in the show. Prof. Shekar has a PhD in Computer Science from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, a Master of Computer Technology from Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, and a Bachelor of Engineering from REC, Tiruchirappalli. He has donned various roles prior to joining IIMB as a faculty member. Presently, he is Professor of Quantitative Methods and Information Systems at IIMB.

** This article is an expanded version of the interview given by Professor B. Shekar to 'The PERFECT Show'. The Editorial Board thanks him for his acceptance to publish the interview in Dharana.*

The author thanks Mr. Prashant Sree (Producer of 'The PERFECT Show') for permitting the interview to be a base for this article. The article is presented in Question-Answer format to retain the flavor of the interview.

He has received many honors including the Distinguished Alumnus Award of NIT Tiruchirappalli, most recent being "Best Teacher in Management Award (Southern Region)" conferred by The Deccan Herald. He has given lectures/seminars on Creativity, Thinking Paradigms and Problem Solving at various academic institutions across the country. At IIMB he teaches graduate-level courses on creativity and thinking.

Let us go over to the show.

Prashant Sree - PS
Prof. B.Shekar - BS

PS: Welcome to The PERFECT Show Sir.

BS: Thank You. Upfront let me state that the views I express are my own. The institute that I am affiliated to is not responsible for these views.

PS: Very well Sir. Starting with the first of the 'Perfect Questions', what are you passionate about in life?

BS: I am passionate about life itself – Strange as it may seem but that is the truth. Here I would like to elucidate this cryptic statement. I am passionate about life in all its forms and colors. For example, I am passionate about knowledge as that opens several doors and leads me through different corridors to unexplored and uncharted territories. At the same time I love ignorance – it is the one that gives me humility and sometimes helps me in developing reverence towards others.

PS: That definitely shows ignorance in a new light. I agree with you Sir that awareness of our ignorance leads us to knowledge. Now, what have you learnt in your life (other than academics), which you would like to share with others?

BS: There are many things and in fact most of them may be shared. Here are a few.

There is none who is despicable or hate-worthy or pooh-pooh-able. If at all such feelings get evoked, they are issue-related and that too are temporally bound. When these feelings occur, one should be able to recall immediately the issue-relatedness, and get rid of these feelings quickly.

There is a lot to learn from everyone you come across in life. This is irrespective of social, moral or financial status. In actuality one may learn even from non-human living

beings. However that requires tremendous perception, capability and motivation. I have been taught by auto-rickshaw drivers, canteen/hotel bearers, and corridor sweepers, to name a few. Learning is to be construed as "becoming a better human being as compared to what you were before".

One should be able to accept one's mistakes unreservedly, genuinely, and immediately. This is not because it is a great quality as it is generally claimed to be. It is because of the good feeling it generates; and this is enough a reason for practising it.

PS: I am sure your learning will be an effective learning for our readers, particularly what you said about opening your mind and learning from any source that can teach us. If you are given a wish to change one thing in the world, what would you change?

BS: MYSELF – Because I think that is the only one over which I have "some" control and that too not always. I am talking about living beings only. I am not referring to non-living things, and collective entities such as world, society, and environment. If you ask me about the environment, then I would certainly like the environment to have more love, compassion . . . However, I think you will start feeling them when you look at the world through a universal framework. That is why I said "myself".

PS: Wise words, sir. One can only act on the zone of influence which one has control over. Improvement starts with self. Now let me ask a question about mythology. Who is your favorite mythological hero, and why?

BS: I have many. One of them is Sri Rama. Even to mention His name, I do with utmost reverence and I consider it a great privilege to know about Sri Rama through His story.

Usually one has a tendency to admire traits because one desires those traits; essentially implying lack of those traits. This is precisely why He is my favorite. He lived for Dharma and nothing else. Though this term encompasses many attributes I would like to explicitly cite a few - truthfulness, compassion and duty-boundness. Undoubtedly these have been practiced individually and collectively by several (mythical and non-mythical) personalities. The uniqueness here, is the unimaginably high intensity levels of practice.

Some of the incidents make me stand up in awe and reverence. Here is one who went through a sequence of trials and tribulations to keep up a word given by his father. He considered Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi as his mother. Some of the passages in Ramayan reveal the consideration he shows to Kaikeyi. His attitude and consequent interaction toward Vibishana reveals another exemplary trait. The subtle way of making Hanuman understand humility, is a lesson on “how to teach”, or more precisely “how to make someone learn”.

PS: Lord Rama’s deed and valor is very well known. His attributes and qualities certainly serve as a reference point for someone who wants to live his life in an ideal way. What would you like to evangelize or stand for in your life?

BS: I do not understand this question. Answers to some of the previous questions will give an idea of what I appreciate. “Stand for” is too strong a term and it may become vague also. I do not stand for anything, and even if I stand for something I do not think I have the capacity to state it succinctly. Yes, I would like to lead a life according to Dharma though I am miles away from it right now.

PS: What would you consider as Thumb Rule for success in life?

BS: You have mentioned three words that are open to interpretation. We need to address the following questions: What do you mean by life? How do you define success? How should you view a thumb rule?

A thumb rule (by classical understanding) is a rule that is signified by experience and not backed by theory and proper analysis, and is somewhat akin to a heuristic. Quite often this may lead you to success. However it may also lead to failure as experience is never universal. This being the case, I do not think one should look for thumb rule(s) in life, as life is a very serious affair. Let us not forget that one cannot put back the clock. Hence I would not like to search for thumb rules. I very much doubt their existence in such matters.

Now we come to the other terms mentioned by you.

Life – Any human being leads many lives, personal, professional, and official to name a few. Every relationship may be considered as a life in itself – Relationship with

father, mother, wife, brother, friend,... In each one of these, success assumes a different colour. I am not saying that we wear masks because mask implies “hiding something”. I am just saying that every relationship is a wholesome part of the sum totality of the life that we are leading. I know individuals who have failed as a husband and as a father but who have been successful as a professional. This being the case, how can one have a thumb rule for life (in all its complexities)?

Next is success. It has a variety of definitions, all of them being person-centric, experience-centric and philosophy-centric. One individual’s definition may be utter nonsense to another. Hence I would not like to delve into it. In addition, any statement that I make may be (who knows) a defensive part of me coming out.

After these long winding bends and turns on the road which I have cited, let me at least say what I think may (strictly MAY) give happiness (not SUCCESS) to an individual. **Identify your natural strengths and weaknesses. Seek environments that need your natural strengths and contribute.** Try to overcome your weaknesses. It is not easy. It will be slow and will take a long time. That does not matter. You will definitely do it. Ofcourse this is easier said than done.

One may think that it is easy to identify strengths and not weaknesses. In actuality it is difficult to identify both. This is where people around you should help. Only your well-wishers may do it. The axiomatic well-wishers are your parents. Then onward your sieve should be applied. Let me again state-I am not referring to success. It should be noted that strengths and weaknesses are abstractions, and these need to be translated into real world entities depending on what “life” you are looking at – relationships, career, professional...

You may wonder why I gave a long pre-ambule to state this. It is essential to identify the right context and interpretation for your question.

Let me highlight some difficulties related to this strengths-weaknesses discussion.

(1) Many a time we may not be able to identify our strengths and weaknesses. As stated earlier, parents will definitely have interest in our well-being and hence

can certainly point these out. Genetic disposition does play a large role and hence they seem to be relatively more qualified toward this. However, blinded by excess attachment, parents may always get pushed to extremes. Working parents may not have the time to perform this arduous task as it needs observation over a long stretch of time and correlation of a high order. As genetic descent of more than one level may also help, uncles, aunts . . . may be useful surrogates. However we have come out of the joint family set-up and got into a nucleus fold. Consequently the problem of distance crops up. Proximity is a necessary condition for such guidance.

Thus there is a genuine problem. I do not have any solution for this. Each individual is placed in a unique situation and hence examination has to be done on a case-to-case basis – Again, there is no guarantee.

In addition to this, there is another serious problem. Societal constraints may polarize the attitudes of parents, leading to lack of sensitization toward the child’s “strengths”. This may tilt the balance in favour of success (defined in there and contemporary societal terms). I have been a personal witness to such happenings. When such things occur, I can only feel sorry for the unfortunate situation. The mid-career transition from industry to teaching in my case was amidst one such difficulty.

- (2) Strengths may become weaknesses and the other way round, depending on the environment. There are very few universally valid strengths and universally valid weaknesses. Thus one should be able to pick the right environment. It is a phenomenally hard task.
- (3) There is a natural urge for an individual to ignore the strength that may be glaring to the eyes, and pursue the weaknesses and try hard to overcome them to the point of not utilizing the strength. I know several such individuals. While it is good to attempt overcoming weaknesses, it should not be at the cost of underplaying and undermining strengths. This may be tackled by personal counseling done by well-wishers who are in the immediate vicinity and on whom the individual has confidence.

I for certain believe that every individual is bestowed with natural strengths that need to be groomed, well-

directed and placed in the right environment. If you closely observe some of the “successful” people you will find them anchoring on their strengths. A few examples – Einstein, Newton, Chandrasekhar . . . These personalities have mentioned the key trait (in passing, somewhere in their writings) that helped them and this is not something that most people possess. I would deem them as their natural strengths.

PS: Your answer has shown ‘Thumb Rule’ in a new light. Who are your favorite role models and why?

BS: I do not have role models in the generalized sense. However there are people (real and not mythical) whom I like and admire for the traits they possess. I have had personal contacts with some of them; and a few others I got to know through their contributions. Here are a few examples along with respective categories/traits. Sometimes there may be more than one in a category. Mentioning just one does not belittle the others.

Administrative acumen, professional competence and courage – My father Dr. L. R. Balasubramanian

Intuitive Grasp, Understanding of situations and people – My mother Neela Balasubramanian.

Communicating great and possibly difficult ideas, and consequently inspiring the audience – Professor R.Vittal Rao

Involved multi-emotional singing (Hindi) – Mohd. Rafi (**Tamil**) – P.B.Sreenivas

Light music composer/arranger (Tamil) – Viswanathan and Ramamoorthy (as a duo) (**Hindi**) – Madan Mohan (**non-Indian**) – Mantovani

Visual art (Static) – Raja Ravi Varma

Visual art (Dynamic) – David Lean

Classical music singer – G N Balasubramaniam

Classical music composer – Saint Thyagaraja

Classical literature (Indian) – S L Byrappa (**non-Indian**) – Leo Tolstoy

Sports personality (specific attributes not listed here) – Viswanathan Anand

PS: Could you please mention three Must Read Books for any Manager/Entrepreneur ?

BS: Mahabharat;

Les Miserables - to have an (in depth) appreciation of the different emotional facets of an ordinary human being;

Euclid's 'Elements'(along with mandatory "attempting to solve at least one problem at convenient intervals") should go a long way in sharpening the intuitive, creative and logical facet of the human mind.

These are books for everyone. These are not just "Must Read" but "Must Study". I don't think I can suggest anything exclusively for a manager/entrepreneur.

PS: Thank You Sir. Now let me put a few questions regarding your profession. Being a professor, what motivated you to choose this career? At what point in your life, did you decide to become a teacher.

BS: I am not cutout for the industry. There are many reasons. I don't intend sharing them here. I am relatively better off in academics. I realized it in 1983. A huge amount of time had passed by then. It is better to be late than never to reach.

Here I would like to add something. A professor should be a scholar. He or she has to adopt a scholarly approach to life in general. I know a few of this kind. However I am far from being one (miles to go).

PS: Very humble way of saying that the learning streak in you still remains. Could you please share three most important things (related to professional) you learnt in your career?

BS: I cannot prefix "most important". To me any learning is important. However I would like to mention a few things I learnt. Do not ask me whether I practise them. I am trying to. However I have learnt enough to know that they need to be practised. I do not know when and where I learnt them. I don't compartmentalize learnings as career, professional, social or personal. They are life's teachings; that's all.

A thing that is worth doing is worth doing well. If it is not worth doing well then it is not worth doing at all. The more you practise, the better you feel.

Never harbor negative feelings (jealousy, hatred ...). It is bad for your health – mental and physical. Your mind will

never be at rest. In addition modern science hypothesizes the presence of a psychosomatic component in many of the physical diseases.

Your actions will invariably have a thinking component and a feeling component. Give importance to both. Don't be skewed in your approach. Just as an illustration – suppose a guy is caught copying in an examination. Punishment is a necessity as that is going to teach him and others not to do it. Hence he needs to be punished. However, a capital punishment will destroy and possibly demolish him. Any punishment should be to mend and reform, resulting in his contributing positively toward himself and the society.

PS: That was useful. Talking about learning, how can one ensure that the spark of Knowledge remains shining?

BS: It will continue to shine if the spark is a result of your love for "that" knowledge and not a result of an indirectly and/or externally motivated effort. Thus you need to do what you love. It is not always easy. There may be several sacrifices you may need to make. It is also important that you should know to identify your true love. Otherwise your sacrifices may leave you disillusioned.

PS: A few questions on Management. MBA is considered a way to fast money. How much of it is true...?

BS: Good money-Yes. Fast money-Not necessarily. A word of caution-Anything that comes quickly also goes away quickly.

Some comments are warranted. Students certainly give a lot of value to what they do to earn that money. Most of them are aware of what they like and otherwise. They choose jobs based on that. They do hop from one job to another fairly quickly before they settle down, money being one of the important parameters. However the job needs to be within the bandwidth of their likes.

PS: In what ways should a student pursuing MBA spend his time so that he utilizes most of his time in the 2 year MBA stint.

BS: I am not competent enough to answer this question as "ways to spend time" and "utilizing the most of/his time" are too general and at the same time too person-centric. I don't think I can answer that in a meaningful

way. I do not want to say - "Work hard, Get a good CGPA, Develop your personality, Develop team spirit ..." as these are all tautological statements and may hold in other similar academic environments too.

PS: Some questions on Manager and Leader. There is a subtle difference between a Manager and a Leader. Which is more desirable?

BS: That depends on a person's attitudes, aptitudes and goals.

Some comments:

My contention is that a good manager is more by nurture (by training) as long as there is willingness to work, learn and implement. On the contrary, a good leader is more by nature than by nurture. It has to be in you. Of course if one has the spark, there are ways and means of making a fire out of it. Let me also add that it is better to be a reasonably good manager than to be a bad leader.

Every job has a leadership component and a managerial component. This mix varies as you go up in an organization. There is bound to be a sizable leadership component as you approach the later stages of your tenure. Hopefully everybody has a little bit of "leadership"

PS: MBA school teaches the students to become able managers. How to mould oneself to be a leader?

BS: I do not know whether one can mould toward leadership (see my answer to the previous question). I wish to make a point here. A sham/bad leader can very easily be noticed as compared to an OK manager. Unfortunately there is nothing like an OK leader. People will not tolerate lack of leadership if you hold a position that imposes such demands vis-à-vis lack of managerial effectiveness. Another characteristic - technicalities are more in management and may be learnt and practised,. Leadership has less of these

PS: The education industry in India needs to change so as to effectively empower the students. What kind of change is required and how can it be brought about?

BS: Firstly, I don't think education should be an industry. If "education" makes a major headway as an industry in any country, then I will feel sorry for the citizens and future citizens of that country. Next, I do not know what

you mean by empower. You need to state "empowered to do what".

Now let us look at education from a larger perspective

Education should be personalized and teaching should be on a one-to-one basis – the Socrates approach. It might be expensive from various angles. If that is the case, then so be it. I believe that education should be classified as a basic necessity like food, shelter and clothing. We cannot afford to play around with education. Just as food is nourishment for the body, education is nourishment for the mind. Hence budget, especially for school education, should occupy a high position in the priority list of any government. I do not even know whether it should be a governmental initiative or societal initiative or a judicious combination of both. To me "education industry" comes very close to being an oxymoron.

One thing I am happy about - in good private schools, personalized attention is being attempted in a serious way albeit being an extremely expensive proposition. Here I would like to point out the existence of a "school for the gifted" in Hungary, which has produced great mathematicians...

Let me quote the famous mathematician Paul Erdos: "In Hungary a few years ago a special high school, the Michael Fazekas High School, was opened in Budapest for children who are gifted in mathematics. The school started just when Pósa was due to go to high school. He liked the school very much, so much so, in fact, that he refused to leave it for entrance into university two years early. Soon after attending Fazekas High School, Pósa was telling me of other boys in his class who he thought were better at elementary mathematics than he was. Among these boys was the now prominent Lovász."

Why can't we have a large number of such schools for different subjects and at subsidized rates in our country? I know there are several difficult issues that need to be resolved. However there is no point in ignoring something because it is difficult. Every child gets treated differently in the school mentioned by Erdos. Recall Einstein's dislike toward his school (called gymnasium at that time). It was primarily because of regimentation and approach. He was all through an opponent of regimentation. Incidentally

regimentation is an inherent attribute of any industry-oriented environment. It is a process of bunching things together ignoring the differences however subtle they might be. One should not graduate students like mass produced (though well engineered) products such as pen-drives, pens and pencils.

There is a need to address another important associated issue. Societal lopsided value system has led to making university education a fad. The large proportion of mediocrity present among university graduates is a result of this malady. Every youth goes through the same tunnel, namely primary, middle and high school leading to a pre-university certificate followed by a professional /arts/commerce/science degree. This has resulted in giving every child the same knowledge till the pre-university level irrespective of the student's aptitude, inclination, ... Doesn't it seem strange!

There should be a large number of schools that cater to the basic requirements of life and nothing more. Just to emphasize this point let me relate some thing from my experience. I was helping out a few children who were preparing for the SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) exam. They were grappling with the elements of the mathematical entity 'groups' as an abstraction. I was at a loss to understand how this would be useful to a student who may not go beyond SSLC. I also doubt its applicability for a student who drops out at the pre-university stage. Especially for a country like ours, there is a need to impart society-oriented education. It is not difficult to observe the dearth of skilled personnel. This is because of the mis-directed education system bred by the mis-placed societal values.

Academic evaluation systems have very peculiar problems. First let me state the context. We have adopted (sometimes adapted) several ideas that have originated in the Western part of the world. A little observation will quickly reveal the unsuitability of quite a few of them in the Indian context.

Generally any social system that functions effectively is deeply rooted in the ethos of the land. This ethos is influenced by tradition, cultural trace and demographic profile. Cross-cultural adoptions need to be assimilated with great care and caution. Invariably there will always

be a sub-section of the population which benefits from such adoptions. However a large cross-section may not derive any benefit whatsoever. The student evaluation system in vogue is a typical example. In addition to attributes that make it unsuitable in the Indian context, there are also some inherent lacunae. I do not wish to enter into a lengthy debate. However I would like to touch upon some relevant features.

Let us take one important component of this acquired evaluation system, namely the standard test format that makes answers to questions (present in the test) amenable to machine-evaluation. I quote an interesting observation (words in italics are introduced by the author) made by Professor R Vittal Rao in one of his lectures on 'Foundations of Mathematics', which he gave in 2004-05 at IIMB.

"This leads to implementing standard tests that are evaluated by machines. What does this in turn lead to? These tests tend to have nothing to do with mathematical understanding, but put a premium on brute knowledge, memory and speed. *This may be true in other domains as well.* One great drawback is that all wrong answers are treated as equally wrong and a right answer is always right, no matter whatever be the erroneous reasoning or guess work that was used to arrive at this 'right' answer. The student with the wrong answer has no way to explain the reasoning that led to this wrong answer - (Even a murderer gets a hearing!). Who knows - may be this so called wrong approach that the student used may even open up a completely new approach to the problem - though with modifications."

Its being an inherently self-defeating mechanism is apparent. In addition, we have not cared to adapt the system as a whole to the Indian context. Thus the evaluation system that is currently in practice can never yield optimal results. It is unfortunate that we still adhere to it, sometimes under the garb of inevitability.

Any academic evaluation system should blend with the academic fabric of the society. In general, evaluation is an end-point check for learning that has taken place over a pre-specified period of time. By and large students here in India orient themselves only toward evaluation. This could be due to lack of motivation. This could in

turn be related to societal pressures of sorts. Thus we again return to the lop-sided value system present in our society.

Certainly an evaluation system across board is infeasible. When different course contents have different evaluation strategies such as class-participation, group assignments, and case presentations, differing academic pursuits should have different evaluation systems. In addition to the genre of a course, the candidate (and associated characteristics/traits) is also an important parameter. This doesn't seem to have bothered our educationists as we have a tendency to work in a compartmentalized fashion forgetting that the output of the system is going to enter the society. If an evaluation system is to be effective then it has to benefit the candidates who are going through it. It should not just be a process that is targeted at elimination/acceptance of candidates based on the requirements of an academic organization/environment. I know that this is a humungous task that may involve thinkers from all walks of life. Unfortunately the side-effects of the currently followed process may make detection and diagnosis extremely tricky and elusive. This needs a lot of research, analysis, and discussion.

I have discussed these issues with a few teachers who are attached to academic institutions ranging from high school to graduate school. All of them are unhappy with the existing evaluation system- not just a casual grumble, but much more than that.

In addition to several other possible reasons, these may very well be responsible for the growing unemployment – not just among the youth but also in other age groups.

I only hope that people with sufficient power, societal influence, and political will, notice this alarming state and take remedial action before it is too late.

PS: After hearing you, I would like to retract my statement and rephrase it as “How to Change the evaluation System in India?”. The individualized attention if given to kids will definitely be beneficial. I believe Indus School is also a new step in the education system which emphasizes more on overall learning along with academic learning.

Sir, we have reached the end of the Show. It has been a great pleasure to have you in the show and learn from you. On behalf of the readers and me, I thank you for sharing your thoughts and knowledge with us.

BS: You are welcome. I wish you all the best.