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**SOFT SKILLS PROGRESS THROUGH INDIAN HISTORY
CONVENTION****DR. GHEGADE SHANTILAL INDRABHAN**Assistant Professor, Head & I/C Principal,
Department of English,
Savitribai College of Arts, Pimpalgaon Pisa ,
Tal. Shrigonda Dist- Ahmednagar**ABSTRACT –**

In the present higher education scenario in India, curricular innovations seem to have been given highest priority. The reason is that the curriculum need to keep pace with the fast-changing external reality and cannot afford to fall behind in main aspects. Keeping this in view, the role of soft skills/ Key skills/ life skills (or whatever name one may give to skill training) need to become an undividable part of the present-day curriculum. Though there is much attempt in this direction by including some sessions on soft skills in every Refresher Course or Orientation Program for faculty engaged in higher education, a much more intensive effort in this direction needs to be undertaken in order to meet the requirements. The present paper attempts to through light on how Indian Narrative tradition would prove a useful tool for explaining importance of various soft skills.

Key Words – Soft skills, Curriculum, Narrative Tradition

The most deliberations on soft skills are based on the inputs accessed from the West, particularly the USA and in the Indian milieu, often appear as irrelevant grafts. Soft skills need to be exemplified and inculcated through case studies most of which happen to be culture-specific. So, if the Western models are used as universal models, often the Indian receivers of higher education, particularly given the present social dynamics of our post-graduate classes, find it difficult to involve in/ absorb the teaching point behind the skill. Mere theory is not enough and concrete backgrounds need to be used in order to generate a sense of participation in the learner and facilitate a practical dimension rather than assumption alone.

This is significant particularly for English teaching learning programs because from the time soft skills were introduced into the curriculum at various post-graduate and professional courses here, it was the English department on which the responsibility of teaching these courses rested. Earlier experts in Organizational Behavior did what today the English teachers expected to do, but not solely for training managers, but for all other professionals too, not only for professional capability but also for personal accomplishment.

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In other words, soft skills are today seen as corresponding to the hard skills that give knowledge of a particular subject/ discipline to the learner. Without soft skills, these hard skills seem to be dysfunctional. And the crises that threaten survival at the worldwide level today seem to be attributed to deficit in soft skills at the micro and macro levels. A remedy would be to incorporate soft skills into every kind of curriculum – if not explicitly then implicitly – so that all those who pass out of the higher education institutions are able to make their public and personal lives more focused and goal oriented.

This can be done in an important manner in the Indian context by delving into the traditional narratives which form a part of the Indian tradition of thought and philosophy. For the learners, these references serve as familiar – sometimes part of the foundational narratives – mostly oral – on which they have been brought up. This may often be consciously recognized and at other times subconsciously known but not actually accessible for conscious recall. Skills training transform the known/un-recallable into a content of awareness which can help in practical execution of the skill. For example, decision making can be elucidated by narrating Arjuna's state of mind on the battlefield and various arguments presented by Krishna in the Gita in order to make the former rethink/ modify his decision. Communication competence as well as etiquette can be exemplified by Nachiketa's meeting with Yama. Ekalavya's successful course in archery explains inspiration and initiative while team building can be illustrated by the manner in which the Pandavas / Kauravas acquired support for the battle. These and many others such stories make the skills come alive on the psychological screen of the learner leaving a permanent mark for future reference and recall.

Keeping this in mind, let us understand how certain skills can be imbibed by using some instances from the popular traditions preserved in the Jataka Tales. Based on the ballads, legends and folklore of ancient India, these tales numbering more than 500, form the basis of Buddhist and Pali doctrine. Dating back to about 5th – 3rd century BC, these narratives preserve the message of justice and wisdom tempered with compassion. Since the thrust area is right thinking and right living, the necessary parameters of soft skills – that is, attitude and behavior – are both addressed making them most applicable for skills training. Also, the process reiterates the spirit of Indian systems of thought which have weathered several storms arising from changing experiential dimensions of human endeavor to come out as unshakable by adapting to and assimilating ideas from far and wide.

Therefore, in the 21st century to re-think / re-read the Jataka Tales from the viewpoint of soft skills will yield rich results. The skills to be dealt with are restricted to (1) self-awareness (2) time management (3) leadership (4) mentoring to suit the limited frame of the research paper. But this can be the beginning of wide research and application of many other skills to Indian ideas and ideals.

Self awareness is a skill dependent on person's ability to put into place a balanced self-image. This can be done by measuring self-esteem and self-worth through what is popularly known as SWOT (Strength, weakness, opportunity, threat) Analysis. Most of the problems encountered by people zeros down to their incapacity to analyze these. Many people have an exaggerated opinion of their strengths and ignore their weaknesses entirely while others minimize their strengths and continuously harp on their weaknesses.

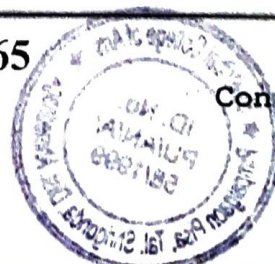
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It is noticeable that one needs to focus on strengths but to do this efficiently one should be aware of what the real strengths are and not an fantasy of one's strengths. In this, the role of weaknesses is also of supreme significance because it is by reducing, controlling or orienting the weaknesses into positive channels that strengths are enhanced.

To exemplify this we can quote the story of "The Sadhu and the Ram." It narrates an incident of a Ram-fight in Varanasi where, amidst an agitated crowd, a passing sadhu stops. When he pushes the crowd and comes to the center of the fight he sees the Ram standing with its head lowered. He presumes that the Ram is bowing down to him as he is a holy man. He tells the others that only the Ram knows how to worship a sage while the human beings are insensible. One man from the crowd warns him that the Ram is not bowing to him; instead, it is preparing to attack him. The sadhu refuses to move out of the animal's path, asserting that the poor ram wanted his blessing and so he will not leave without giving, it his blessing. But the next minute the ram charges into him and he is thrown out. He realizes that he has to blame himself for the pain and disgrace he is suffering now. He had to pay a prize for his lack of awareness.

The sadhu's self-image as holy man needed modification because in the eyes of the ram the difference between the sacred and the secular is non-existent. The sadhu does not comprehend that sometimes listening to the advice of common people also is helpful to a secure and peaceful existence. These are his flaws which come in the way of his balanced self-awareness. But the end of the story is important because the sadhu realizes his fault and instead of blaming the animal or the people around, directly takes the blame on himself. This is the commencement of a new self-awareness in him. From this the skills training program can obtain examples of situational analysis where the participants record how they would respond in parallel situations, what assumptions they make in a given circumstance and what response a specific event elicits form in order to modify, enhance or direct their self awareness.

Let us now consider the next skill – **time management**. Very essential in all contexts, time management helps a person to achieve whatever he / she wants by sensible use of the valuable commodity, time. All people have only 24 hours in their day but some achieve more than other only because their capacity to deal with time is both competent and effective. These two factors are significant in time management theory. Competence refers to the time taken to do a job well while effectiveness refers to the result produced when measured alongside the time taken to complete the given task. In the teaching-learning context these two are very vital because an assignment written brilliantly but submitted late is as good as not doing the assignment as all; also if done in a hurry but badly written, it is equally useless.

The story of "The Perfectionist" is applicable in this context. It speaks of a craftsman who makes cradles for small babies. He is proud of his outstanding skill of carpentry. Once, a rich man who is blessed with a son comes to him to buy a cradle. The carpenter assures him the most wonderful cradle in a week's time. When the customer comes after a week, the carpenter asks for another week's time. This goes on for a long time and finally the child is too old to need a cradle. The man gives up visiting the carpenter every week. Time passes speedily and the son is now married. When he has a son, the father tells him to go the same carpenter to see whether the cradle which had been ordered for him when he was born is

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ready yet. Astonishingly, the carpenter says he is still working on it. He shows the man an incomplete cradle and emphasizes that he took pride in the quality of his work; so he would not allow any customer to rush him and make the completed product less than perfect!

It is clear that perfection also needs to be time-bound. What use is the cradle when the child and then his child are no longer able to use it? There should be a sensible, quantifiable and achievable goal in all tasks which are dependent on time. It is exactly what Marvel's poem "To His Coy Mistress" highlights. If life did not have a boundry our time consciousness could have been jettisoned. But since it has a beginning and an end, time is a precious commodity which cannot be replaced, replicated or recovered.

The next skill to be explained is **leadership**. To begin with, we need to appreciate that unless a leader can lead him self/her self, he/she cannot lead others. Once we become leaders of ourselves, we can securely take the lead in any context which needs it. A series of skills-set are needed to be a leader but we shall not go into those details now. Suffice it is to say that most people shy away from leaders, behave like 'sheep' as Aldous Huxley had once said, and therefore good leaders are always a commodity in dearth.

The narrative called "The Day the Earth Broke into Two" makes this point. Once, a rabbit was soothing under a tree when bilva fruit falls down with a huge sound. At that time he was contemplating what would happen if the earth broke into two and the sound produced convinces him that what he was thinking had come true. Jumping up, he at once begins to run for his life. On the way he meets many other animals who ask him what the matter was. He tells them that the earth was breaking and they - rabbits, deer's, pigs, tigers, panthers, elephants - too start running. When the lion hears this, he refuses to believe them blindly. Asking them one by one beginning with the elephant he soon finds out that no one had actually confirmed the truth. They have just believed each other blindly. Soon he takes the rabbit to the spot where the whole drama began and illustrates how the falling of the bilva fruit on dry leaves had caused the whole upheaval.

That is what leadership is all about - the ability to surmount a context. The lion is the only one who had this ability and is therefore not overpowered by the context. All the skills he uses to go to the core cause of the problem and find the rationale behind are qualities which need to be cultivated in order to become an efficient leader.

The last of the skills to be taken up is **mentoring** - a top -priority area in the current higher education context. The reason is obvious - classroom interaction does not offer much possibility to a one-to-one exchange between the teacher and the learner, particularly in large classes. Mentoring bridges the gap. The traditional mentoring process is based on the Greek story of Ulysses leaving his son Telemachus to the care of an intelligent and compassionate counselor, Mentor when he is away from Ithaca. But today mentoring can take any form of advice, help, motivation, support, inspiration, etc., It need not necessarily be an older person in a position of power or authority giving advice to others. Peer group mentoring is also equally effective and sometimes unconventional mentoring schemes are seen to produce amazing results.

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Take the example of “The Magic Chant”. Here a pundit and his pupil fall into a conflicting situation and it is the pupil who advises the pundit. Unfortunately the pundit does not heed to the pupil’s words and suffers for this. The setting is a forest through which the two are passing when they are trapped by robbers who tie the pundit to a tree and demand money. The pupil promises to get the money and be back in two days. He tells the pundit not to lose heart or disclose his secret chant to this evil gang. But the pundit gets edgy of the agony of being a captive and attempts to get himself free. He tells the robbers that he knows a magic chant which will bring them a shower of the most valuable gems. Sceptically they allow him to utter the words and are then enchanted by the treasure they collect. But their joy is short-lived because a rival gang comes to snatch it away from them. In the ensuing battle all are killed and the pupil returns with the ransom money only to find that his guru has given his life as a price for not heeding his advice.

Soft skills are thus important for correcting conduct and attitudes. They are not only lessons in values but they are skills which can be learnt by practice and rust due to lack of practice. They may not teach anything new but they serve to purify the doors of insight so that all the knowledge which lies in the vicinity of consciousness surfaces to the level of active awareness and are fore-grounded in all life situations which need correction. The imbalances that are at the origin of the problems of today can be neutralized by skills training and to use these and other everlastingly relevant Indian narratives is just one way of doing so.

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