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Ethical Education and SEE Learning in India

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The world today is dealing with numerous human-made crises, visible in the proliferation of crimes such as murder, rape, theft, genocide, cyberbullying, and an ever-expanding range of mental health concerns including stress, anxiety, and depression.

If we meticulously peel back the layers of these problems and observe carefully, it becomes palpably clear that their root cause is not merely the pursuit of power, greed, or material need. At a deeper level, these crises reflect a constant decline in human values.

The erosion of empathy, compassion, and gratitude has led us to a troubling point in our collective social discourse - a world that was once imagined to be more humane by virtue of human presence now appears increasingly indifferent to human suffering.

From Kabir Das to Guru Nanak, from Mahatma Gandhi to the Dalai Lama, generations of thinkers have consistently urged humanity to value human connection over material accumulation. Yet, rapid technological advancement, the increasing pace of life, and the relentless pursuit of power in a pragmatic world have subtly normalised selfishness. Today, it is often considered acceptable to prioritise personal success over another's pain.

This moral decline manifests itself in everyday life. We record accidents on our phones before extending a helping hand. Acts such as defacing public infrastructure do not trouble our conscience, while the simple act of disposing waste responsibly appears burdensome. While governments and education systems are frequently blamed for such failures, a pressing question remains unanswered: who is responsible for the gradual erosion of civic sense and ethical sensitivity within society?

Particularly alarming is the incessant rise in suicide rates among India's youth. The education system we have inherited, largely shaped by the Macaulay–Wood framework, has successfully trained individuals to secure high-paying, technologically advanced jobs. However, it has failed to teach students how to manage the pressure, anxiety, and emotional strain that

accompany such success, or how to live a morally grounded, grateful, and emotionally balanced life.

In this context, the need of the hour is not merely education, but ethical education. This brings us to the central theme of this article: Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL).

Meaning: Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL)

Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL) is an educational framework carefully curated for students between the ages of 3 and 19, with the objective of fostering holistic development alongside academic learning. It seeks to address not only cognitive growth but also emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility.

The SEEL programme was developed by the Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics (CCSCBE) at Emory University, at the behest of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Rooted in secular ethics, the framework draws upon universal human values rather than religious doctrine, making it applicable across diverse cultural and social contexts.

Explaining the motivation behind initiating this work, His Holiness the Dalai Lama stated:

“My motivation in undertaking this work reflects my firm belief that when each of us learns to appreciate the critical importance of ethics and makes inner values like compassion and patience an integral part of our basic outlook on life, the effects will be far-reaching. I look forward to a day when children, as a result of integrating the principles of non-violence and peaceful conflict resolution at school, will be more aware of their feelings and emotions and feel a greater sense of responsibility both toward themselves and toward the wider world.”¹

(Piramal Foundation, Press Note on SEEL)

In a fast-paced world where emotions and inner well-being have increasingly taken a backseat to performance and productivity, the SEEL curriculum — imparted alongside regular academic instruction — helps students become more self-aware, recognise their emotions, and develop emotional intelligence. It enables them to better cope with stress, anxiety, and social pressure, challenges that have become deeply embedded in contemporary student life.

The Dalai Lama, a consistent advocate of humanistic and secular values, has long emphasised the importance of integrating ethical reflection into mainstream education. By combining regular academic study with ethical and emotional learning, SEEL equips students not only to perform better in their studies, but also to cultivate healthier relationships and a more responsible engagement with society.

Pedagogy of SEEL

¹ Piramal Foundation, Press Note on Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEE Learning) (on file with author).

The pedagogy of SEEL is deliberately experiential rather than rote-based. It focuses on practice, reflection, and participation instead of memorisation.

Teachers are trained to integrate ethical and emotional learning into everyday classroom experiences. While some institutions allocate specific time periods for SEEL activities, others incorporate them into regular classes through role plays, reflective writing exercises, group projects, and dialogue-based learning.

Self-awareness practices include mindfulness and reflective writing, allowing students to observe their thoughts and emotions. Emotional stress is addressed through deep-breathing exercises and grounding techniques. Inclusivity is fostered by introducing students to diverse cultures and encouraging interaction with people from varied social backgrounds.

Social responsibility is cultivated by teaching students not only their rights, but also their duties towards fellow citizens and the nation. Activities such as community service (shramdaan), environmental responsibility, and peaceful conflict resolution through dialogue help translate ethical learning into lived practice.

Outcomes and Legal–Social Importance of SEEL

SEEL has gained increasing importance in India, particularly in light of rising concerns around youth mental health, social conflict, and declining civic responsibility. Several organisations and educational institutions are collaborating with government bodies to implement SEEL-based programmes across schools.

From a legal perspective, SEEL aligns closely with the principles of constitutional morality, which emphasise dignity, equality, fraternity, and responsibility. While law functions as a corrective mechanism after harm has occurred, ethical education serves a preventive role, reducing the likelihood of conflict, violence, and rights violations by nurturing empathy and moral reasoning from an early age.

By equipping young individuals with emotional regulation, ethical judgement, and social awareness, SEEL contributes to the creation of responsible citizens who are better prepared to exercise their rights conscientiously and fulfil their duties towards society. In the long run, such an approach reduces the burden on legal and institutional systems by addressing the roots of social discord rather than merely its consequences.

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