Extending UHV & Holistic, Value-based Education to Prisons

The purpose of education is not merely to impart knowledge and skills or prepare individuals for employment, but to prepare every human being for life: to develop right understanding, live in harmonious relationships, make responsible choices, and contribute to the well-being of all.

Every human being has an inherent need and right to understand oneself, one's purpose, and one's relationship with family, society, and nature. This understanding can develop through formal and informal education, self-exploration, and direct observation. A humane society must recognise this fundamental right and ensure opportunities for such understanding, irrespective of individual circumstances.

However, much of our present education focuses on knowledge and skills without adequately addressing right understanding, human relationships, and the larger purpose of life. Consequently, individuals may use their abilities for personal gain, accumulation, competition, or exploitation rather than mutual well-being. Growing inequalities, conflicts, and disharmony raise fundamental questions about the direction of education and societal development.

While every individual is responsible for their actions, those with greater understanding, abilities, resources, and influence have a greater responsibility to work towards a society that ensures the well-being of all. It is therefore insufficient to view crime and imprisonment solely in terms of individual wrongdoing without examining the educational and societal conditions that may contribute to such outcomes.

From this perspective, extending Universal Human Values (UHV)-based education to prisons is an important responsibility of educational institutions and society. Incarceration does not diminish a person's need or potential to understand, learn, change, and live meaningfully. Beyond punishment and behavioural regulation, correctional efforts must also provide opportunities for inmates to develop right understanding, recognise their responsibilities towards others, and prepare for harmonious and constructive participation in society.

Experiences from UHV workshops conducted in prisons across Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Punjab, and Kerala bring this need into focus. A recurring reflection among inmates is that encountering these proposals earlier in life might have helped them avoid the offences that led to their imprisonment. Many have passed through formal education, including some with graduate and postgraduate degrees. This raises a fundamental question: Has education adequately prepared us to understand ourselves, make responsible choices, and live in harmony with others?

Through UHV workshops, inmates explore questions concerning happiness, relationships, physical needs, personal conduct, and the purpose of life. Rather than prescribing behavioural rules, the workshops facilitate self-exploration of one's assumptions, feelings, intentions, and actions, and the possibility of living with trust, respect, responsibility, and harmony.

Feedback from inmates and observations shared by prison authorities indicate encouraging changes, including movement from despair, hopelessness, feelings of revenge, and inner conflict towards self-reflection, clarity of purpose, renewed hope, improved relationships, and greater willingness to take responsibility. These experiences suggest that holistic, value-based education can complement existing correctional and rehabilitation efforts, supporting personal transformation and constructive reintegration into society.

This session will present experiences of extending UHV into prisons, including the approaches adopted, changes and reflections reported by inmates, observations of prison authorities, implementation challenges, and possibilities for wider application. It will also explore collaboration among educational institutions, voluntary organisations, prison administrations, and individual volunteers to expand such opportunities.

The larger vision is to make education a means of societal transformation: preparing every human being to be life-ready and contribute to the well-being of all. Extending UHV-based education to prisons expresses this responsibility. By fostering right understanding and harmonious relationships, such efforts can contribute to addressing the roots of conflict and violence, interrupting recurring cycles of harm, and building a humane society in which no one is left behind.

This is an essential step towards global peace and harmony, with the well-being of all ensured generation after generation.