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Guru mindset hinders challenge

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That scientific, logical and creative challenge is essential for “Make in India” to take wing is what many of you, my valued readers, have written to agree with me on (<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/from-the-discomfort-zone-challenge-to-exit-mediocrity/99/#comments>). What’s hindering us to confidently take on challenges is subservience to the “guru” in every field who always takes on a superior, higher order space. It’s unthinkable in our society to challenge the guru’s training. Disciples have to respect and obey the ideas or orders of the guru who generally never likes to be challenged.

I remember our art college professors in Kolkata were extremely strict. Students had to learn painting or drawing technicalities exactly in the teacher’s artistic style. There were 2 kinds of professors, those who only taught, others who had created a big reputation in the art market. The latter became gurus whose hardcore disciples considered themselves a cut above us because their guru professor is a famous artist. From their paintings in later life, you can easily identify which guru professor such painters were disciples of. This guru-disciple trend was suffocating me. Hailing from an inferior refugee colony, I was a low profile student who didn’t have the swagger of my slick city-

bred colleagues to become a guru professor’s disciple. More stifling and disheartening was seeing my senior colleagues take up clerical jobs, giving up hope of an artistic future. Suddenly after my 3rd year, I had to break this path. I eloped to France. I don’t know if I subconsciously challenged myself or took a risk.

After a tough entrance test, I enrolled in Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-arts in Paris, the prestigious 1648 art academy that trained painters like Degas, Delacroix, Monet, Renoir among others. From my livelihood savings I also studied graphic design in Academie Julian founded in 1868. Initially I felt extremely dispirited, no professor would come to my drawing board to take my pencil or brush to teach me. Was I again sans a guru? Then I noticed that whoever wanted the professor’s help would either take the drawing to the professor or call the professor to see the work. That’s when I understood these professors were masters, not gurus. To coach students, they gave references of other painters, photographers, cinematographers, or controversial figures in domains outside art. They never displayed their own artistic competence, nor obliged students to follow them.

My typography professor in Academie Julian was Paul Gabor of Hungarian origin. From him I learnt and have mastered the typography foundation of 4 schools, Gothic, Roman, Antique and Elzevir. He trained us with such passion that typography felt like an art form. Much later when I entered the branding profession, what I discovered about him took my breath away. My professor is the world-renowned creator

of a different typography font named Gabor after him. Training from such masters made me shed my guru culture baggage. Masters don't impose their personal style, instead listen to individualistic ideas of students, discuss different angles to help them develop. One of my Ecole des Beaux-arts professors often commented on my drawings saying there's gesture in them, that I should never lose this gesture style in my art. Consciously or unconsciously, the way forward in my artistic domain was a challenging mindset. I've later created a movement called Gesturism art.

To illustrate the prescriptive process of the oral transfer of craftsmanship from a guru, let's look at the traditional guru-shishya parampara in Indian music. There is an element of worship of the specific knowledge that a disciple gains from a learned guru who personally teaches Indian music. This worship often gets exemplified into unfettered guru devotion irrespective of other non-becoming characteristics the guru may have. Today, young people across the country mostly want to play the guitar, piano, drums or keyboard. Rarely do they express interest in the sitar, sarangi, tabla or shehnai unless parents or grandparents urge them. Urban areas have more stores that sell Western rather than Indian musical instruments. Perhaps that's because you cannot excel in oral musical traditions without gurus and there are not enough interested disciples. After all such music was an elitist art form and gurus never always impart all their secrets. This prevents disciples to easily blossom into new gurus. So when most gurus pass on, so do their art and the techniques they excelled in.

On the other hand, Western musical system documents everything, allowing students to learn from bygone masters. It even encourages them to challenge masters to become better than masters in future. Take the works of 18th century Baroque composer George Frideric Handel. His 42 operas, 29 oratorios, 16 organ concerti and over 120 musical compositions are performed

exactly the same way even today. Another prolific 18th century Classical era composer was Wolfgang Mozart in whose honour an annual music festival is held in his birthplace Salzburg, Austria. That he was a great master is evident as he inspired many composers to become masters too. The most famous among them are Ludwig van Beethoven, Fernando Sor, Mikhail Glinka, Frederic Chopin, Max Roger and Tchaikovsky who wrote memorable musical tributes to Mozart that are played and available to everyone today. There are many interpretations and reinterpretations of how people have played any master's original compositions, but every later version is documented so nobody becomes dependent on a guru.

I'm making this guru vs. master point to demonstrate the importance of a mindset of challenge when our country invites global capitalistic competitive manufacturers to come "Make in India." The guru-shishya system may have success in certain domains, but it prevents you from becoming a challenger. Here you require the master to make the learner better than the master. In business, people with the guru mentality look up to their bosses, giving them guru status. This practically kills all initiative, making them mentally and physically dependent at work. Unless we break this guru kowtowing attitude, great ideas like "Make in India" will remain a dream waiting for the guru's wand to materialize it.

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