

Higher Education and Group Thinking

SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY

Department of English
University of Hyderabad
Hyderabad

The problems that plague higher education in India today have been discussed thread bare. Yet, little attention has been paid to the structure and contents of the university apparatus that paradoxically promotes group thinking, inimical to the goals of true learning. Some of this thinking even goes contrary to the nationally agreed goals: the need for the all important climate of freedom, especially for the young, as well as the pursuit of collective welfare in consonance with the interests of our civil society.

Let me introduce a caveat here: by group thinking I do not mean thinking against a group, or that, thinking that emerges from a group situation is necessarily evil or regressive. What I simply mean is that group thinking that denies space for the right to differ from the group and from the larger collectivity does not serve the interest of the group, of higher education, or of the larger democratic order. Such group thinking may also go against the interest of progressive causes and ideologies when it is accompanied, for instance, by competitive extremism.

The effect of the colonial educational system rooted to a Macaulay or a James Mill in blocking independent thinking is well known. Today, the new danger comes from within the university system in promoting a climate of intolerance and closure to thinking in matters of society, polity and culture. It is important for us to therefore, quickly recognize the new upsurge in group thinking in order to restore to the university its rightful role as the conscience keeper of the community.

On the face of it, the charge that the leading centers of higher learning, country wide, with their complex genealogy, evolution, values, agenda, professorate and patronage system could generate only a limited set of views, cultural, political and ideological, seem to go against the grain of common sense, felt experience and

received wisdom. Indeed, it is generally thought that, like the Indian reality, our university system is a hot house that germinates myriad of plants. On the other hand, one could argue that part of the reason this system has failed over the year to capture popular imagination is because of what I would describe as the 'clone syndrome'.

This is not to deny our notable achievements in the fields of literature, philosophy, diasporic imagination, sociology, anthropology, history, economics, culture and subaltern studies and other disciplines. Some of the best of our university scholars would easily rival their counterparts elsewhere. However, the precise role the system has played in producing and disseminating such a body of knowledge is yet to be determined. Further, despite this excellence, we have not yet succeeded in establishing linkages between this cultural capital and our communitarian welfare ideals. To the average person in the street therefore, the university system is often equated with a land of lotus-eaters, the professorate viewed with a sense of benign and amused tolerance.

The two areas in which group thinking is currently manifest in the university system is with regard to identity politics, related to the issue of diversity, empowerment and multiculturalism. In varied ways, these are also connected with the issues of class, caste and gender. The second domain of group thinking is the discourse over faith and secular modernity.

It is true that some of the best minds of our university system have spoken and written profitably on these issues including diversity claims, gender justice, minority, dalit and women's issues. Less forthcoming has been fresh thinking related to the domain of faith. Paradoxically enough, these very achievements seem to have been undermined by the upsurge of illiberal and intolerant mindsets, expressed in exclusionary politics in the academia.

To the outsider, this politics of exclusion within the academy may not be obvious. It embraces both the traditional Left and the Right and is manifest in subtle forms through a system of rewards and punishments, through research grants, fellowships, appointments and other academic allurements. One consequence of this thinking is that while academic culture requires nuanced responses to complex issues, group thinking of the doctrinaire kind, often manifests aggressively through simplistic binaries such as 'if you are not with me you are against me' or other unsubstantial adages such as 'biology is destiny'. In movements like feminism,

for instance, deviation by a critic, especially male, could be dubbed as crypto patriarchy. We may recall, in this instance, the controversy over Ashis Nandy's explanation of the Sati phenomenon. No effective defense becomes possible when the intellectual adversary invokes such considerations.

Group thinking, sometimes called political correctness, may have many explanations in the Indian context. Our system of hierarchy and reverence for elder figures, the general culture of conformism and inability to carry out professional dialogue without bringing in the question of personal loyalty—these certainly contribute to a closure in our thinking.

Original ideas, on the other hand, demand courage of conviction and a willingness to face the unknown, unmotivated by the thoughts of immediate, mercenary gains. This is what was traditionally called liberal education—the ability and willingness to look critically and objectively, to look at issues and points of view and carry out creative thinking that defies current wisdom. Even while recognizing the limits of liberalism (and objectivity in any case no longer finds universal acceptance) we can certainly go beyond closed thinking. It is the absence of these traits, intellectual and moral, that has converted many universities today into a battleground and a ghetto like situation. Thus, even while we flaunt words like, 'democracy', 'pluralism', 'dialogue', and 'debate', we seem to promote a discourse of intolerance.

As we struggle to reinvent the university system in India, we must introspect and contribute to the creation of a new academic culture. Such a culture is based on what the multiculturalist Patrick J. Hill calls 'the conversation of respect'. In the final analysis, higher education in India will not float or sink with the quantum of funding available, but rather, with the quality of our thinking, our ability to go beyond petty, personal and partisan interests and our capacity to deliver the intellectual insights that society urgently needs.