

Academics As Missing Intellectuals: Some Reflections

A.R. VASAVI

Nothing—is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so to remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship.

Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*. 1994

Edward Said could have easily been describing the Indian academic. From Delhi's multiple academic circles to those in the mofussil areas, most academics in India seem to be beset by 'moral stuttering', upward social aspirations, political opportunism, and a collective amnesia in which the very objectives of being academics and possible intellectuals seem to be lost. Amidst what is seen as epochal transformations of the society and nation, academics have neither voice nor presence to either guide or comment on much of what is happening in the nation. Worse yet are the very characteristics which combine to defy what must be the defining nature of an intellectual and an academic; an honesty, an openness, an engagement with a larger world, and a sense of commitment to a common good. And, despite the growing volume of academics we seem to have increasingly fewer intellectuals.

This deficit personality of the Indian academic emanates from several sources and is not limited only to academics from particular social backgrounds. Instead, academics from across the spectrum of social backgrounds—from established intellectual families, the landed gentry, from professional and government service backgrounds to those from disadvantaged caste communities—seem to have been socialized into set orientations. These orientations are largely that of a focus on a narrow career safety (and not even career ambitions), a limited world view that continues to be defined by their religious, caste and community backgrounds and a closure within narrow social circles. Emanating from these limiting structures, the Indian academic is largely an uncritical and embedded member of her or his own

community and one rarely comes across anyone who is free of these inherited socialities and orientations. Such an attitude and orientation not only makes for a closed mind that prevents any intellectual growth but also makes for an overall limited personality who fails to think and be open to all new ideas. Recently, a young environmentalist narrated his disappointing experiences in putting together a waste segregation and management practice in the campus housing that he lived in. While many of the faculty were reluctant to endorse and join in the waste segregation and recycling scheme, one senior faculty took him to task, demanding why he or his wife should dirty their hands and did he think his wife should stoop to do such work?

These orientations and limitations are also compounded by the very narrow and undemocratic culture of the educational institutions from which students and academics graduate or in which they work. The largely hierarchical, patriarchal and even caste-defined cultures within most educational institutions fail to provide an environment in which individual intellectual growth and a commitment towards a larger collective can be fostered. Instead, the overall culture has reproduced in each generation a culture of deference, sycophancy, and subservience. The result of such institutionalized socialization is the marked inability of most academics to be able to stand for themselves, to speak their minds or make independent judgment. Yet such a culture of subservience does not make for fully docile academics or sustain institutions in conditions of harmony through oppression. Instead, in many institutions, academics engage in dissent and resistance

A.R. Vasavi is Professor of Social Anthropology at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore

through vicarious and indirect means much of which further despoil the institution and its functioning. Acting in groups and cliques, rather than as independent thinkers or scholars, many academics reproduce vicious politics within the ambit of academia itself.

The close relationship between the State and academia also accounts for some of the ills. State support for higher education should in many ways be seen as a way to ensure broad-based and public support for opportunities. Yet, the politics of higher education has turned such State-based systems to become a route to not only politicize education but to also silence and co-opt academics into the agendas of political parties or the State. Seeking favours, especially for promotions to higher positions, or jockeying for largesse has made many academics and even creative writers become lackeys of the State. This, in turn, has made them take two divergent and in many ways anti-intellectual approaches. One set has chosen to silence their voices of dissent even in the context of gross violations of rules or processes of democracy by the State. Some others have opted to become in-house state specialists acting not only as spokespersons for politicians but also as trouble shooters, providing hacked and false data or reinterpreting data to suit political expediencies. I recently reviewed a report, written under the chairmanship of an eminent, nationally renowned, agronomist, that enabled the government of Karnataka to assert that the calculations made by the government's own dept of economics and statistics were based on wrong methodologies and once corrections were made to the analysis, the agricultural economy of the state was actually doing well! Such academic support then meant not only a denial of reality but an active assertion of an untruth that harmed a large number of persons. State awards and grants also keep a large number of academics within the ambit of political and personalized largesse and favours, and those in the close circles retain access to privileges that only make them lackeys of the government. While engagement with the State, especially for purposes of policy or in acting as a pressure group or bearing weight to ensure judicious decisions, is necessary, many academics see such engagement itself as the sole purpose of their training and careers.

Compounding this alliance with the State are trends where many social scientists are now working as agents or partners for international collaborations. Many, if not all, of these collaborations see academics retained as local data collectors with little or no contribution to the theoretical bases of these studies or to the further use and dissemination of the research. While some progressive international projects have deliberately and consciously sought to address these limitations and the credit for

being more democratic and conscientious about sharing materials with a larger public is due to them, the role of many Indian academics in seeking to engage in only these international projects needs to be reviewed. Working for agencies and organizations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other aid or transnational 'development' organizations is seen as a sign of their own competence and the remunerative daily wages, assessed in dollar amounts and much larger than their average pay, are sufficient to keep them yoked to these agencies. What is more disturbing is the extent to which such international collaboration does not seem to have significantly improved their academic orientation or enhanced their academic abilities and research outputs.

The failure of Indian academics to be fully engaged intellectuals is visible in many cases and instances. For one, despite the range of important and sensitive public debates in India, most academics have sought to shy away from taking stances. Or discussions on issues are always framed within received ideas and opinions and there is an absence of even being informed on recent research or ideas. Over the years, I have witnessed so called 'well-established academics' hold forth on issues in voices that indicate not learning but personalized un-evolved opinions. Some cases that I can recollect now are the following:

- a. At a discussion on caste and human development, a scientist calls for more studies on the genetics of caste-based intelligence.
- b. During a meet to review the status of Sanskrit teaching and learning, a young man suggests that we take the path of Israel which has been successful in introducing Hebrew as a state and popular language.
- c. A national level discussion meet on population trends, has some people suggesting compulsory family planning especially for North India.
- d. Discussions on trends in educational policy are suffused with suggestions for privatizing education and for merit to be assessed through standardized testing only.
- e. A well-known national scientist calls for turning India's agriculturists into 'farmer technicians' who can then use high technology and thereby resolve all the problems of India's agriculture.

In all of these instances, there is a continuous tread of non-thinking; views formed from close and personal circles are presented as ideas, and most new ideas, especially those that are based on norms of openness, equity and justice, are ridiculed as being impractical. In this strange reproduction of common sense there is the

reinforcement of the privileges enjoyed by the few, and a underlying tone that seeks either status quo or a return to an idealized past. All of these stances and positions indicate a lack of understanding of the complexities of Indian societies, the role of democracy and the impact of new economies.

The past decade has also been witness to the growth and outing of academics and their leanings towards religious fundamentalism. Complexities, problems, dissent and disarray are sought to be addressed through returns to an idealized past and to reconstructions of the past that are either romanticized or distorted. Far from being critics of the fundamentalist interpretations of religious texts, there is a wave of religious orientation in which science, scholarship, religion and politics are all combined. I have over the years witnessed and observed the range of 'religion and—' and 'religion in—' conferences which are not merely in subjects of conventional social sciences but in fields as diverse as cognitive sciences, mathematics, and environmental sciences. Yet, each of these engagements are not reviews of links or the impact of religion/s in these diverse fields but are primarily speculations as to how religion/s can contribute to their growth. Associated with this, are attempts to locate academic and theoretical concepts and ideas in and from the body of classic religious texts and like the fundamentalist overture, much of this is also conducted through a prism of misinterpretation. A strange and unusual academic re-enchantment with religion as defining all reality and therefore of its legitimacy as the foundation of all disciplines is emerging. Unchecked, such academic orientations will soon see the reversal of many of the gains of progressive and sensitive scholarship.

As with the turn to religious texts, there is a trend of increasingly reinterpreting the caste system that presents caste identification as not based on birth but on the very character of individuals. Associated with this are a range of interpretations of the potential of a new caste-based categorization and a rendering of solutions in which all the problems are linked to what is perceived as the disturbance of the caste system and its well-ordered functioning of a 'good and viable civilization' are being made.

The consolidation and assertion of such views is also met with a silencing of all voices of criticisms. In fact, there is little tolerance or understanding of criticisms itself; of the State, of trends in society and even of leaders. Critics are often seen as spoilsports or as pessimists who fail to appreciate inevitable trends in society or the nation.

The very altering nature of the disciplines also partly accounts for the disarray and even disorientation among

academics. The sweep of new schools of thought within the social sciences is a case in point. Even as the rigid boundaries of older, established schools are being challenged, the orientation of many of these new schools has further alienated many. The excessive borrowing from internationally fashionable and dominant theories has meant that nationally relevant theories and perspectives have not emerged and the potential of these to provide alternative views has largely been lost. Linked to this, is the trend of seeing academic achievement as being measured in international visibility or being part of the global circuit of conferences and meetings. Writing is then associated with writing for an international audience and in keeping with trends in international circuits.

The pressure of being global is also compounded by the recent rise of corporate groups that have sought to co-opt or solicit the help of some academics. Some well-known figures, popular on lecture circuits, are now close allies of such corporate figures who in turn are seeking new presence as national thinkers and leaders. Lending support to their enterprises, funded through their own personal funds or as part of the philanthropic foundations of their corporate groups, are academics who provide either the gist or second the orientation and plans of some of these corporate groups. Such new collaborations have yielded programmes in which there is an overt celebration of privatization of all sectors, a furthering of the roles and contributions of corporate personalities, and the endorsement of schemes which vicariously support the growth of these corporate groups. Forgotten and even erased are any independent identities and perspectives that any academic as an intellectual must have.

The growth of the global economy and the overall political disarray in the country has meant that social and alternative movements related to most issues have been stymied in the country. The role of academics in many of these has also been limited and the exception is that of academics associated with the movement for Right to Food, which has also promoted the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme. The absence of the contribution of academics to such endeavours, or to public causes such as this, stems not from being hard pressed for time but from a general disengagement from public issues and from alternative perspectives and movements.

Even as the numbers of academic positions has increased and the salaries and facilities, ensured by the fifth and more recently the sixth pay commission, have ensured more than comfortable life styles for academics, the abilities of academics to be guideposts and model citizens seems to have decreased. The poverty of thinking

and the handicap of being in-house political party intellectuals mean that very few of the national academic figures are able to engage with pressing issues or provide insights to resolving issues. Contestations over the Singur and Nandigram issues, over Kashmir and Sri Lanka, about rights of the religious and sexual minorities, about the role of the government and the private sector etc are all issues which seem to invoke responses that are primarily political positions and not ideas for a complex nation and its even more complex societies.

In the growing distance and disability of academics to being intellectuals is the erosion of the very quality of ideas and knowledge. Compared to the immediate post independence period in which academics rose as intellectuals to meet the challenges of building a new nation, the current period of integration with a global economy, and a further redefining of the ideas and contours of the nation, is witness to a vacuum in the portals of academia itself.