



Readers' Forum



Herdism in Universities

The problems that plague higher education in India today are often the subject of heated debate. However, we seldom pay adequate attention to the structural and normative flaws within our universities that promote harmful forms of “herdism”, inimical to the goals of true learning, as well as contrary to the need within our universities to ensure a climate of intellectual freedom, especially for the young. By “herdism” I mean a view that the group is always right and others always wrong. Group thinking denies space for dissent and debate. It does not serve the interests of higher education, or of the larger democratic order. Such herd mentality is also too often accompanied by other flaws, for instance, by competitive extremism.

It is well known that our colonial educational system, rooted in the prescriptions of Macaulay and James Mill, blocked independent thinking. Today, a major new danger has emerged from within the post-Independence university system. Too many universities are promoting a climate of intolerance and clamp down on debate on vital issues for our society, polity and culture. It is important for us to correct this flaw so that our universities may be restored their rightful role as major upholders of the intellectual conscience of our society.

Our academics have made notable achievements in the fields of literature, philosophy, diasporic imagination, sociology, anthropology, history, economics, culture, subaltern studies and other disciplines. Some of the best of our university scholars would easily rival their counterparts elsewhere in the world.

However, the role that our university institutions have played in facilitating or discouraging the creativity of our academics and disseminating their work is ambiguous. Often these accomplishments were achieved despite the way our universities

operate, rather than being facilitated by them. 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 on the street therefore, the varsity system is often equated with a land of lotus-eaters, the professorate viewed with a sense of benign and amused tolerance.

Herd thinking in the university system is primarily related to two domains: the first is diversity, empowerment and multiculturalism that is in varied ways stifled by the constraints connected with the issues of class, caste and gender. The second domain of herd 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 with insight on these issues, including on diversity claims, gender justice, and minority, Dalit and women’s issues.

Paradoxically enough, these very achievements seem to have been undermined by the upsurge of illiberal and intolerant mindsets, expressed in exclusionary politics in academia. To the outsider, this politics of exclusion within the academy may not be obvious. It embraces both the traditional Left and Right and is manifest in subtle forms through a system of rewards and punishments, through biased research grants, fellowships,



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appointments and other academic allurements. One consequence of this thinking is that while academic culture requires nuanced responses to complex issues, herd thinking of the doctrinaire kind often manifests itself aggressively through simplistic binaries such as “if you are not with me, you are against me.”

In movements like feminism, for instance, deviation by a critic, especially if it is by a male, is often dubbed ‘crypto patriarchy’. We may recall, as an example, the controversy over Ashis Nandy’s explanation of the Sati phenomenon. No effective debate is possible when an intellectual adversary lowers the terms of the debate by invoking such considerations. There are many other manifestations of herdism based on passion and prejudice rather than verifiable evidence.

Herd thinking, sometimes called political correctness, may have many origins in the Indian context. Our system of hierarchy and reverence for elders, the general culture of conformism and an inability to carry out professional dialogue without bringing in the question of personal loyalty — these characteristics, now embedded in our academic environment, certainly contribute to unwarranted and premature closure in our thinking. Original ideas, on the other hand, demand courage, conviction and a willingness to face the unknown, unmotivated by thoughts of immediate, mercenary gains. This is what was traditionally called liberal education — the ability and willingness to look critically and objectively at the entire spectrum of issues and points of view and carry out creative thinking that defies current wisdom.

Even while recognising the limits of liberalism (each and every claim of objectivity in any case no longer

finds universal acceptance) we can certainly go beyond closed thinking. It is the absence of such vital traits necessary for the promotion of independent thinking, intellectual and moral, that has converted many universities today into a battleground and bred a ghetto like situation. Thus, even while we flaunt words like “democracy”, “pluralism”, “dialogue”, and “debate”, we seem to actually promote a discourse of intolerance.

As we struggle to reinvent the university system in India, academics must introspect and contribute to the creation of a new academic culture. Such a culture should be 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 and our ability, go beyond petty, personal and partisan interests and deliver the intellectual insights that our society urgently needs.

Sachidananda Mohanty, Hyderabad

Women and Newspapers

Every newspaper wants more women readers. The reason is simple. Advertisers are convinced that married women make most consumer decisions in households. They decide what foods to buy, and often have the last word regarding the purchase of kitchen gadgets, crockery and cutlery. Women choose the clothing for themselves and their children and even have a major say in the clothes their husbands purchase. And single working women—their numbers on the rise—purchase everything from automobiles to TV sets for themselves. Goods and services purchased by women are still most effectively advertised through

newspapers and magazines. After all, you can’t tear an ad out of a TV screen. Women find it rather convenient to have a cutout ad handy while out shopping.

How can the newspapers attract more women readers? Newspaper editors and their staff hold frequent discussions on the subject, but often end up with no clear answers. The old-style women’s sections, with their tight focus on food and fashion, haven’t been a roaring success. Attempts to renovate the women’s section into specially designed women’s pages that reflect current realities such as women working outside the home and women balancing the demands of home and work, have fared somewhat better in certain newspapers. But then these women’s sections have to compete against women’s magazines who with their much larger availability of space and alluring visuals are better equipped to cover women’s concerns.

Indeed, an urgent task for all newspaper editors is to make the whole paper more meaningful to more women. Women care deeply about certain issues like education. They want to know more about schools—the qualifications of teachers, the facilities on offer, and school transport. They want to know whether the schools are safe from hoodlums or tottering from shoddy construction and maintenance. They want to know what percentage of the city’s budget is devoted to education. They want hard, verified information, not the usual press releases issued by education officials, schools or politicians.

After education, women are concerned about health and the environment. A rapid decline in the tiger population may be alarming, but women are more interested in practical matters like whether the tap water is



safe. They want to know whether their children are more likely to develop asthma in certain areas of the city than in others. They want assurances that someone is doing a careful and honest job of inspecting the meat and fish they are buying in the market. They are also concerned about the safety and usefulness of everyday medicines and allied preparations. They want solid information about health; not only about diseases, but also about prevention. That includes health and exercise. It's the obligation of a responsible paper to examine these issues thoroughly and responsibly before publishing on these topics. For example, women wish to differentiate between diets that are just fads and those that are endorsed by reputable nutritionists. Similarly, a newspaper should resist publishing a health warning without professional verification.

And it's naïve to think that women don't care about the rest of the paper. They care about things like the amount and manner of collection of taxes, and the inefficiency of corrupt government bureaucracies. They want solid information about the state of the economy, and how it will affect their lives. If criminals are roaming the streets of their neighbourhood or selling drugs, they want newspapers to highlight the issue, so that an

indifferent police force is compelled to act and ensure that the streets are safe. They are concerned because they walk those streets. Their children play in those streets.

Even the sports section is no longer a closed shop for men. Millions of younger women now play in organised sports; they understand the language of sports, the rules and nuances.

Involving a greater number of professional women journalists at all levels of the editorial process would be a right step towards making a newspaper more meaningful for a larger number of women readers.

Women must be among the top editors at every newspaper, and not

just have a token presence at the lowest staff journalist levels. At the reporting level, the contribution of women journalists is already considerable. But at editorial policy levels, newspapers are still not hiring sufficient numbers of talented women. Women must share the power to decide what stories are to be covered and how. Female staff members should be encouraged to write critical memos to editors. And their opinions should be respected in the best possible way; by being put into effect.

And given the fairly large available pool of talented women journalists, it would be easy to find women to fill such positions.

Mohinder Singh, New Delhi

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