

ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING & ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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"A University stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of ideas and for the search of truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If the Universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well with the Nation and the People." Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on the purpose of JNU, Delhi.

The word 'academy' originated from the Greek word 'akademia' representing the Athenian hero, Akademos. The Great philosopher Plato was the first to use the word for his Academyⁱ and advocated skepticism, i.e. developing a questioning attitude towards generally believed facts or knowledge. The same was followed by centuries to represent the institutions of higher learning.

In ancient times, the learning process was basically to survive and how to hunt animals for food. There is no doubt that all human beings are carnivorousⁱⁱ in nature. After the beginning of civilizationsⁱⁱⁱ, people started settled down in a location and agriculture has got a prominent role in human life. The learning process shifted to methods of cultivation and survival. Here, man learned from their ancestors and the entire nature was the class rooms. After centuries of endless struggle with nature, man learnt the techniques of substantial food production. Improvement in science has led to long survival rates and ease of living. The history of mankind changed with the industrial revolution^{iv} in United Kingdom. Industries began to expand, machines started working day and night and a range of consumer products enrolled and markets began to develop. The production process has changed from self-subsistence production^v to market oriented production^{vi}, and it has changed the life style of man. The industrialization has created a need for a wider market for labours, raw materials, consumers etc. Specified skilled education was the need of the hour. Children has to be trained to specialize in purchasing departments of raw materials, operate the machines, marketing of products, accounting of sales etc. Adam Smith asserted that specialization of labour will increase the average productivity. Keeping in mind the need of the market, modern education has become limited to class room learning's with specializations. Students are being carved for the use of market. They were trained in specialized faculties and discipline was imparted on them. This is because discipline was a basic condition for a factory worker to engage in an efficient manner. Actually they are being trained to be a factory worker from childhood onwards.

Actual learning process has come to an end with man distancing himself from nature and bound to class room learning. Here the ultimate urge of a student's learning capacity and his visions is being obstructed by the walls of class room, shrinked to university prescribed syllabus and the limited lectures taken by teachers and float within the prescribed text books. Most appalling is that he is being categorized according to the marks scored in the end examination. An end product of this less preferred system is a student with half-baked knowledge of a specialized subject along with zero knowledge of what he actually intended to learn. This has limited the purpose of education itself. Textbooks and tutor become the limit of student to urge knowledge. Moreover, our education system is more of a fragmented in nature, i.e, each degree colleges specializes in one discipline and do not have exposure to other disciplines. This makes students unaware of the knowledge process in other disciplines. Within this, for most of them the purpose of education was to succeed in examination and nothing more. An imaginary competition has been created within the students to score marks though it hardly represents one's capacity to endure knowledge. So each one becomes adulterated to gain tutorials to answer the most frequently asked

questions in university examinations. This tendency has corrupted the whole purpose and process of education itself.

The purpose of education

To further scrutinize the purpose of education, we have to quest ourselves on what we really want to achieve from education?. This is because education cannot be obscured to the definition that ‘it is the production and transmission of knowledge’, but also we have to consider ‘knowledge for what purpose?’. If the only purpose is to earn materialistic gains, then technical education will fulfill the same and there was no need for arts subjects. But purpose of education is wider than just material gains, i.e., to create a welfare gain to the existing society through a ‘social change’. Recognizing this purpose, the Yashpal Committee appointed by Government of India has recommended more space of social science subjects even in the institutes that carve skilled professionals such as IITs. Now IITs has a better space for humanity subjects than ever before.

The purpose of education is to create a better citizen, more humane, civilized citizen with creative thoughts that takes human being the next big leap of development than just a factory engaged worker. How differently an educated man thinks as compared to uneducated man. A student is entering to academic learning as a raw product with deep rooted beliefs, biased thinking etc. accrued from the place of locality he survived. It is the duty of the academicians to reform him and carve him to view the society in a better perception. His visions towards society, his perception on various sects from society, cognition on various issues society faces, analyzing thoroughly without bias of sex, caste, religion etc. and coming to valuable judgments and suggestions for improvement. His visions must be to think beyond the limitations deep rooted in the society he lives. Education makes a man a reformer. It was this reformation and enlightenment^{vii} in Europe that led them to achieve the present development status. Immanuel Kant described the age of enlightenment as “mankind’s final coming of age, the emancipation of human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance”.

The purpose of education itself is to liberate a man. An educated man is a liberator of the obstructions faced by his society. To achieve this, Indian academics has to think from the side of a student seeking asylum under it. Indian academics has to first modify itself to accomplish tolerance towards various ideas, never ending thrust for knowledge, criticizing it’s own policies. Convert itself into a hub of different ideas and build a culture of tolerance towards others. There is no place for water to pour into a filled pot and also for a pot kept upside down; as the same case is applicable to academics also.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an intellectually disciplined process of conceptualizing, analyzing and evaluating information gathered to reach a meaningful logical conclusion backed by facts. It is an important element serving the development of academic subject as well as human development. This is the most lacking feature of Indian education system. Indian education is westernized in nature but it fails to adopt critical thinking, which is the core essence of western education itself. This is because of our deep rooted colonial bounding that lies within us. We are more practiced to bound down than to assert our rights and identities. Indian libraries are afraid to keep the books that question our beliefs. We try to preserve our

unquestionable heroes. We are accepting Gandhi as a father of a nation, but we are not ready to study his views on Hinduism or lower castes. Same as the case of St. Augustine, we are not ready to critically analyze his views on women. Everywhere we can see these preservations and prejudices. We place certain things as an ultimate end to itself. But for education, there is no ultimate knowledge, but there is only beginning. Knowledge is created by criticizing the existing knowledge. Everything is questionable. Here you cannot be biased or at the same time you cannot exclude anyone's views such as of your teachers, parents, elders, leaders, etc.

Science has done good will to society and developed so far by constantly questioning the existing scientific knowledge. Likewise, each society has developed through questioning the existing patterns. It's through education that one earns the capacity to question the existing pattern of knowledge, whether it is deep routed cultural, traditional etc. and this questioning will lead to a way to an additional knowledge and thereby betterment of society. For eg., The questioning of the general belief that earth is flat led to the development of astronomy. It was Ferdinand Magellan who first proved that earth is round. This lead to other inventions related to the solar system. Another example is Dr. Ambedkar who questioned the deep routed caste system in the Indian society and this made to meant laws that all men should equally treated as per Indian law. So developing critical thinking among students must come to the top most priorities of Indian academics. The way of patronizing the students will ultimately end up with a good for nothing obliged future society lacking creative inspirations.

To point out the importance of critical thinking, we can take the example of a skilled low level worker in a car factory whose work is to tighten the screws of automobile parts. He can do the work effectively by daily experience and by train himself. But if one wants to make a more fuel efficient car, he has to question the existing fuel pattern in that automobile. The first category worker does nothing to improve the present betterment of human society but the second worker improves the welfare of society. Here we call this questioning process as critical thinking and the purpose of education rests with it.

Academic Freedom

Critical thinking and academic freedom goes complimentary to each other. Academic freedom is a necessary condition to develop critical thinking among students. Critical thinking is lacking from the academic sphere in India because of lack of tolerance. Indian academics still follow the colonial feudal hierarchical pattern. This can be witnessed in each and every institution including family. Children are not ready to question their father's wrong decisions, students are afraid to question teacher's subjective explanations...etc. This is because as per Indian tradition, parents, teachers etc. are treated as equal to God and thus unquestionable authorities. Here questioning is an insult to these hierarchies. So creating an environment to question is a must for developing critical thinking in academics. This comes through developing academic freedom in institutions. Academic freedom and personal freedom comes hand-in-hand. Each engaging participants should recognize each other's academic and personal space. A high level of tolerance towards each other, respecting each other's personal rights are must to promote academic freedom. Here the teacher is not the ultimate authority of knowledge, but just a guide to lead students to gather ultimate knowledge through lively discussions. So ultimately, a patron-suppliant relation^{viii} in academics is diluted and converted to a friendly knowledge creation atmosphere. But the necessary condition for expanding academic freedom is availability of responsible students.

There are some inputs needed to question this generally accepted knowledge. The duty of teachers is to show the students the way to acquire these inputs. The students have to develop the skills of good observation capacities, analytical skills, interpretation, unbiased judgment, better cognitive capacity. This helps them to see things in a logical manner with clarity. The inputs may be received through wide reading, engaging in academic discussions at a wider platform etc. As to a plant to grow, it needs sunlight, oxygen, carbohydrates and through the process of photosynthesis it makes primary produce and grows themselves as well as feed other living beings and helps to sustain life on earth. Likewise, academics can nurture only with certain inherited purposes it intended to do. Here, the role of academic institutions and teachers is nothing but primary producers itself.

In recent times, shrinking of academic space is the basic concern of higher education in India. This is largely due to intolerance towards other's ideas, rigid and narrow mindedness, and lack of logical thinking. Examples are recent withdrawal of text books from Delhi University, pulping of books of renowned authors etc.

But some of the exemptions of academic freedom in India are such as the famous Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi. Here, it is the students that run the whole academic environment. No teacher is involved in arranging daily discussion platforms with well-known invitees. Here, a day and night unlimited academic discourse platforms works in 365 days a year. It is the students the in-charge of conducting the elections through student election commissioners. Gender equality is maintained through a body called GSCASH in which students as well as teachers are members of it. In the curriculum development, student body has an important role. So here students are not treated in a patron-suppliant relationship, but they are part of each and every bit of the institution and they are free to be aggressive on their rights and this is the success of JNU itself. Overall a tolerant atmosphere is needed for academic discourses. It is a place where you can watch the banned documentaries, banned books and face-to-face interaction with the authors. It is a liberated campus with girls and boys dine the same mess and discussions and interactions keep on moving beyond mid-nights. It's a lively campus with gender equality without violence. Your moral neatness is least bothered here but everyone is eager to see your academic participations. There are many handwritten laws in university manual but the only law followed is to enrich the university atmosphere for more academic freedom. The students of JNU can tell undoubtedly that they are being made by this institution and real education meant the same. Though institutions like JNU are rare in India, it is a model that each and every higher learning institution has to frame themselves.

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NOTES

ⁱ Plato's Academy- Plato has given the name 'academy' to his school of thought because he started his academic sect at the sacred garden named after the Greek hero Akademos.

ⁱⁱ Carnivorous – Living beings that depend solely on animal flesh for survival.

ⁱⁱⁱ Civilization – Here it meant for the initial social process in which man started forming societies and thereby state by enter into an advanced stage from a savaged life style.

^{iv} Industrial revolution – It represents a period of major industrialization that took place in the late 1700. It witnessed mechanization of agriculture, development of machine tools, evolving manufacturing industries such as textiles and transportation facilities such as steam ships, rail etc.

^v Self-subsistence production- A farmer/producer focus on producing food/articles to feed themselves and their families.

^{vi} Market-oriented production- A producer producing goods and services according to the demand for the market with an intention to sell them at a profitable price.

^{vii} Enlightenment in Europe- It was a cultural reformist movement that took place in Europe in late 17th century which challenged the ideas prevailing in tradition and faith and acknowledged the advanced scientific knowledge.

^{viii} Patron-supplacant relation- It is typically used to represent a superior-dependent relation.

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