Democracy and Diversity in Higher Education in India

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Abstract

EDUCATION is a subject directly or indirectly linked to each and every family of the country irrespective of social, cultural, and economic diversity. The establishment of a democratic and secular political system and reconstruction and modernization of society based on the principles of egalitarianism and recognition and respect for India's cultural diversity were central to the vision of independent India. The commissions set up after the independent India speaks for the same. The Constitution of India clearly propagates and preserves the pluralism and diversity that may be linguistic, cultural based on caste, creed culture, religion etc. This research paper deals with the democracy and diversity in Indian Higher Education system.

Key Word: Democracy, Diversity, Constitution, Higher Education

India has for centuries been a truly pluralistic, heterogeneous, multiethnic, and somnolent society. However, in recent years, Indian society has been shaken up. A sharply increased awareness of group identities has led to conflicts. Longstanding hierarchies of caste, region, religion, and language are being challenged. The "lower castes" are rejecting the 'superiority of the upper castes, the southerners are defying the hegemony of northerners, non-Hindi speaking people are demanding linguistic freedom, and non-Hindus are questioning Hindu supremacy. Such developments call for an examination of the cultural dynamic that is evolving in Indian society. On one hand India is being celebrated as one of the largest democracies but on the other we find threatening the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood that inspired the national struggle. Although this dynamic affects all spheres of activity, this paper will focus to the dynamic of democracy, diversity and its impact on Indian higher education system.

In general term, pluralism means the affirmation and acceptance in the interests and beliefs of the citizenry. Pluralism in a society is the presence of more than one cultural identity among its population. It can be multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual and other multi-cultural categories. Several of these pluralistic traits- and in some cases almost all of them –can be present in a single society, as is the case of India. India is not only one of the largest and most plural society, but its pluralism is probably the most complex and comprehensive as well. India, it has rightly been said, is a 'continental federal polity constituted into a single territorial sovereignty'. Diversity in India based on religion and caste; language and dialects; cultural patterns and life styles; regional pulls etc., are as big in their physical distribution and dimensions as also in their distinctiveness as are normally the hallmarks of separate nations.

Let us have a cursory glance at the size of India's diversity. According to an estimate made by The People of India project of Anthropological Survey of India, there are nearly 4,599 separate communities in India with as many as 325 languages, and dialects in 12 distinct language families and some 24 scripts. India's constitution recognizes 18 official languages, and there are 35 that are spoken by more than a million people each –what bewildering linguistic diversity. Talking of religious diversity, India is a secular pluralist state that is home to every religion known to mankind. India has the distinction of being the land from where important religions namely – Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism have originated at the same time the country is home to several indigenous faiths and tribal religions which have survived the influence of major religions for centuries and are holding the ground firmly. Regional co-existence of diverse religious groups in the country makes it really unique. India has the third largest Muslim population (after Indonesia and Pakistan and also the second largest Shia Muslim population (after Iran in the world). In the census 2001, out of 1028 million population, 138 million (13.4%) have registered themselves as Muslims, 24 million (2.30%) as Christian, 19 million (1.9%) as Sikhs, 8 million (0.8%) as Buddhists (0.4%) are Jains. In addition, over 6 million have reported professing other religions and faiths including tribal religions, different from six main religions. Hinduism is professed by the majority population in India. The Hindus are most numerous in 27 States and Union Territories except in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Lakshadweep and Jammu & Kashmir. The Muslims professing Islam are majority in Lakshadweep and Jammu & Kashmir. The percentage of Muslims is sizeable in Assam (30.9%), West Bengal (25.02%), Kerala (24.7%), Uttar Pradesh (18.5%), Bihar (16.5%) Christians have emerged as the major religion in the North-Eastern States, namely Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya etc. Punjab is the stronghold of Sikhism. The Sikh population of Punjab accounts for more than 75% if the total Sikh population in the country. The largest concentrates of Buddhism are in Maharashtra. Thus, what wide and complex is the religious diversity in India. Similarly, there resides vast diversity in terms of castes having numerous sub-castes in them. There is hierarchy of castes and within castes there are numerous sub-castes-each having its own identity.

It does not require extra efforts to say that 'democracy' and 'diversity' are inseparably connected to each other. Democracy in general term refers to the ideal that all human beings have equal value, deserve equal respect, and should be given equal opportunity to fully participate in the life and direction of the society. Diversity refers to the variety created in any society by the presence of different points of view and way of making meaning which generally flow from the influence of different cultural   and religious heritages, from the differences how we socialize women and men, and from the differences that emerge from class, age and developed ability. Each to this concept, in dynamic relationship with the other enriches and enables the meaning and value of the other. Either considered without the other is diminished both in its meaning and its value. Diversity, at its best, is recognized and respected in human societies characterized by political freedom, and is not usually respected where freedom is absent. Democracy in turn depends for its

effectiveness on the fullest possible engagement of all the human talents and perspectives within a society.

But diversity can also signify unequal access to political, economic, social and cultural power. When diversity is characterized by patterned in equality and persistent marginalization of specific groups, it is a symptom of democracy's failure, a sign of society's unwillingness to confront injustices. Democracy that does not welcome diversity can degenerate into a totalitarian uniformity and an inability to adapt to changing conditions. The decline of coerced and unvarying socialist democracies around the world has amply demonstrated what can happen when the idea of democracy has no moral compass. In the contemporary world democratic values and respecting diversity provide a standard- amoral compass by which a society can be held accountable for delivering equal justice, equal participation and equal opportunities.

Keeping in view the existence of vast diversity and their deep commitment to democracy that our Founding Father gave India's a constitutional scheme that not only acknowledges the existence of this vast diversity but also creates space for fostering strengthening and promoting diversity. They were absolutely clear in their approach that affirmed their deep faith in inseparable relationship between Democracy, Diversity, Rule of Law and Human Rights. According to them the negation of any one of these is negation of others. They strongly believed in the positive value of the diversity and aimed at harnessing the same for the nation building and development. These commitments were empathetically stated in the Preamble to the Constitution which stresses the Socialist, Secular, Democratic nature and ethos of our Society and State. The Preambular statement is equally emphatic in stressing the concepts of 'fraternity' 'equality', 'justice' and 'federalism'. Thus, the idea of India and Indianness is the idea of an inclusive democracy (Abhishek Singha, 2008). According to many scholars (e.g., see Mishra, 2007) by declaring India a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic, the Makers seemed to have taken idea of liberty, 'equality' and 'fraternity' more seriously than even their European and American Counterparts. African-American got voting rights only in 1870. Almost a century after the framing of the American Constitution, and American Women only in 1920. But all adults, irrespective of their class, sex and caste enjoyed right to vote from 1950 when India formally became a Republic –a testimony as to how the Founding Fathers viewed diversity as an asset for building an inclusive democracy. In addition to the Preamble, parts III and IV of the Constitution further project the va'ue vision of our Founding Fathers.

Part III of India's Constitution guarantees certain basic rights and freedoms, such as, equal protection of laws, (Article 14) freedom of speech and expression (Article 19), freedom of assembly and association (Article 19) and freedom of worship and religion (Article 25). These rights are justiciable and people can claim these rights against the State. These rights, in substance, protect and promote the pluralistic character of India's policy by demarcating an area of individual freedom and liberty for everyone living in India wherein government cannot interfere.

The commitment of the Founding Father to building and inclusive and pluralist democracy is clearly reflected in reading of article 14,15,16 & 17 of the constitution. Article 14 enjoins the State from denying to any person equality before the law or equal protection of laws within the territory of India and thus incorporates the idea of formal equality. The Founding Fathers believed that stopping merely declaring the concept of formal equality would be meaningless for millions of these who were Dalits and Untouchables and were subjected to all kinds of exploitation. Any such declaration would ultimately lead to perpetuation of existing in equalities. Hence two kinds of approaches were adopted, in the first-all kind of discrimination in the name of caste, race or sex had to be curbed and in the second and in order to give real meaning and content to formal equality provisions were incorporated enabling special treatment to weaker section. Every citizen under the constitution has been given fundamental right to be free of discrimination by the state on grounds of race religion and caste. Government discrimination on this ground is prohibited generally by Article 15 (1) in the Constitution. More significantly, discrimination is prohibited by Article 16(2) with regard to state employment. In specific contexts government is further forbidden to discriminate on grounds of place of birth residence, descent, class, language and sex. It is envisaged that government will not only refrain from discriminatory practices in the public sphere but will actually seek to eliminate them in private spheres too. Thus, the idea is to bring in the concept of equal citizenship and respect diversity. In addition to attacking discriminations in public and private, the constitution directs the government to undertake special measures for the advancement of women, children and people belonging to backward class Article 15(3),(4),(5) and Article 16(4), Article 17 abolishes the practice of untouchability and attaches criminal punishment against any individual or groups from inflicting any disability arising out of practice of untouchability. Again Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labor attaching criminal punishment to anyone indulging in such activities. Thus, apart from attacking discrimination private and public and structuring special provisions and policies like the affirmative action the Founding Father empowered the State to intervene in the title of human freedoms the entrenched practices of dominant power in society. In fact, the whole idea of these three strands of equality namely-checking discrimination, providing special treatment and making dominant social power accountable was to ensure that India embraces Inclusive and pluralist democracy.

If the foregoing mentioned provisions in the constitution are aimed at creating space for fostering and promoting India's plural democracy and its rich diversity, the most priceless part of the Constitutional value system according to Justice Krishna 1year (2008) is found in (Article 54-A) spelling out the fundamental duties of every citizen. Article 51 amongst others emphasizes the adherence to spirit of brotherhood and idea of building fraternity.

"It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to abide by the constitution and respect its ideals and institutions; to cherish and follow the noble ideals which inspired our national struggle for freedom; to uphold and protect the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India; to promote

harmony and spirit of common brotherhood among all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and the regional or sectional diversities; to remove practices, derogatory to the dignity of women; to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture……….

Thus, the idea of respecting brotherhood (sisterhood) and building fraternity is key to the constitutional text.

It may be relevant here to mention that at the time of dawn of independence in India during early days of adoption of India's constitution doubts were expressed looking to the size and complexity of diversity – religious, linguistic, regional, economic and socio – whether India would survive as a constitutional Plural Democracy for a long. None other than Sir Ivor Jennings was very candid in expressing these doubts. However, despite and respite of these expressed apprehensions and all kinds of odds, unity in diversity is a reality in India. India's experiment and India's idea as a "Democratic Plural Nation" has become an example for many others nations on the globe.

Gandhi giving a philosophical basis to democracy in India called "all Indians to a higher vision of themselves" getting people to perceive the dignity of each human being. Gandhi believed that 'only individuals who are critically conscious of their own conflicts and passions can build a real democracy. In fact, Gandhi's idea of Swaraj (self-rule) meant 'control of one's inner life and respect for other people create self-aware and engaged rather than passive citizens. Gandhi claimed that 'the real struggle that democracy must wage is struggle within the individual self between the urge to dominate and defile the other and a willingness to live respectfully on terms of compassion and equality with all the vulnerability that such a life entail. This grand was the Gandhi's vision of democracy where in shedding one's fears, delivered in oneness of human kind irrespective of caste, creed, community, colour, sex, etc. thus he wrote in Young India 17 September 1925: "I do want to think in terms of the whole world, my patriotism includes the service of humanity". Again, while writing in Young India, 4 April 1929: Gandhi said:

"My mission is not merely the freedom of India, though today it undoubtedly engrosses practically the whole of my life and the whole of my time.

But through realization of the freedom of India. I hope to realize and carry on the mission of the brotherhood of man. My patriotism is not an exclusive thing. It is all-embracing and I should reject that patriotism which sought to mount upon the distress or the exploitation of other nationalities. The concept of my patriotism is nothing if it is not always, in every case without exception, consistent with the broadest good of humanity at large. Not only that, but my religion embraces all life. I want to realize brotherhood, or identify not merely with the being called human, but I want to realize identity with all life even with such things as crawl upon earth".

What a strong massage of brotherhood and humanism. Significantly again Gandhi symbolizing the spirit of modesty and superb tolerance and respect for other wrote in Young India, 6 August 1925:

> "I hold myself to be incapable of hating any being on the earth. By a long course of powerful discipline. I have ceased for over 40 years to hate anybody. I know this is a big claim nevertheless, I claim it with all humility".

Talking about democracy John Dewey way back in 1916 described democracy as the most ethical aspiration conceived by human communities. However, most importantly what Dewey said was that democracy as societal aspiration is unobtainable, without society's commitment to a lifelong education to develop the "capacities for associated living" in a society characterized by complexity and diversity. Those capacities can only be developed if we, as a people, strive to understand one and another's experiences, anxieties and aspirations and if we work constantly to develop the ethos and culture to live and work in community with one another – a culture that will rather erase differences not exploit them for the advantage of some over others.

The question is whether our institutions of learning and education are equipped to do their part in imparting the kind of capacities Dewey is pleading in above mentioned paragraph for promoting a culture of democracy and respect for diversity. Fostering culture of pluralistic democracy requires acquiring critical thinking and imaginative approach – an approach that can imagine the pains, pleasures, pathos, joys, experiences and expectations of 'other'. I wonder whether our educational institutions are equipped for the task. Most of our educational institutions including higher education institution are famous for their lack of critical thinking. The emphasis on rote learning and on regurgitation for examinations is distressing, and things are only becoming worse with the immense pressure to produce economically productive graduates. The emphasis is more on converting human into economic capital rather converting it 'social capital'. The instrumentalist view of education is more in currency. The educational culture of India that at one time was represented by voices like that of Guru Rabindranath Tagore who emphasized that all the skills in the world were useless, even baneful, if not wielded by a cultivate imagination and refined critical faculties is under assault. Voices like that of Tagore have been silenced by the demand of profitability in the global market. Parents great pride is the admission of a child to the Indian Institute of Technology and Management. They have contempt for the humanities and arts.

Thus increasingly, the emphasis in education today, is towards vocationalist and skills development. It is repeatedly said by responsible voices that we have the jobs but do not have the people skilled enough to do them. We need bio-technologists, fitters, crane operators, nurses and lab assistants. It is said that our education does not prepare young people for what we need. It is pointed out by a study recently conducted by the CM that in the year 2025, there will be 40 million jobs worldwide which need to be filled. India will be one of the few countries in the world to have a labor surplus of right age group. It, therefore, believes that we need to think about the kinds of

education system necessary to develop skills whereby our children will be best equipped to function in this scenario.

To us the purpose of education is to produce more 'responsible' and 'rounded citizens' imbued with humanism. Education aims at liberating the students mind, encouraging him or her to take charge of his or her own thinking and becoming reflective critic of traditional practices. It is only this sort of education that will develop each person's capacity to be fully human, which means self-aware, self-governing, and capable of respecting the humanity of all other fellow human beings, no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, no matter what their gender on ethnic origin. This concept of a link between education and a deeper and whole rounded inclusive citizenship has a special urgency in today's time, as the global market and ruthless competitiveness is increasingly putting pressure on all humanistic ideas in education, as educational proposals based on technical ability alone are becoming increasingly popular. When education is discussed in most of the forums, the focus is on education for profitability, for enrichment and for generation of wealth. We rarely see a focus on the education for humanism for imagination and for the critical faculties. But these abilities are crucial to the welfare of humankind and for promoting pluralistic – democracy.

Despite expansion in higher education system: growing number of universities and colleges; rising number of students going for higher education including those belonging to difficult and backward backgrounds; public and private sources committing more resources and growing concern expressed by one and all about reform and enhancing quality of higher education one area and the one which is most crucial that has lost sight of everyone right from policy makers to common citizen is how to foster and strengthen the link between liberal education and more inclusive kind of citizenship informed by humanism, having "inner eyes" and nurturing sympathy. As pointed earlier the demands of the global market have made everyone focus on scientific and technical proficiency as the key abilities and the humanities and arts are increasingly perceived as useless frills, which we can prune away to make sure that nation remains competitive.

The need is somehow to strike a balance or draw a synthesis between these two approaches the one – a trajectory of vocationally, instrumentalist education arising out of an increasing need of skilled people in the market place and its plan to fit people for jobs and generating wealth for individuals and the other being the broad humanist liberal vision of education built upon "inner eyes", "sympathy" and "concern for others". How to achieve this balance, to me is the greatest challenge and most formidable question. It is this question that should guide any discourse on reforms enhancing quality of education and putting in servicing the cause of India's rich pluralistic democracy.

A great concern has been expressed in almost every policy making forum and rightly so that the access to higher education needs to be enhanced. The present enrolment ratio which is somewhere around 10% needs to be raised to at least 15% in the XI plan though even that figure

is much lower than US and Canada where enrolment is somewhere about 60%, countries in Europe having enrolment is about 20%. It pleaded that number of universities and colleges needs to be raised for easier accessibility and better quality as well as governance. The government has already announced setting up of 30 Central Universities, 8 IITs, 6IIMs, 10 NITs, 5 ISER, 20 ITTTs and more than 300 colleges – these are all welcome steps. But again, it is important to ensure that this enhancement of access and expansion of university and college system should be responsive and reflective of India's vast diversity. Students who are deserving and desiring and belonging to marginalized, ignored, weaker, minority, exploited sectors should be benefitted by the enhanced access and expansion.

Special steps, efforts and network has to be created in that direction, otherwise higher education would fail the cause of democracy and diversity. In the past, through a vast expansion of higher education has taken place it does not reflect absorption of students coming from backward, rural and difficult backgrounds. So far achieved expansion is demonstrative of urban disparities inter religious group disparities, caste and gender disparities. It is equally important that enhancing accessibility for the sake of accessibility would only add to the nation's financial burden and result in wastage of human resource unless it is ensured that what is made accessible is 'quality education' and education which is 'relevant According to a study, our 4,95,000 engineering graduates produced annually, only eight to 10% are employable. Thus, enhancing the quality is the key. But again, we would like to emphasis that the whole exercise should not result into elite institution and average institution dichotomy. Any such scenario would only dis-service, the cause of democracy and diversity. Enhancing the quality education in colleges located in urban areas, backward areas, far flung areas and similarly in the universities which are starved of good faculty, laboratories and infrastructure is as much needed if not more than what is being advocated for universities and colleges having better resources and catering to better background students. Making educational experiences contextual and relevant to life is the key if nation has to progress. As already mentioned, that producing social capital is of greater importance. To me, it seems it is a huge challenge and we all need to put our heads and hearts together to take this challenge seriously.

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