

The Casteist Measure of Academic Excellence in India and Its Implications

- K.S. Chalam

The death or killing of Rohith Vemula on the campus of University of Hyderabad has created so much uproar World over even though for the dalits , it is a routine matter as hundreds commit suicide on the college, Institute and university campuses, and thousands are killed each year with little attention paid by the enlightened media and Intellectuals. Rohit incident, it is commented by some skeptics is different. The Suicide note/ letter of Rohit in English with gloomy expression, and the previous history of suicides on the campus of the university must have impelled the event to make the civilized World wakened up from their slumber, but the dalits in general had a melancholic sigh that we have not yet reached the ultimate. May be it is time to reflect on how the system of higher education designed mainly for the Bhadrakalok in India is becoming an exterminator for dalits and others particularly when their numbers are rising.

Education in India particularly the literate learning had been under the control and regulation of the aliens who settled here and used all kinds of guiles to enslave the locals. One important marker is the so-called first invention of humankind, Grammar for the language by Panini of 4th century BC. Though some scholars are of the opinion that some texts like Datupatha, Unadisutra etc did exist before Panini, it his ingenuity that created Ashtadhyay not only in protecting the Vedic Sanskrit but also created rules and regulations in such a manner that did not allow other languages to emerge and grow. Any indigenous spoken word was subjected to the rules of the game and were considered as inferior or not qualified to get the status of a language if not knowledge. Thus, the procedures of discrimination and exclusion were sown perhaps much before the physical segregation in India, though the ancestors of Panini in the Middle East or the Mediterranean region did not use such restrictions. We are citing the example here not to harbor a point on academic debate on Linguistics, but definitely the sociolinguistics that had devastated the lives and vision of millions of Native Indians who are still considered as illiterate, ignorant, and uncivilized with the standards established to benefit only a section of the settlers. This has entered the World of Education particularly higher education without much difficulty as the British from the time of William Jones, Macaulay etal considered the Hindus (Bhadrakalok) as their long lost kin or Indo-Europeans or Aryans. The

Modern University in India entered the country through the British as a Feudal Institution when the Colonial power was enjoying the feudal splendor.

The educational history of India is replete with incidents that the imperialists had used it to enslave the natives. Though the Anglicans represented by Ram Mohan Roy brought some semblance of modernization, it was totally confined to the 'Bhadralok' of Bengal. It was very much convenient for the British to toe the line of the Bhadrlok in the educational programs. The East India Company and later the British India Government have totally believed in the line of divide and rule. They have learnt the merit of this rule by observing the functioning of the caste system with which a handful of Dvijias had an absolute control over the majority. The pundits have convinced the imperialists that the Indian caste system was based on merit of the individual's birth in divija caste. It is because of the merit of the caste and the efficiency with which it was applied in the Indian society, the pundits made the British to believe that the country could achieve intellectual brilliance. Therefore, the education system that we inherited from the British had never represented the Indian society. The educational dispatches of the British officials have amply supported this version. In one of the dispatches, it was mentioned that, "education and civilization may descend from the higher to the inferior classes, and so communicated may impart new vigor to the community but they will never ascend from the lower classes to those above them; they can only, if imparted solely to the lower classes, lead to general convulsion, of which foreigners would be the first victims". The mind set of some of our contemporary intellectuals and journalists reflect the trend initiated by the European colonizers.

Jyothi Rao Phuly initiated the fight against caste exclusion in our education system. It was he for the First time in Indian history represented to the Hunter commission in 1882 that the British were collecting revenue from sudras and ati -sudras to educate the upper caste Brahmins. This, he claimed was atrocious and the remedy he suggested was universalization of primary education. Later his spiritual disciple Dr. Ambedkar represented to the Simon commission for equality of opportunity in education. It is from this memorandum one can find the enrolment of the low caste Hindus in collegiate education was zero in 1882 and nearly one for backward classes in 1923-24. These facts have never been discussed in our mainstream discourses, though some analysts like Chalam K.S have brought out the nature of apartheid in scholarship in our education system. (There is a conspiracy of silence on some of these studies). Our university education has remained largely an upper caste prerogative. Caste prejudices

continued to exist on our university campuses in the first half of the 20th century due to under representation or no representation of lower castes. There are stories how university professors used to search for the sacred thread of the student to ensure that they have not been misled by a mistaken identity. The evil of ragging had a social dimension to threaten and exclude non-divijas to enter professional higher education. The present anti-quota agitations are a continuation of the legacy of the imperialists and the few self-centered individuals.

It is strange to note that while sociologists and other social scientists in the US and Europe are working out strategies to implement diversity to provide opportunities to different communities on the campuses to promote creativity in the classrooms, Indian scholars are busy with imperialist discourses. It is common sense knowledge that education and society are inseparable. The whole society is reflected in the education system of a country and not the privileged few. Education, the sociologists say is a change agent. What kind of change and progress we anticipate if the education system is burdened with stereotypes of the inherited merit of the few. That is the reason, while the US could produce intellectual giants like Rawls, Coleman among others during the civil rights movement and dwarfs have emerged in the anti-quota movement in India encouraging fundamentalist forces on the campuses. Except Amartya Sen who believes in social inclusion, no social scientist in the country is found anywhere nearer to the intellectual traditions of the free society. How do we expect the universities to flourish and compete in the world of knowledge so long as we keep our universities as islands of caste prejudices and upper caste vanities?

India boasts of its traditions of great teachers like Vishnu Sarma sages like Viswamitra, Vasista, Tagore, Radhakrishnan and several others. But, these traditions have become obscure under the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon traditions of education. One may refer to the select events of violence on the educational institutions in the USA where there is terrible discrimination now than during the previous decades leading to intolerance. Recently, MS Vinnie Burrows, the 92 year old African –American leader spoke in Visakhapatnam about the experiences of the black students in USA and coined the term that there is a ‘pipeline from school to Jail’ for blacks. It means that most of the African-American students are not learning / taught the basics of life skills in the schools resulting in asocial behavior and finally end up in jails. Are the Dalits different from the African-Americans now?

The classroom transactions in some of the multi-ethnic countries in Europe and other democratic countries have undergone some kind of revamping about two decades ago to facilitate diversity. Some considered diversity as an inevitable outcome of corporate capitalism based on MNCs where different ethnic groups are expected to interact, for which concepts like that of Soft Skills has been developed. But the skills are not incorporated as part of the curriculum of the University courses and a separate market is created for them in the training segment of education market. In other words, educational programmes have been commoditized and offered as per the needs of the segmented labor markets, and not as democratic practice of education. This has distorted the broad goals of higher education identified by scholars like Howard Brown in the USA. Research and teaching, evaluation and administration, learning and personality development, social goals etc are trivialized and tailor made courses prioritized. Research funding and university tenures are related to the quantifiable outcomes. Teachers and scholars are either over burdened with work or involved in the manipulation of results to earn degrees, fellowships , jobs etc with least regard for societal goals and enrichment of human relations.

Teaching in Higher Education

The system of higher education that evolved in the post liberalization period is not very sure of its learning outcomes. We know that the British were sure of the learning outcomes of the education as enunciated by Lord Macaulay. Macaulay prescriptions were relevant to the times and the purpose for which the colonial education was imparted. Is there any change in the objectives and purposes of education today particularly at the higher education level? Can we declare that our effort to educate our children through Quality institutes like IIT's and IIMS and in our universities will ultimately utilize them to export our natural and human resources for national development? It is very difficult now to say this after internalization of education and cross border education permitted through GATS. Then, how can we tell the teachers to mend their business of teaching. As some management experts emphasize that teaching is not so much important today as compared to learning; the problem here is how to make the student learn. Is it not the responsibility of the teacher to make the learner learning how to learn? Do we have the infrastructure and superstructures of education to leave the business of teaching learning process to the learner and make the teacher to concentrate on his research? In fact the Learning Report of the Club of Rome in the 1980s has brought out the concepts of Anticipatory

learning and participatory learning. Both the concepts along with the level of learning at different phases of the individual, group, society and civilization stages need the involvement of a good and enlightened teacher. Can we deny this?

The quality of higher education teaching was considered until recently of obtaining a research degree and few publications. No one was bothered to look at the diversity that has taken place in the enrollment in higher education and the need to train the teachers to deal with a diversified student intake in the classrooms. Teaching in colleges and universities was never considered important. Many of the good teachers have also neglected their teaching careers to obtain research degrees and after some time left the universities and the country. The brain drain through research at the cost of public is much higher than the normal route of students going abroad. However, neither the government nor the academics reflected on what is good teaching. Every one who is undergone university training knows that all those who have good degrees and publications are not good teachers. Some of them are worst communicators and even failed to live as good fellow human beings in terms of their interpersonal relations. There are some exceptions. Victims like Rohits are subjected to the tyranny of such namesake teachers. Majority of the young Postgraduates who enter in to teaching profession do not know how to write on the chalkboard if not a white board. In fact, majority of our colleges in the rural areas do not have black boards. It is not the school that is considered as an institution without walls, but in the private sector, several colleges were established in such an environment. Therefore, the academic staff orientation scheme based on experiments of K.S. Chalam in 1985 became UGC programme in 1987 as Academic Staff College and now as Human Resource development. Though some teachers have opposed the scheme in the beginning, the teachers in rural areas and in affiliated colleges considered it as important input to non -traditional groups who have entered teaching profession for the first time. In fact, we have designed the course structure keeping the needs of not only the teachers but also the first generation students, to make education socially relevant.

The basic function of a college teacher for that matter even in the university is to teach the students and appreciate how the young people are learning and acquiring cognitive skills. The subject matter is as important as the method of teaching. In fact, teachers in the colleges and universities are paid salaries to teach. Research and extension activities are complementary to teaching. It is very easy to assess research in terms of the number of publications or patents

or similar qualifications. But, teaching is hardly measured. The quality of teaching is seen in terms of the publications in majority of the government or UGC regulations. This in fact has caused more damage to our higher education than other weaknesses of the system. Then, how is it possible to measure teaching. Chalam K.S. has developed several instruments to measure good teaching in colleges and universities that include 18 competencies including relational skills. It is necessary that the teachers have to spend more time for preparing for the class than doing experiments in a lab or doing fieldwork for a research paper. Most of the young teachers do not know how to prepare for the class and some of them do not know how to identify a research topic. Teaching is an art. It can be learned through constant practice and observation. Several studies are conducted to measure good teaching in the West in terms of student evaluation of teacher. This is one of the ways of measuring good teaching. Academic scholars have developed Teacher Quality Index TQI consisting of five important components. It relates to the teacher first as a human person and then the students should accept him as an academic leader. Second, he should know how to manage the classroom. There are several problems in the classrooms today with divergent social, academic and economic background students attending the classrooms and teacher should know the adult psychology. Three, the instruction or classroom transactions are to be planned in advance. It is not like playing a video or connecting to an internet. He should also know the technology of using the web material when and where. It is to be planned before hand and every time to be revised before going to the classroom. Otherwise, students get the same material from the web or from notes and don't find it not stimulating to attend the class. Most of the classrooms are empty today because of the failure of the teachers in making the classroom impressive and provocative. The teacher must inspire the students and it comes through lot of experience and training. Four, preparing for the classroom is one thing and implementing it in the class is another. The teacher should know where to stop and review the lesson and ask questions to know whether the students are following or not. Five, Monitoring the student learning and the need to understand the potential through various methods of evaluation is important. There are several such issues, which can be quantified to provide incentives to the good teachers rather than relying solely on research output, which is not useful most of the time for the classroom. There could be separate cadre of research professors whose job should be conducting research work and occasionally interacting with students to test their newly acquired knowledge. They should also know the social relevance of research.

There are excellent researchers who are working in our premier educational institutions with funding from different agencies. The problem with most of the professors is that they are just research workers and do not carry the characters of a good teacher in the sense of good human beings to maintain relations with students. The student teacher relations are not like the master-client and it is beyond a familial bond to infuse confidence and inspire the ward to master invisible frontiers of knowledge irrespective of the social background of the student. There are stories how the teachers are predisposed with their own caste students and humiliate others in the past in some state universities. Unfortunately, most of the teachers who are from the traditional learning families carry the arrogance of legacy and belittle the slow and those from non- traditional learning backgrounds. They just do not understand the difficulties and the family background of the students / scholars. Unless one carries empathy and sympathy under a liberal atmosphere for such groups, it is very difficult to create conditions of learning. Further, it is observed by several activist scholars that the so-called elite institutions like IIT, IIM and Central universities with liberal central funding have developed some kind of euphoria that they are different from state institutes where students are drawn from local language medium colleges. But the fact of the matter is that the unit cost of the elite institutes is several times higher than that of the state universities/institutes. Therefore, it is not always correct to say that the performance of the elite institutes is better than the local or state institutes/universities.

The Government of India has appointed several committees on Higher education in India and the experts including the knowledge commission could not reach out to the rural college or a state university where the bulk of the future generation is being trained. There is very little effort to define research as a component of teaching learning process and much less about the social sciences and their use in making higher education socially relevant (except some IITs). It is very disappointing to find that there is absolutely no mention about the improvements in the Quality of teaching except a paragraph on faculty in one of the recommendations of a national commission. The angst about the future of teaching rises with the fact that none of the experts consulted were drawn from teaching faculty of a state university or college to represent the serious problems of teaching in majority of higher educational institutions. Added to this, it is reported that 50 to 60 percent of the positions in

the faculty are lying vacant even in our IITs and IIMs. This shows the apathy of our experts towards teaching and teachers.

The social reform movements and the so-called communal representation popularly known as reservation in admissions and public jobs have substantially improved the Human Development Indices in the South. In two of my publications in the 1990s, I have provided empirical data to show how it has happened. The World Bank and the UNDP in their reports noted the positive contributions of reservations in India and compared them with that of preferential representation to Bhumiputras in Malaysia and similar policies in other countries. Yet, people keep on referring to this simple measure as an aberration without knowing the size of caste-based reservations of let us say (15%) scheduled castes. There are 175 lakh jobs in government (state, union, local body, public sector) where the caste –based reservations are observed. It means that there will be 26 lakh dalits in all categories of jobs if the policy is implemented without distortions. This is around one per cent (1.3) of the 20 crore dalits in India. Does the country not afford to contribute this paltry amount to call itself a civilized nation or Viswaguru? The amount of sacrifices these groups have made in the form of remaining illiterate, sick and jobless for 6 decades after independence are greater than what was stacked outside. Yet, both the politicians and the policy makers have remained silent on this important issue making the forward castes educated at their cost and migrated to the West and now open the system to market. Economists like Prof Kaushik Basu and others now admit that markets have failed the masses and inequalities are widened. Dalits are the victims of liberalization in India.

It is in this context the 10th ASER survey report evoked some interest as it has reported that the levels of learning like reading a ii class text by a iii class student is limited to only 25 per cent and so on. Though some of the findings are not reckoning with NCERT survey due to conceptual issues, it is declared that enrolment in 6-14 age elementary education is 96 per cent. The statistic show the alleged mischief that children are only listed by the institutes and are not schooled. The enrolment in to tuition fees paid private schools is 30.8 per cent and in cities like Hyderabad 54.8 per cent. However the differences in the performance of dalits and others persist. For instance, reading of a text is performed by 58 per cent of dalits while it is 69 per cent for forward castes in private schools while the difference in government schools is large 42 per cent and 65 per cent respectively. It is reported in some studies that government schools are considered as schools for reservation folk and therefore neither the teachers nor the public

servants are bothered about teaching and allow the students to perish or mend themselves. Perhaps like the Public Sector enterprises that are designed to make losses to be confiscated by crony capitalists later, the education system is perhaps heading towards that goal. But, the situation in countries like USA, Pakistan and China with whom we always compare ourselves is different. There, state takes the responsibility of 'no child left behind', unlike in India that makes RTE Act and forget. Thus, caste and social background of the student and the inputs used in educating the child are not considered in measuring quality or outcomes.

In fact there is always a bias in designing questions and structuring of the questions that inherently benefit the elite who had an academic or literate background against those whose language, knowledge base and conditions of learning are different. That is why scholars or students like Rohit enter elite institutions there is always abhorrence as to how could these boys or girls come to this level with so little inputs. One of the important functions of a teacher if he is a good teacher is to study the students' academic and social background in designing his presentation or approach to study a problem so that there can be joy in learning together. This is not happening in most of the universities and several prejudices and biases are deliberately or involuntarily entering in to the transactions of academic institutes that do not have mechanisms to study and cure.

The first generation learners or scholars who are entering in to such institutes find the conditions and the company are very conducive to express their agonies. It is not difficult to understand the enthusiasm of the young minds whose cravings and passions are suppressed with shrinking space both in the family and in the institute, find the university or the campus as a platform to express their feelings. We do not have major complaints where the campuses are liberal and known for some kind of non-prejudiced environment. Dalits or the reserved categories in the elite institutes are socially enlightened and sometimes politically inclined to express their democratic feelings and there should be forums on the campuses to provide opportunities for them to express. No one argues that it should be a permanent or fulltime activity, but a structured university set up to venture such activities. It is noticed in several campuses that the young boys and girls do not have any recourse to fall back once their fellowship or scholarship or course ends. They are forced to stay back on the campus with all kinds of inevitable demeaning tricks, as they know once they leave the town/city campus they will not get the kind of exposure or atmosphere in their bastis or villages. It is strange that even

after 70 years of independence and schemes of SCP/TSP there are no provisions for the young pass outs to stay and prepare for examinations to settle in life or the community coming to their rescue before they commit suicide. Are we not guilty?

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