

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Noticing: Caste, Class, and Gender in India

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Dear Higher Education,

In 1971, celebrated sociologist, J. P. S. Uberoi, wrote in the essay 'The Student Question' that in India,

“..our students are generally struggling for participation in society. It is the student rush rather than student revolt that is our real problem. What our people are currently seeking are three things. Firstly, they want the right to enter university as a universal human right. Second, they want assured progress up the ladder once they are on it. Many of them consider it inherently unjust that anyone should be sent down from university for any reason, academic or disciplinary. Third, they want assured employment of some non-manual kind at the end of their term at university.” (34)

In my experience in classroom pedagogy and over discussions with colleagues across departments and universities, these lines ring true 50 years later. In the midst of this status of intellectual life of the majority of students in the country, what is the place and importance of higher education especially in the social sciences and humanities at the current moment? Specifically, I want to focus on what it is that higher education can do to the processes whereby 'our students are generally struggling for participation in society'. What kinds of participation are made possible here or who participates, and what can we do in our classrooms to enable modes of participation that reflect on differences and inequalities? My ability to respond to this comes from my own trajectory in and through the higher education landscape in India.

I am a middle class, upper caste cis-gender woman. My higher education academic training has been entirely in India, and I continue to teach in an Indian University. Though my parents do have higher education degrees, I am the first academic in my family. Due to the nature of my father's transferable job, I have had the privilege to go to eight schools, one of which was in Toronto, Canada and the remaining across states in Northern India. In grade four in school in Canada I experience racism firsthand, when I was bullied for being Indian, unclean, and having 'cooties.' While to this day I remain grateful to the teacher who noticed this and led the entire class back from recess to discuss why what was being said to me was wrong, I cannot deny this personal transgression has led me to notice consistently how racism flourishes in India, amongst communities in India and otherwise. It is this ability to notice that is the most important gift that higher education in India can give to our students as they are 'struggling for participation' in society.

Notably this ability to notice comes after a recognition that we live in a diversified world. After having gone to schools in small towns across India, the best education of this diversity was my time as an undergraduate, masters and PhD student in a public university in India. My time in Delhi University (in the capital city Delhi of India) was an eye-opening experience that put me in classrooms with students from different castes, classes, regions

and genders. It was the first place I saw LGBTQ sexualities openly expressed (other than Toronto), was asked what my caste was, and finally understood the power and meaning of the word ‘feminist’. In senior school in Dehradun (a town in the North-Western state of Uttarakhand), which is not cosmopolitan by any stretch of imagination, I was ridiculed by being called a ‘feminist’ for expressing some of my views on gender. Speaking up was looked down upon, I learnt rather early. It wasn’t until I came to Delhi University that I understood the meaning of this word and that too from fellow students who had gone to the best schools in the most metropolitan cities across India. Their privilege, social and cultural capital gave them confidence with words and language that was new to me. This was an indelible learning for me, which comes from the power and authority, not to mention liberation that I and fellow students felt at the undergraduate college for women, Miranda House. The fact that women occupied and made this space, allowed us to question and notice how our participation in society was never equal, a learning which came from a window into an alternate world made possible by a campus only for women.

I carry these learnings with me as I now teach at a private university in Delhi-NCR¹ India has seen a boom in private universities in the recent past. ‘The current share of private universities in the Indian university sector is around 40%, with more than two million students’ (Mathews). This was certainly not the case when I was an undergraduate student in 2004. Not only does this mean that prospective students have more options, but most private universities are very costly in comparison to public universities in India, and most students cannot afford private sector higher education. This means that while private universities do have scholarship programs for those students who simply cannot afford the price to study there, my classroom is definitely not as diverse as classroom in a public university in India. This is not only due to the caste quota as means of positive discrimination that is present in public universities, but the range of incomes in the middle-class is expansive, and most families cannot easily afford private universities.

But there is another layer here that often goes ignored. Only the most privileged students in India are able to go abroad for their undergraduate education. The majority of students aspire to enter classrooms across the country, which is highly competitive given India has the world’s biggest youth population (Poonam). And while it cannot be denied that there are a few select private universities in India that only the most elite and well-off students can afford (their fees are often closer to American Universities than those in India), most private universities (especially those that have risen out of philanthropic interests) do not seem out of reach for many families in the board upper-middle class categories. I see this in the student composition in my classroom, year after year. Though definitely not as diverse as a public university, students come from a variety of backgrounds as the corpus of students who cannot even imagine an education outside the country is rather large. This is especially true for PhD students, who traditionally even in the public university system in India do not have adequate state support in terms of funds to subsist in a comfortable manner given the inflationary situation in most cities. Private universities in this dynamic, with their reasonably better fellowships and modern infrastructure offer better chances to PhD aspirants, who could not even apply outside the country owing to the hefty application fees. In my department we have PhD scholars that are first generation educated and are committed to using their degrees and exposure to go back to the regions they are from to pursue academic professions and in turn aid students. This is an opportunity many of them have shared with me, they could not pursue in public universities due to the delay in scholarships and often the amount not being enough to subsist and continue research effectively. One of them was enrolled in a PhD program in Europe and the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to the racism he faced in the department there made him drop out of the program and join the private university I am affiliated to.

¹ NCR is an acronym for National Capital Region, which is a planning region centered on the city of Delhi. Delhi – NCR encompasses Delhi and several districts surrounding it from the states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

He has shared with me a few times, “I feel like I am being taken seriously and listened to here.” Clearly, his and his cohort’s ability to participate in society is being strengthened.

At the undergraduate level, a different story emerges. These students too are aspirational, but most could not afford higher education outside India. There is no question that the undergraduate classroom is not as diverse in a private university as compared to a public university, but even here changes in modes of pedagogic arrangements can be beneficial. The need to bring issues of diversity up for discussion to these classrooms are more important than ever before, not only due to the privatization of education but the kinds of information that is available to young adults from a variety of sources, that are often entirely based on propaganda.

A case in point is how I start all my courses that are introductory by detailing power relationships and always using the student-teacher relationship as an example. This allows me to do two things, establish the professional relationship that exists in student-instructor engagement, but also the skewed power structure to engage in a discussion on sexual advances and sexual harassment. Power imbalances must be discussed, as that is what harnesses the abilities of students in my classroom to not only find a space to engage but talk about issues that are otherwise never broached in their lives, or always at a distance. I do think that instructors teaching the social sciences and humanities are placed with a definitive advantage to engage in such conversations and given the rise of the #MeToo movement, the place of social media in our lives and changing understanding of sexualities in India, the undergraduate classroom is the place for these discussions. Asking students about stereotypes that operate on campus especially to judge others is always a great way to make them reflective of and engage in conversations on racism in India. Routinely the color of skin and the shape of facial features emerge as deeply encoded in how students’ notions of ‘self’ emerges from how they make sense of ‘others’ from different parts of India (Sax 292, Engleke 85). This allows for conversations on racism in India, that have often left classrooms silent, simply because the possibility of imagining ourselves as racist has not occurred to most middle-class Indians.

Similarly, I brought an ethnography from Lahore, Pakistan to discuss caste differences to my class. This was done to elicit two sorts of responses. First, if Pakistan has a majority of Muslims (whereas India has a Hindu majority), how can caste exist in Pakistan, given caste is seminally related to Hinduism? Second, in piquing students interests in this way and reminding them of their privilege – only those from dominant castes have never needed to discuss their caste – can conversations on how most students in my class have domestic help who are given different food and water, often in separate utensils from them and their families, allows me to bring caste practices into their homes. Stories emerge from the immediacies of their lived realities, and telling and listening to them together are critical to transformative diversity education. The ability to question unquestioned issues (such as gender or caste) and notice them, stems from bringing these issues to the spaces that are most intimate for students, their classrooms and their homes. I see the need to have such conversations as more important than ever before, and especially with those students that can afford private education in India, as a means for them to think through and question their struggle (or lack of it) to participate in society.

Private universities in the Indian context are also markedly different from public universities, as they are not spaces of student protest in the same way. But using the classroom to engage in conversations that are often difficult and becomes modes of allyship of upper caste and class students in India, is a means to inculcate self-reflexivity in those individuals that are likely to control and hold the larger ability to wield their weight and speak more loudly as they aspire to become income generating individuals. The social sciences and humanities are best placed in this dynamic at the higher education level, to equip our students, to listen, speak up, question, support, and rage on as to who ‘participates in society’ and at whose expense.

Yours Sincerely,

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