

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Pillars of Inclusion

MEENAKSHI GOPINATH

Dear Higher Education,

The 21st century is poised to be the century of women. In education, as elsewhere, their impact is being decisively felt. Around the world, the student demographic in Higher Education is changing in favor of women. They will offer the conceptual alphabet to fashion a new vocabulary of knowledge and power. They have the capacity and responsibility to infuse the learning space with new dialogic tools that engender educational institutions and provide genuinely inclusive democratic approaches to the resolution of conflict to engage with the joys and responsibilities of full civic participation and infuse an ethics of care – to replace divisive hierarchical competitive frameworks of learning.

Universities and colleges are also sites for developing predispositions to cultures of peace and conflict transformation. They have a crucial role in nurturing critical thinkers, shattering myths, and interrogating stereotypes that reinforce “othering processes.” They have a special responsibility to restore the canvas of coexistence.

The shrinking of spaces for dissent and growing intolerance that is reflected in clampdowns by powerful university administrations, and new strictures around freedom of expression, scholarship and syllabi are of most profound concern. The narcissism of monocultural identities is becoming a threat to freedom. We need to fashion a discourse that combines the language of critique with the language of possibility to make despair unconvincing and hope practical.

We need to address epistemic injustice and challenge ethnocentric, anthropocentric and androcentric constructions of knowledge.

I refer here also to a shared language – a language that gives utterance to aspirations of human dignity, a language that gives voice and hope to the oppressed and marginalized the world over, a language that seeing the vital interconnectedness of all beings envisions a kinder world of true sanctuary where an ethics of care recognizes that the “peace of our world is indivisible” and our wellbeing cannot be pursued in isolation of others. Above all, it is a language of leadership that offers an alternative, more inclusive vocabulary of power that highlights the courage and resilience that women can bring into the public sphere. Small yet purposeful steps can often yield dramatic results.

I wish to share a small experiment that started in 2005 at the prestigious Lady Shri Ram College for Women (LSR) in New Delhi, India, where I was President between 1988-2014. LSR then was in the Indian public perception akin to a Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, Smith, or Radcliffe in the United States. This experiment relates to a collaborative program between LSR and a not-for-profit NGO, the Foundation for Academic Excellence and Access (FAEA), whose mandate was to provide support to students of disadvantaged groups to access the best institutions of Higher Learning in India and also to fund colleges that could engage with issues of inclusion in innovative, even

unorthodox ways. The program called REACH – an acronym for Reaffirming Equity, Access, Capacity, and Humanism - brought about significant transformations in the institutional culture of the college within five years.

It was a unique collaboration—a public-private partnership between a college and an NGO free of the constraints of conventional “grant giving” and “grant spending” protocols. It adopted an approach that underscored embedding the institutional matrix with ways and means of enhancing social dignity and addressing the structural violence (of exclusion) perpetuating disparity, discrimination, and stigmatization. While providing bursaries and scholarships to deserving students from disadvantaged groups, it also focused on institutional preparation to create an environment where inclusivity became part of the consciousness of college. It purposefully strove to blur the spurious separations between Quality and Access, which informed much of public discourse on Higher Education.

REACH recognized that existing schemes under government funding were piecemeal, top-down, and expenditure-oriented rather than vision-oriented in addressing inequity. These schemes were invariably ‘ready-made packages’ to be ‘delivered.’ Broadly curriculum-bound (like remedial teaching), there was no room for capacity building of students or development of soft skills crucial for students in Higher Education. The REACH program consciously bridged the divide between ‘skills and academic enhancement. There were peer learning modules, and mentorship was integral to the program's trajectory. Faculties were encouraged to take ownership of the program on a rotational basis. Placements completed the cycle – Placements for this section of students needed to go beyond mere job procurement to include career guidance for higher education, preparation for civil service and management entrance examinations and careers, and training for self-employment and entrepreneurship.

The crux of the program was that an integrated core group of animators drawn from both “disadvantaged” and privileged student cohorts helmed it on the principle of included and equal and NOT separate but equal. This was its essence. Gradually, the program—which included training, field visits, and collaboration with the outreach and voluntary agency placement programs—became a mainstream activity of the college.

The underlying philosophy that propelled the program was a paradigmatic shift from existing practices to desired directional change as shown in Table 1 below.

EXISTING PRACTICES	TO=>	DESIRED DIRECTIONAL CHANGE
Scheme/Project (top-down, rigid, narrow non-participatory approach)		Movement (bottom-up, inclusive, participatory approach)
Quotas (divisive, stigmatizing, discriminatory)		People (valuing students' psycho-social, cultural and historical contexts of experience)
Quantitative ('number' of students in a 'category')		Qualitative changes (ongoing support services to students, liberatory)
Victimhood (feeling of oppression and stigmatization and nurturing grievances)		Agency (enhancement of self-worth and social dignity)
Funding (expenditure-oriented schemes)		Ownership (commitment to the sustainability of a vision)

Boundaries (from restrictive rigid rules and procedures)		Potential Discovery (creating change agents and the ripple effect)
Recipients of the dole (passive recipients)		Contributors of a new discourse (active participants of a learning community)
Linear approach (narrow group of cohorts)		Concentric circles (expansive, resonating for the entire college community)
Compensation for deprivation (mentality of scarcity of resources and opportunities)		Empowering for leadership (mentality of abundance and equitable opportunities)
From receiving applications (from interested students)		Identifying promise proactively in order to nurture potential talent among the disadvantaged

The emphasis was on turning the notion of “disadvantage” on its head and foregrounding agency in a largely ‘elitist’ environment. It provided a context for those wrapped in socio-economic privilege to appreciate the resilience and spirit of those whose growth trajectories conveyed a unique ability to overcome adversity. In reformulating ideas of success and leadership within the frame of those who “traveled the farthest,” the focus was on trajectory rather than outcome, on the learning curve, on succeeding without vying, and on collaborative learning. Throughout the entire process, we were deeply conscious that we were working towards the quality of the collaborative learning process to maximize non-didactic elicited learning horizons for all students. This then became the college's hidden curriculum.

While acknowledging differences and building on commonalities, REACH enabled overcoming negative stereotypes of the “other.” It freed the celebration of ‘performance’ from the tyranny of composite grades, making the appreciation of another intelligence possible. One important exercise in this was called ‘My Story’ shared with increasing numbers of the peer group, which dramatically focused the learnings on the path and the skills and strategies employed to overcome challenges and deprivations on the way – and a candid description of personal experiences of exclusion. This provided a learning to those insulated by ‘privilege’, of realities that classroom teaching could never approximate. Above all, it underscored that while it is important to comfort the afflicted, it is equally important to afflict the comfortable, especially when they are smugly blatantly wrong. It was an attempt to expand the circles of interconnections and empathy and nurture a sensibility that is touched as deeply by the pain on our planet as by the perfection of a bud unfolding.

The vigor of expansive institutions is preserved by the widespread sense that high aims are worthwhile and where students are encouraged to harbor a certain extravagance of objectives so that they venture beyond the safe provisions of personal gratification. And the ability to throw themselves again and again into the tumult of life to make their voice count. REACH was an edifying step in that direction. It helped students to break out of the shadows of invisibility and silence. In a socially stratified society along fault lines of class, caste, ethnicity, and gender, it was a courageous experiment for its time – reinforcing the audacity of hope. The college ethos and student demographic transformed dramatically due to its impact.

Today, an erstwhile ‘elitist’ space has become something of a flagbearer for inclusion amongst the colleges of the University of Delhi – both in precept and practice.

It has enabled many students from underserved backgrounds to ‘transgress’ and resonate with Maya Angelou’s famous refrain: “I do not want merely to survive, but to thrive. And I want to do it with some passion, compassion, some humor, and some style.”

About the author

Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath is currently Founder and Honorary Director of WISCOMP (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace), an initiative that seeks to promote the leadership of South Asian women in the areas of peace, security and regional cooperation. She is also Chair, Board of Governors, Centre for Policy Research (CPR) and Principal Emerita of Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi, where she served as Principal for 26 years from 1988-2014. She has been a member of the University Grants Commission (UGC), India.