

Teacher's Role in Social Change

* Dr. Shruti Agrawal

** Suma Mathew

* Assistant Professor - Communication Skill, Barkatullah University, Bhopal

** Assistant Professor – MBA, St. Joseph's College of Engg. & Tech., Pala, Kerala

Abstract

University teachers have always served a special historic role in the transformation of their respective societies. The academic community has been involved in the anti-colonial struggles in many countries of the Third World. Evidences are many of participation of teachers at higher education in the social movements of nineteenth century Bengal and in the Indian national movement. Their societies have tremendous expectations from them of providing leadership and sustained momentum to social movements and a corrective influence to political institutions.

The objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To analyse the concept of social change;
2. To establish a relationship between education and social change;
3. To discuss the teacher's role in social change;
4. To appreciate the complementarity of the teacher's three major functions of teaching, research and extension;
5. To appreciate the integration of the teacher's academic responsibility and social commitment

Keywords: University teachers, Academic community, Anti-colonial struggles, Third world, Social movements

Introduction

Social Role of Teacher in the Indian Context

As Altbach (1990) says, "The professional role in politics is a widespread and important one". Whether as activist, or expert, professors play great role; their expertise, ability to communicate and their access to the mass media and those in power make them a powerful but generally unacknowledged force in many societies." Let us examine the role played by the teachers in the past. Teachers in institutions of higher learning had played their roles in the social movements of the late nineteenth and the twentieth century, and also in the national movement. However, the role teachers played perhaps may not have been as important as the one played by two other professionals like lawyers and journalist. Among teachers, as evidence suggests, perhaps, school-teachers may have participated in these movements in larger numbers, and all probability, with greater effectiveness than those at higher education. Even, within the university community the students perhaps have been better activists than teachers have. Of course, those from among university teachers who were active in these movements gained a great deal of visibility thanks to their scholarship and articulateness.

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The post-independence scenario has not been very different. Quite a few college and university teachers took to politics, and occupied very important positions in public life. Others have played a significant role in providing theoretical inputs to social movements. Many others, because of their proximity to political leaders and senior bureaucrats, have been immensely influential. Universities and colleges have been cradles of many progressive, secular movements, including those with leftist leanings. At certain moments in recent history, such as the internal emergency of 1975- 77, the role that university teachers as a collective played revealed their political commitment.

In the new social movements of women, dalits, adivasis, environment, human rights, etc, teachers have played a significant role. Again, their position is powerful and precarious at the same time, since they are one of those professional groups most vulnerable to co-option by the government, other organisation of the State and the private sector. Thus, some of the most effective critics of the State are teachers of higher education, but some of its most eloquent apologists are also from among them.

In India, we have something more than just a verbal consensus on the values of democracy, secularism, social justice and the need to eliminate poverty. This is because these values got permeated in the national consciousness during the national movement. It would, therefore, not be easy to subvert these values. The teaching profession can, play a vital role in strengthening these. This has to be something different from 'indoctrination'. No educational system can be completely neutral to the value and goals which the nation has set before itself, but the responsibility of the educational system and therefore of the teachers, especially in a country which cherishes the value of democracy based on individual freedom, is to develop rationality among the students and train their minds to critically follow the argument wherever it leads. The teacher must be able to analyse his or her own bias, if any, and should make it clear to his or her students.

The document 'Education for Our People' spells out in some detail the aspects of this role of the teachers. It says, 'The proper teaching of science and an appropriate technology must be emphasized at all stages of education. Science can be of great help to rid our traditional society of superstition, fatalism, and irrational fear and in promoting the rational temper which a modern society needs.'

The role of the teacher in the Indian context is circumscribed by the objectives of social transformation as articulated in the national movement and later enshrined in the Preamble the Constitution, in the Fundamental Rights and in the directive Principles of State Policy. The approach should encompass a study of the existing social organization and processes and of their strengths and weaknesses as well as of the new social organization and processes which we desire to create. It should also include a critical study of 'our failures to create a strong, egalitarian and prosperous society, social evils such as unequal status to women, caste or untouchability and the many unhealthy traditions and superstitions that have crept into our social organization. The existing modes of production and production relationships and how they tend to concentrate economic power in the hands of a few individuals and to perpetuate poverty should be made known. In other words, the student should know the major problems facing the country, the alternative solutions for them and the programs that have to be developed to create the new social order based on the liquidation of privilege, abolition of poverty, decentralization of authority, enhancement of individual freedom and autonomy.

Teachers' Organizations and Social Action

In the context of the above discussions, let us examine how teachers' organizations perceive this role of the teachers. Educational system forms an important part of greater societal system. Very often educational system is called upon to bring out various changes in the society. It has the potential to create new and positive changes in social outlook, social behaviour, and social traditions among the people. It may also help to wipe out undesirable and irrelevant customs, taboos, beliefs and traditions from the society. In other words, it constituted a major intervention in social process, which we have already discussed at length, earlier which may either strengthen the status quo or bolster social change. We cannot therefore, ignore the role of teachers' organisations, in bringing about social change. This is particularly, most urgent in the present context, when our society is infested with a myriad of problem and is confronted with new challenges of the twenty-first century.

The All India Federation of university and College Teachers Organization (AIFUCTO) (1976) has spelt out the role of teachers' organisation with regard to society as follows: Teachers should

- a) Recognize that education is a public service and strive to keep the public informed of the educational programme which is being provided;
- b) Work to improve education in the community and strengthen the community's moral and intellectual life;
- c) Be aware of social problems and should take part in such movements as would be conducive to the progress of the society and hence country as a whole;
- d) Perform the duties of citizenship, participate in community activities and shoulder responsibilities of public offices;
- e) Refrain from taking part in or subscribing to or assisting in any way any movement, which tends to promote feeling of hatred or enmity among different communities, religious or linguistic groups.

In this context, we are also reminded of Education Policy of Government of India (1968), which reiterated that the educational system must produce men and women of character and ability committed to service and development. It also visualised the transformation of the educational.

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System to relate more closely to the life of the people and emphasised development of Science and Technology and cultivation of moral and social values.. It further says that work experience and National Service including participation in meaningful and challenging programs of National Service and National Reconstruction should become integral part of education.

There are areas where they should act to eradicate certain things and there are areas where they should act to strengthen certain features. Areas where they can act as a negative force are: Illiteracy, Superstitions, Religious fanaticism, fundamentalism, Dowry system, Sati system, Casteism, Secessionism, Prejudice against the female sex, Regionalism, Parochialism and Communalism. Areas where they can act as a positive force National Literacy Mission, Adult education program, Environmental education, Energy education, Family planning, Community health education, National service scheme, rural development program, urban sanitation program and Citizenship education.

Higher Education: An Appraisal of the Situation

Higher education in India today, with an apparent decline in its standards, has been not been adequately responsive to the changing needs and demands of the society thus not fulfilling its own larger purposes.

This has several aspects to it. There is a general feeling that the caliber of the teachers and quality of instruction in colleges' and universities are less than what they thought to be. There is a complaint that a large number of teachers lack professional competence and make a living but do not follow the vocation. However, in the light of the working conditions of teachers, where in a number of States, salaries are not paid for months on end, or are arbitrarily reduced, teachers have no choice but to find other sources of income, which negatively impacts on their teaching Under the circumstances, however, the extent of original, research and good teaching that is the hallmark of a significant number of colleges and universities is quite remarkable.

In some of the affiliating universities and in the colleges, teachers have no control over the curriculum, which is drawn up by a small group and imposed on all. No wonder teaching in many of the colleges and universities is done without any purpose other than that of helping students to somehow pass the examinations. In these cases, the teacher seldom tries to relate her teaching to the actual life situations and to the changing needs of the society. Moreover, not enough teachers take social issues to the classroom and try to solve them. Neither do they take up extension activities for social change and progress nor do they try to make teaching and research an aid to the process of such change and development. To remedy this situation, as teachers' organisations have pointed out,

there is a need for democratization of decision making in the university system and making the university administration non-partisan, transparent and accountable, which would make teachers participants in the university system, professionalise the universities and increase teachers' incentives to perform.

The conditions of work for teachers in a very large number of places are quite unfavourable; they often do not have even a desk to do their work in the institution much less an office room, they lack adequate housing transport, their social status is not very high, and they spend a lot of time fighting for better pay and promotion opportunities. Despite the IT revolution, the large number of teachers have no access to internet, and are thus denied access to new advances of knowledge in their own disciplines. The vast majority of university/college libraries are poorly stocked and grossly underfunded. Teachers also don't have allowances to buy journals and books distancing them from advances in the profession. Promotion avenues for a large number of teachers, particularly in the colleges are poor and undermine teachers' morale, and ultimately the professional environment in the university.

The greatest challenge to the university system comes from the process of globalization in which dominant neo-liberal theory dictates the gradual reduction of State funding and support. Consequently, the Indian universities are increasingly starved of funds, which has led Altbach estimate that, "it is probably the case that 95 percent of Indian academics work in an environment that is well below international levels (Altbach, 2002: 14). Similarly, Jayaram notes that, with the structural adjustment reforms and liberalization of the economy, the State is gradually shedding its responsibility for higher education. Educationally, the Indian university system has progressively become nominalized and marginalized (Jayaram: 236). Considering all this, the fact that the Indian university system continues to function as it does, is a testimony to the professional commitment and resilience of the teaching community.

Future Directions

After going through the section on the situation in Indian higher education, anyone might appreciate that all these problems do exist and need to be solved in order to improve the tertiary education system. Both the students and teachers of higher education should strive their best to solve all such problems and bring out a well-attuned educational system in the country: Let us discuss some aspects of such an endeavour.

It is the call of the hour that the State does not abdicate its role in funding higher education. Teachers in the primary and secondary education streams are trained in the higher education stream. Apart from educating the educators, higher education provides the intellectual skills required for labour to be able to complete in a highly competitive globalized world. Most importantly in a society in transition, higher education develops and transmits the plurality of intellectual analyses and approaches that would facilitate both policy makers and the citizenry to meet the challenges of social change. In this, it is important to stress the continued relevance of the Social Science and Humanities streams, which some quarters have considered less relevant, or even unnecessary, in the current scenario.

The Social Sciences enable an evaluation as well as a future projection of socio-economic developments that are vital to national progress. The humanities address the cultural domain that shapes social consciousness, which in turn substantially impacts on social processes. These disciplines provide the intellectual skills to critically evaluate contending models of development in virtually all spheres, and suggest alternatives suitable for the Indian context. These disciplines in particular and higher education as a whole provide the "historical memory" of nation. This historical memory is indispensable not only not only for an appreciation for the past, but also for the insights it gives into the present, and the possibilities for the future.

In view of its critical role in national development as States earlier, higher education must continue to be funded by the State. This is also necessary for an egalitarian and socially just higher education system. Now that State funding has been cut, tuition fees particularly in professional courses have raised sharply.

These fees are no longer affordable by poor and lower middle class students. Since there are insufficient scholarships for these strata, they are even more underrepresented than before in such institutions. As such, professional degrees contribute to social mobility; restriction of access to them goes against the Constitutional goal of social justice leading to more strife in society. This is yet another reason for State funding of higher education.

Because of lack of internal autonomy and the stifling control exercised by academic bureaucracy, the nature of work suffers. It is, therefore most desirable that institutions have internal autonomy combined with administrative accountability so that a conducive academic atmosphere is created. The academics should also be provided with adequate facilities and an atmosphere of stimulation from peers. This is a prerequisite of the evolution of independent academics, for their professional competence, and for contribution to solving the country's problems. The academics should involve themselves in policy-making issues related to education as well as social and economic progress.

The solution to the problem of less pay in private and government colleges leading to demotivation among teachers lies in having a national incomes and wages policy. This should be based on the recognition of the critical role of higher education and teachers in national development. To attract and retain talent, salary and career prospects must be improved and be made comparable to competing careers. Incentives must be provided for quality work done by teachers.

As we have discussed teaching, research and extension work can go hand-in-hand. Programs of educational transformation also can go hand in hand with the complementary programs of social and economic transformation. Change rather than status quo has become the watchword for successful living and education has been recognised as a tool for ushering in changes in an orderly manner. In such a context, higher education has to be both sensitive to the social needs for his students, and willing and competent, to perform a linking function between the academic and the social world.

Conclusion

We can no, after the discussion in this paper, place the role of academic persons and of academic institutions in a perspective. The observation that the obligations of the university teacher are many as her role is multidimensional is reinforced and discussion.

Important though the role of the teacher is, the teacher at high education is not solely a teacher in the classroom sense of the term, her social role and responsibility in providing leadership as the most informed citizen of her society can hardly be undermined especially in the context of developing nations confronting a myriad of problems. The academic responsibility and social commitment of a teacher are however not in conflict with each other; on the other hand, her commitment to the societal cause can be seen as a part of her main functions of teaching, research and extension. Yet within this framework of basic social and professional roles teachers also have, obligations to uphold certain academic values that are widely considered essential to the progress of learning and discovery. These responsibilities include a commitment to maintain an atmosphere within the institution that leaves every member as free as possible to learn, to search for knowledge, to express her own individual beliefs and opinions, strive for excellence and foster professionalism and social relevance in teaching.

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