

THE TARNISHED IMAGE

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I have had a love-hate relationship with higher education. I keep walking out of it but sooner or later get pulled back in. I chose university teaching as a profession, and struck to it for fourteen years (1951-65) before migrating to the UGC secretariat in 1965. The reason? Because the Education (Kothari) Commission was at work. I hoped for some reforms in university education, and wanted a part in that drama. After four years of grilling hard work and rapid learning - I needed a break. A research fellowship at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla, was most welcome. My topic of research? Education and Social Change! The work had to be cut drastically, because I was offered a Chair by Berhampur University (Orissa) within a month after I joined the Shimla Institute. Physical and mental exhaustion of uprooting half the family and the household establishment from Delhi to Shimla, and getting children readmitted to new schools - stopped me from sending any reply to the offer.

After a month a call from an old friend in the Orissa Education Service and Prof. D.S. Kothari, Chairman, UGC and my Guru (I learnt from him new dimensions of higher education e.g. (a) the national and international context of the university system - a paradigm shift from the Nineteenth Century meaning of autonomy in individual universities; (b) its needed **social** roles, rather than what I had valued earlier - only stimulating intellectual growth of individuals; and (c) to think in terms of initiating/sustaining long term processes of change, providing for 'chain reactions' - not 'quick fixes') forced me to decide to return to teaching. I spent only eight months in Shimla, completing three papers in return for the fellowship that I had been awarded.

The next sixteen months of teaching - as a Professor, Head of a Department, and one of the oldest faculty Members in the University offered many rewarding challenges. For the first time I could introduce new ideas into teaching methodology, cure my young colleagues of many of their unnecessary fears, hesitations and inhibitions, and use my upto-date knowledge of educational debates in India and abroad to encourage bright but young, inexperienced, and intimidated faculty (all departments) not to accept too many diktats of the Registrar and his cronies without questions. Within a few months I had plenty of allies among the faculty and students to try out new experiments.

Family and career reasons dictated a return to the UGC in 1972 but the decision meant deep regrets, which still haunt me at times. I have missed the rewarding company and trust of students, of educating young faculty on the meaning of academic freedom, the values of student participation in

academic and other management issues in higher education, the criticality of winning of their trust, and encouraging their empowerment. Despite the warnings, of many friends about the notorious 'goondas' that enrolled in the Department of Political Science, and pessimism of some senior colleagues - that experiments in self learning would be futile since "Berhampore was not Oxford" - the experiments did work, the students and young colleagues did respond - and the most notorious goonda became a champion, when I had to face the one and only strike against my "harsh academic standards". The same students wept when I left Berhampore for Delhi.

I did not know that within a year I would be so deeply involved in the investigation of the CSWI, which would change the course of my life. At times during the next five years (1975-80) when my second Guru, J.P. Naik pulled me into the ICSSR - to develop the first national research programme on 'invisible women' (*i.e poor working women in the informal sector - who are visible to policy makers, academics or other members of the intelligentsia. The term was used in India by M.N. Srinivas, in the policy statement of the ICSSR's Programme of Women's Studies issued in 1976*) I felt that my entire professional life before joining the CSWI had been a preparation for the work I had to do (when I became Member Secretary of the CSWI in 1973, and thereafter. Old students, and colleagues from Bihar and Orissa, and the large circle of friends acquired within the University system during my UGC days - responded to my SOS and undertook research at short notice. The administrative experience gained in the UGC also helped me to deal with government agencies at the Centre and the States, and harness the CSWI Secretariat fully in the massive task we had to perform within just fifteen months.

When Naik Sahib asked me in 1975, to get involved in the ICSSR's Alternatives Programme - in Education, I pleaded my inability to cope with two obsessions. Adopting women required abandoning education. But within five years, I was in the struggle - to make educational institutions accept their social and constitutional responsibility - to promote the value of gender equality. How were they to do that? I was back, remembering DSK's last formal statement as Chairman, UGC - "Our mistake was in continuing the old order in perceiving the roles/functions of the University - Research, teaching, and then only concern for the community. This order has to be reversed in toto".

By 1979 I was conspiring with Ela Bhatt and Neera Desai - on strategies to harness the SNTU University's total resources - human, infrastructural and knowledge - to assist poor rural women to break, through their barriers of 'invisibility', atomisation, marginalisation and pauperisation - and find their voice as equal citizens of India. A very messy diagram, showing a cyclical relationship between community involvement/action, research and teaching - and some impassioned pleading won us the formidable support of the Vice Chancellor - Dr. Madhuri Shah. The alliance was to see us through the 1st National Conference and the formation of the Indian Association for

Women's Studies, the UGC launching its Programme of Women's Studies and the articulation of the paragraphs on "Education for Women's Equality" in the National Policy on Education, 1986.

Sixty years ago my mother defined education as a "process of ever widening mental horizon and social concern. It made sense to be over fifty years later, when a village woman with only primary schooling responded to the training of volunteer teachers for a literacy campaign by describing the method a 'a jilabi'. You move from the known to the unknown, then back to the known and onwards... You see?" My tutor at Oxford influenced my role as a teacher, - "to try and ensure that my students learn how to teach themselves".

After the birth of my daughter, I went through a phase of "role conflict" and went to my self confessed conservative father for advice. The advice was clear and helped me through the rest of my life. "You are trying to balance your responsibilities as a teacher with your responsibilities as a mother. Introduce a third factor and the equation will be resolved. This poor country made pretty high investment on your training. Do you have the right to waste it?"

I haven't lost my faith in the University system despite its tarnished image. It is a major asset for the future - if we can restore its confidence and unleash its creativity and social concern. There are many examples - but critics do not want to know. Press has done much to tarnish the image. It is time to show a positive concern.
