

**THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES'
IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University

Fourth Convocation Address

**By
Vina Mazumdar**

We are told, we are living in the era of globalisation and must adapt ourselves as rapidly as possible to that process so that we do not fall behind in the race in development, nor find ourselves isolated and marginalised by that process.

The United Nations, born out of the shambles and destruction caused by the two World Wars, and the threat of enhanced powers of mass-destruction, put-forth three major concepts in the hope of building a new world order, so that such devastations could be avoided in future. These were a) human rights; b) the equality of all nations as members of the General Assembly; and c) development for all peoples irrespective of race, class, caste and gender. According to historians of the 20th century. the process of decolonisation - enlarging the membership of the General Assembly - and the periodic debates, dialogues and other activities to make the concepts of human rights and development more meaningful and real in the context of the unequal world that we live in represent the most important achievements of the UN.

The greatest controversy has been on the notion of development. While no-one questions that economic growth is essential, critics have all along questioned the absolute primacy of the economic dimension of development, neglecting its social, political and cultural aspects. Rather belatedly, the United Nations convened the first World Summit for Social Development in 1995 to make-up for this failure.

The document that emerged from the Summit - the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development - mentions many keywords and phrases - eradication of "poverty, unemployment and social exclusion", "democracy and transparent and accountable governance", social justice and equity, people-centred development. "empowerment of the poor and of women", "peace and security" and "respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms." The only attempt to define social development states that:

"throughout the world. all men and women, especially those living in poverty may exercise the rights, utilise the resources and share the responsibilities that enable them to lead satisfying lives and to contribute to the well-being of their communities and humankind".

Significantly enough the Summit's assessment of the contemporary social situation emphasises - the glaring contradiction between expansion of prosperity and expansion of unspeakable poverty - i.e. the failure of single-minded pursuit of economic growth which enhances inequality within and between nations. It also admits that this growing inequality and contradiction has been accelerated by the "global transformation of the world economy which are profoundly changing the parameters of social developments in all countries".

The final document is substantially different from the earlier drafts prepared by the UN Secretariat. At a meeting convened by the then Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Sh. Pranab Mukherjee to discuss the first draft, many of us raised strong objections to the **racist and imperialist tone of the document. I also raised the question why the role of educational institutions and systems had been altogether omitted and pleaded that a meeting should be convened to obtain the advice of educationists, particularly those within the university system. This was not accepted. but the Indian delegation at the preparatory meetings pressed for and obtained a special commitment on “universal and equitable access to quality education., making particular efforts to rectify inequalities relating to social conditions; to strengthen the role of culture in development and contributing to full development of human resources and to social development”**.

I would also claim some credit for some specific references to the crucial role of universities and other institutions of higher education within the Programme of Action by persuading the Indian delegation to incorporate specific amendments for this purpose. I still find the document unsatisfactory, because it continues to under-value the reality that generation and promotion values essential for social and human development are amongst the basic functions of the educational process. As a student of international and national politics over the last five decades, I have been a powerless, but not non-vocal observer of the increasing marginalisation of educational institutions in such dialogues, debates and policy formulation at both international and national levels.

It is generally believed that like the United Nations, India too, has been deficient in not recognising the importance of social dimensions of development. This is incorrect. The goals of social development were indicated in our Constitution - in the preamble and the directive principles of state policy, apart from the section on fundamental rights. The Constitution recognised the existence of historically institutionalised inequalities in our society and built-in specific provisions to correct them so that India could become a genuine democracy. The protective clauses for the removal of social, political, educational and economic inequalities of members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the specific mandate on the state not to discriminate on grounds of sex, caste or creed, and empowerment of the state to adopt special measures for the protection of women and children are some of the examples of this ideology. For the first time in India's history the principle of equality in the eyes of law and universal adult franchise, along with the previous examples enabled constitutional experts to describe our constitution as “a radical departure from the inherited values of the Indian social system”.

The late Durgabai Deshmukh as a member of the first Planning Commission, demanded from the Indian government specific budgetary provisions to translate the constitutional goals and promises into reality. She was the first to suggest the need for a policy for social development in India and as an Indian delegate to the United Nations. Unfortunately, her suggestion for a policy was not accepted at the time by either body.

However, the Planning Commission did respond to her demands by setting up the Central Social Welfare Board to put some of the activities that she had in mind in motion. Jawaharlal Nehru, commending this venture at its inauguration, specifically directed the Board's attention to the need to improve the status of women, scheduled castes and tribes and others handicapped by their marginalised position in our society. Quarter of a Century later, the Committee on the Status of Women in India, touring the North-Eastern States, heard village women in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Assam, speaking about Durgabai's messages - to organise themselves and

participate actively in the task of national development. At its initial stages, the Community Development Programme also contained some of the basic ideas being advocated by Durgabai. The fact that these earlier promising efforts changed course or got diluted in the later decades certainly cannot be attributed to any failure on the part of these early visionaries.

The role of universities in India's national development was addressed very forthrightly by the Indian Education Commission (1964-66). Starting from the premise that the Indian education system must aim to develop **a secular, socialist and democratic society, the Commission went on to record certain special responsibilities of Indian universities – in sharp rejection of the post-second World War theory of academic neutrality being propagated from transatlantic sources at that time.**

“First and foremost, they must learn to strive to serve as the ‘conscience of the nation’, as assessors of the national way of life. This responsibility becomes all the greater in the absence of an enlightened public opinion. There are so many new pulls and forces (as well as old ones) operating in our national life — as, indeed, in the life of man as a whole — that its balance has become very precarious: and there is a danger of losing our bearings unless universities are able to play this role adequately by involving themselves deeply in the study and evaluation of the social process. Such involvement is vital since the universities are preeminently the forum for a critical assessment of society — sympathetic, objective, unafraid - whose partiality and motives cannot be suspected. So far the Indian universities have not performed this function adequately. This may be due either to apathy or failure to recognise the importance of this role or to the traditional belief that scholarship and academic excellence thrive only in isolation from the clamour of the multitude. In some cases, an apprehension of the displeasure of the authorities or influential vested interests, which may not take kindly to their opinions and criticisms, may also have worked as a deterrent. To discharge this function properly, the university teachers should cultivate not only intellectual integrity, courage and scientific knowledge but also win public confidence. Unless they have the high ambition to make an impact on the quality of social thinking and endeavour, they will not be able to help in moulding a new society which will not merely cherish high values but actually provide opportunities for living by them. For this purpose, it is necessary, as a first step, to develop the universities themselves into communities where such values are prized and practised.

A university's business is not primarily to give society what it wants but what it needs and obviously they are not identical. It is not a ‘community service station’ passively responding to popular demand and thereby endangering its intellectual integrity. Nor is it an ivory tower into which students and teachers can withdraw for a time for teaching or research, accepting no responsibility for the improvement of society. It must always be in a constant state of creative tension knowing where to interpret, where to criticise, where to pioneer, and where to support traditional values. It needs courage to reject unduly complacent images of one's individual or national life, and overcome the many emotional blocks in the mind. It must encourage in its students and also in the general public free and disinterested thinking which challenge vested interests and established ways.”

Written 50 years ago these messages are even more critical for the university community in today's context - when the accelerated process of social transformation, the propaganda and myths about globalisation, ideas of ‘the end of history and ideology’ threaten the basic role of universities - to develop young minds to think and act critically and creatively, to participate actively to achieve genuine social development.

I have inflicted this long quotation on you because I do not share the current ideas about the end of history or ideology. I have taken great pride that the freedom generation generated such ideas in our academic institutions, and left many of us with the persistent faith in the capacities of our young people to translate this vision into reality.

The same faith helped some of us – including your Vice Chancellor), to launch a movement for women’s studies and fight for its incorporation within the university system when the National Policy on Education was being formulated. In 1985 the Indian Association for Women’s Studies, in collaboration with the University Grants Commission and leading thinkers from the university system mounted pressure on the Education Ministry, the outcome of which was the small section within the policy statement titled Education for Equality. The Policy did not include all that we had suggested, but I can assure you one thing. **But for the intervention of the women’s movement, the words ‘equality’ and ‘empowerment’ would not have featured in the National Policy at all. The increasing trend among policy makers at the national and global level has been to regard education only as a marketable commodity in which promotion of values is considered irrelevant.**

Value education, human rights education and more recently the term ‘empowerment’ especially in the context of women have become part of the rhetoric and universities are expected to treat them at par with population and environmental education - as separate subjects for study. not as dimensions of critical and creative assessment. Yet each of these have thrown up complex issues in social development of which our generation had been totally unaware.

Developments in science and technology, the accelerated phase of globalisation, the weakening of the nation state system - the theories of ‘withdrawal of the state’ some current intellectual modes which try to negate any faith in universal human and social values, and the all pervasive influence of the market in every sphere of our lives — subject our young people to multiple pressures which were absent for most of us. **It is in this context that the role of universities becomes even more critical and crucial than ever before.**

Reports of increasing number of adolescent suicides - because they cannot cope with the pressures of competition and parental aspirations in educational achievement are grim signals of what is going wrong with our social development. Female infanticides in communities and regions with no early history of such practices, which your Vice Chancellor was one of the first to investigate are similar signals.

A recent study based on the ‘81 and ‘91 census on juvenile sex ratios indifferent regions and social groups suggests that both female infanticide and female foeticide following sex determination tests are spreading to new regions. It also raises a value question. Satish Agnihotri, who is currently completing this study, says the census data clearly indicates that it is only our tribal communities who have so far escaped these trends - since the juvenile sex ratio among them is the most balanced in the country. Who then should we assess as more backward in terms of social development?

In my own work with most impoverished tribal peasant women for the last seventeen years I have come to acknowledge and respect their sense of social responsibility and capacity for collective action not only for their own but others’ empowerment. I have also discovered that they have a different perspective and a store-house of knowledge - which they share with other peasant women - on management of natural resources from which all of us have a great deal to learn. Dr.

M.S. Swaminathan freely acknowledges that tribal women have helped to preserve whatever is left of our bio-diversity.

Are these not issues that need to come into our universities' teaching and research agenda? Should we not utilise the legitimacy conferred on universities by the National Policy on Education to intervene actively in women's empowerment to ensure that we can build a mutually supportive relationship with the women who have remained in the margin or fringe of our social system for thousands of years and are now identified only as the most deprived in terms of economic, social and political benefits of 'development'?

Years back Prof. M.N. Srinivas agreed with me that our educational system, instead of promoting the values contained in the Constitution, had become the most powerful instrument of the sanskritisation process. Engagement in action research with poor peasant women — including large groups of tribal women — has helped me to realise that the sanskritisation process can be countered through a policy of partnership between higher education institutions and such groups. Some of you may think me partisan in making this plea but I believe I am building on the messages of the Kothari Commission, in identifying one way in which universities can play a critical and creative role in social development.

Our inherited, established social values perpetuated a social, economic and political hierarchy through a powerful institutionalized system of social exclusion, and monopolies of economic, political and knowledge power. Today that hierarchy is global - and we have again become passive recipients of knowledge and political and economic doctrines emanating from regions and institutions which pay only lip service to the principles and concepts developed by the UN system. It is time for our universities to pick up the challenge and re-establish a two way dialogue, not only with ideology but with concrete research backed data for new perspectives on social development.

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