

Role of Higher Education in Curbing Extremism

Abstract

Education has a huge role to shape a person's persona and her/his mindset. If it were not for education, the world would not know the many geniuses who changed the way things were. Education, then, helps to go beyond the status quo.

Higher education, on the other hand, takes this process to the next level. In-depth research and innovation borne out of higher education, can contribute to newer knowledge-creation and can solve the many problems that plague the planet today. Extremism of various kinds is one of such problems. Let us first try to understand what Extremism is.

Keywords: Extremism, Identity, Higher Education, Extreme, Society, Psychological.

Introduction

Extremism, simply put, is to hold or resort to extreme views or measures/actions, to achieve a purpose. But when applied to the real life situation, the term is often complicated by its political references, economic motivations, and its sociological linkages.

Politically speaking, ideologies that aspire to break away from the mainstream, often through the use of violence and extreme measures, can be seen as extremism. The fringe groups that stand out of the mainstream political discourse like the far-left or far-right can be seen as extremism in the modern day. Often terms like radicalism, reactionism are used to describe such behaviour.

Economically seen, extremism can be used to further an economic goal or to achieve a socio-economic aim. The extreme-left and Maoism can be seen as one.

Sociologically speaking, extremism is usually seen as the espousal of extreme ideas, views and actions by an individual or a group, that goes against the mainstream ideas and norms of the society. It is advocating extreme means to achieve social ends. Now after having touched upon the basic understanding of extremism, let us now see how higher education can play a role to curb it. Higher education, as does primary education, helps shape the psyche of a person to a great extent. If we delve a little into psychology, extremism can be understood in its purest and deepest form. Psychologist Arno Gruen said, "The lack of identity associated with extremists is the result of self-destructive self-hatred that leads to feelings of revenge toward life itself, and a compulsion to kill one's own humanness."

Pay attention to the what Gruen says is a feature of an extremist. The lack of identity. The whole fight of extremist forces is for identity, for asserting an identity in society that otherwise relegates them to the fringes or margins.

Take the naxals for example. The socio-economic lack of opportunities and exploitation robs them of a sense of identity in the society they live in. It then gives rise to a rebellion against the very society that they live in, and that discriminates them. A maoist takes to the gun, because he derives a sense of identity from the rebellion itself. The government, and society will now give him an identity—of a maoist. Identity is the reason he is fighting a never ending battle of violence.

The right-wing fanaticism, calling for hindutva, or Hindu identity is another example. Terrorism, or fundamentalism taking recourse to violence, is perhaps the biggest menace of this century. For many of such fundamentalists, jihad becomes the way they see themselves in the society. Jihad becomes their identity. The sense of identity, in all the above cases could be related to religion, class and economic status, and even caste, ethnicity, gender.

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Now if we figure, that at the root of extremism is a sense of lack of identity, or a sense of misguided Identity, then what better way to solve the problem than higher education?

Education, by shaping your psyche, as I said earlier, lends itself to also shape who you are. It creates a sense of identity. Primary education forms primary identity for us. And higher education, then imparts higher sense of identity to us.

A child ascertains her/his identity as a girl/boy, her religion, later her caste and class and other such social identities, as she grows up but it is only through higher education, that this initial sense of identity is further underlined, further strengthened, further enriched. It is therefore important to see what our higher education imparts to the students, as it has a pivotal role in determining their deep-rooted identities, their sense of 'self' and the way they relate to themselves in the society. Higher education, in other words, deepens their sense of identity. And this becomes a reason, why working on our higher education system and its curricula can make a whole level of difference to the individual and collective consciousness of our students, which then plays a major role in their choice of a moderate, tolerant path, or of an extreme, intolerant and fanatic path. The choice is more ours, than their's. But in some cases, a higher education does not help much and even underlines the extremist belief even more. A believer in Maoism for instance, has read Mao, Marx and the like in his textbooks. The ideology came to him through education.

In such cases we need to look into what constitutes higher education in our country in the first place. Higher education should go beyond just empirical truths and theories, but should also delve into the normative concerns of our society, the moral needs of the society. Such a normative shift, from a purely empirical focus, can sensitize the students against extreme ideologies and modes of action. This is not to promote conformism among students and to curb valid rebellion of any kind, but to inculcate sense of responsibility in them towards the society they live in and most importantly towards themselves. A sense of identity that thinks beyond the barrel of the gun, beyond AK-47s, and embraces the cult of a reasoned, open discourse.

Aim of The Study

The following study is aimed at exploring the idea of extremism from the point of view of education and to outline the ways and means through which

higher education can be used to lesson and curb extremism. Indian society is plagued by extremism of various forms and kinds ranging from religious extremism to caste-based and class-based prejudices leading to violence and disharmony. The study looks at the rationale for using higher education as an instrument of change, both in the individual at a psychological level as well as social and political levels. The root causes of extremism lie in the mind and the social conditioning of a person, not to mention in the socio-economic and political subsystem s(h)e inhabits. All of these causes can be targeted through an effective higher education system aimed at an empathetic model of humanity, and at a more balanced way of learning, that shall keep away the extremes to the margins

Conclusion

Extremism, by virtue of its nature, is a position that refuses to acknowledge any kind of moderate or fluid understanding of any idea. Higher education does exactly that. It opens the world-view of a student to incorporate a diversity of concepts, analogies and ideas and also a plethora of opinions, points-of-view which can then mar extreme tendencies. Higher education sets in motion, a process of self-understanding and self-awareness, a lack of which can lead to extremist fancies. Higher education can sensitize students to realities other than their own. It makes the mind more open and more versatile, to take into account varied ideas without resorting to extreme binaries. A higher education model can thus aim at bridging the gap between 'us' and 'them', help in curbing the creation of 'the other', and can help lesson the polarisation of world views by adding nuance and comprehensivity to an otherwise divided world, hell-bent at boxing people in categories. In other words, higher education can help rise above these polarised categories.

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