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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES AND SOFT SKILLS IN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: Universities and college campuses are not only spaces for intercultural encounters but even offer challenges of the same. They are learning grounds for what lies ahead in professional spaces, business environments, neighbourhoods and larger social fabrics. Development of soft skills is of utmost importance in today's times where universities are microcosms of what lies outside it. Beyond academics, universities are training grounds for facing diversity with an inclusive and empathetic stance.

Index Terms - Soft skills, higher education, prejudice, discrimination, ethnicity, intercultural competencies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities are fertile grounds for nurturing intercultural competencies. There is hardly any other institution, which could facilitate congeniality through 'experiments with equality' (Beteille, 1981). Universities and college campuses are not only spaces for intercultural encounters but even offer challenges of the same as well as learning grounds for what lies ahead in professional spaces, business environments, neighbourhood associations and larger social fabrics. These spaces can be very crucial for one's peer group formations as well as decisions regarding pertinent matters regarding occupational, aspirational as well as political choices and decisions. For this reason, there is a need to be self-aware as well as cautious about the dangers of negative generalisations, stereotypes and convenient narratives about social situations. The dynamics of the process and institutionalisation of stereotyping communities/ regions is of great relevance in a country like India, which prides itself in its pluralist character. Universities are like microcosms of larger society and can be excellent grounds for training youth about harmonious coexistence, despite differences of culture, language, region, religion, caste, gender etc. Students coming to the University as a space for cultural encounters need to be trained in soft-skills, to enable harmonious coexistence, besides increasing potential for productive and creative pursuits. Many of them would have deep seated and socialised understandings of who is to be trusted, befriended or even seen with. Some of these perceptions may have to do with how families, communities, caste, class, gender groups nurse ideas about the 'other'.

II. UNIVERSITIES AS CULTURAL MICROCOSMS

Universities have to negotiate the challenges of equipping students with requisite skills for enabling to respond to the transforming needs of contemporary societies and even workplaces. Increasingly, there has been a lot of significance attached to soft skills which refer to personal characteristics and interpersonal behaviours such as how one communicates, responds and whether or not the person has the ability to work in a team. A series of studies agree in assigning soft skills a major role in employability, as well as in achieving well-being and personal goals (Cornalli, 2018). Globally, education systems' continuous and embedded misfit with the requirements of the employment market has raised misgivings about the role of universities and colleges in equipping prospective job seekers with the right kind of skills in culturally pluralistic professional eco systems. For them to be able to live up to those expectations, universities need to be able to not only transmit knowledge as well as skills that are particular to respective disciplines or occupations, but must also develop so-called soft skills, meaning dispositions and attributes that are transferable to many occupational situations and areas. This becomes a very pertinent requirement in today's globalised times. We seem to be coming closer territorially, digitally and even economically but have lots of gaps to fill when it comes to cultural connects. Even traditional games and sports are instruments of self-expression and a tool for sharing one's identity with others. Indigenous sports may be the backbone of a community's cultural identity, generating feelings of pride and rootedness in one's heritage. According to Hagmann et al, (2003) "The classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form". At the time of writing, campuses in India have become rife with contentious statements about a form of veiling that Muslim girls wear, as part of their religious practice. The fact that courts have had to intervene about its essentiality as well as the educational site as a secular one denotes the social fractures that universities and other institutions of higher education are grappling with. What needs to be noted is that the development of intercultural competence is not just something that students

need to be skilled at. Even teachers need to develop attitudes, skills as well as knowledge to enable awareness and an effective healthy learning environment. It is a conclusion foregone that a classrooms with diverse students, improve the satisfaction levels of both faculty and students (Polyak et al, 2013).

Universities as spaces for cultural interactions become sites for critical engagement by social scientists because of the impact that students' ethnic and class background can have on their performance in academics, besides peer group formations. This has been seen with reference to people coming from so called lower castes as well as other marginalised sections and regions, in Indian universities and colleges. The hegemonic practices of upper castes in various domains of social and professional life, including Universities have brought to light the challenges of implementing constitutionally recommended policies of inclusion and Equality. Even in a supposedly more advanced land of opportunities, as United States of America is known for, they have quite questionable standards as well as perceptions of an egalitarian society. According to Steele (2018), nearly all aspects of underperformance, which includes not only lower grades and other assessments but even actual graduation rates have been observed amongst middle class African Americans. So one can imagine if this poor performance is seen amongst middle class African Americans, what would be the plight of economically more disadvantaged people from the same ethnic community.

III. GLOBAL CONNECTS

Almost all nations and regions, world over, have some exposure to intercultural encounters as well as communication. They evolve and build resilience due to the impact of cultural diversities which further strengthens their culturally pluralistic character. Even people in remote areas are not completely untouched by the influence of social media as well as images due to technological advancement, thereby leading to metamorphosis of earlier cultural norms and behavioural patterns into newer ones. It may be a difference of degree only but people as well as communities are connected like never before. This has changed the economic and cultural landscapes even of most places in the world, including the remote ones. Even though communication opportunities and spaces have allowed for individuals and communities to be more connected than earlier, conflicts, suspicions and stereotypes abound between and within regions, cultures and nations. Hate speeches spread like the proverbial wild fire in volatile situations and make the coexistence of diversity and unity almost impossible. Globally, deeply embedded inequalities and violent wars or acts of extremism have been on the rise. Whether it be Indo-Pak conflict, the way North-eastern students are facing ridicule, stigma and acts of bullying in University campuses in India or Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan, the social fabric of many societies is fraught with negative vibes, violence and even xenophobia. According to Khair (2016), Xenophobia is not so much about unreasonable and reasonable fear of strangers as it is about an unequal and unfair enactment and institutionalisation of one's power over others. Incidentally, UNESCO was appointed as the lead agency in the for the International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013–2022).

IV. ETHNICITY AND CULTURE

An Ethnic group has been referred to as a group of people who have a 'common inherited culture (including language, music, food, dress, customs and practices), racial similarity, common religion, and belief in common history and ancestry and who exhibit a strong psychological sentiment of belonging to the group' (Taras and Ganguly, 2015). When identities based on the criterion of ascription, like caste, language, region, religion etc, become the determinants of 'collective mobilisations', then they take the shape of 'naturalised' identities for all, especially those who would like to see them from that light only which would mean from a partisan viewpoint (Gupta, 2007) According to him, India could actually qualify for several 'cultural' nations within the concept of State, due to deeply embedded restrictive consciousness of each of the various dimensions of ethnic identity ie. language, religion, region etc. Prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices add to the feelings of doubt, hatred and general hostility that some groups from some regions, ethnic groups or cultural practices face. It might even be just about the food that they consume or the way they wear a certain piece of clothing, which become markers of stigmatisation. For being able to foster intercultural dialogue would entail giving access to every everyone's culture and historical moorings besides bringing to the table the dynamics of cultural diversity with universal values to show the ways in which intercultural exchanges can promote the spirit of humanism. There are multifarious opportunities to share, listen and talk to people coming from diverse cultural and historical backgrounds.

According to a UNESCO report, we need to be aware of how cultural diversity has to coexist with human rights and only that can foster intercultural competencies. The dangers of war and conflict are there for all to see (UNESCO, 2013, p. 38). The kind of serious issues that we are grappling with in the 21st century; the most basic thing that we need to know about is how to live with each other. Increasing levels of extremist perspectives and actions, violence and even the crises caused by displacements have necessitated the importance of consolidating and intensifying dialogues among people coming from different cultural backgrounds and belief systems. This would not only foster a culture of peace but be able to counter hate speeches too. Undoubtedly, intercultural competencies are about working towards improvement of one's level and tone of social interactions, especially when one needs to have empathetic stances towards difference of gender, socio economic status, ethnicity, age, gender etc. (Deardorff, 2020). Culture can be understood as behavioural patterns which could be conspicuous or implicitly embedded acquired and transmitted by symbols, which then become characteristic traits of groups. The essential components that culture is identified with are ideas and values. In fact 'culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other, as conditional elements of future action' (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952). Famous American anthropologist Singer (1972) defined culture as a pattern of learned, group related perceptions including both verbal and non-verbal language, attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours. So while culture can be a learned activity it could also be the identifying marker for a group. It being a way of life which is patterned would ensure that beliefs, norms and practices would surface repeatedly in an individual and his group's lifetime/interactional process. He even pointed out that Western ethnocentrism had overshadowed how India was being perceived. The tendency to compare people and their practices and look at one culture from the standpoint of one's own is symptomatic of preconceived perceptions that can give a convoluted understanding of different cultures and their behavioural practices.

V. SOFT SKILLS

Unlike hard skills like technology, academic qualifications and other skills regarding ability to 'do' something, Soft skills are about 'person related competencies and are not centred around completing a task in any context. 'They enhance a person's ability to tackle professional settings through suitable and appropriate to context behaviour. This then can be 'further transferred for different activities' (Emanuel et al, 2021). While we discuss the idea of different cultural groups, ethnic identities, global conflicts as well as universities being microcosmic sites of what happens at the macro-social level, we need to understand the importance of soft skills development to tackle intercultural dynamics. While the world seems to be getting smaller and easier to travel within, offering all opportunities for establishing connections across territorial and social borders, it can be daunting indeed to collaborate with people from different cultures than one's own. Amongst the many other soft skills, patience and humour leave a great impact on how to break cultural barriers. The only thing that one has to be careful about is that one should be sensitive to not hurting anyone's religious, caste or ethnic sensitivities. One person's humour should not be another person's dent in dignity. One would need to be cautious that one's 'humour is understood and well-received (Schulz, 2008).

Hagmann et al, (2003) "The classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form". It would be pertinent to understand the unique contexts, cultural moorings as well as intercultural experiences for making sense of universities as spaces for social encounters. Intercultural competence is an important skill to be gained from higher education (Gierke et al, 2018). Research studies have revealed that intercultural competence is not so easily attainable, within a short once off kind of module or time span. It is in fact that could be a lifelong process where critical reflection may be the key achieve it (McKinnon, 2006). Some of the key constituents of intercultural competence could be involving knowledge enhancement, developing listening, critical thinking skills, having respect for others besides viewing difference of cultural norms as a learning opportunity. Students need to be aware of global, social and political happenings for improving their intercultural fluency. These would be very useful skills for success in careers and in global workplaces, which are becoming increasing inclusive (Gercar, 2019).

VI. CASE STUDY- SHORT TERM COURSE IN HINDU COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

In March 2021, Hindu college, University of Delhi had launched an online course to acquaint students across the country to pursue 'DEVELOPING SOFT-SKILLS THROUGH SPORTS AND CULTURE OF N.E INDIA 'The course had an enthusiastic response with almost 60 students participating, from all over the country, and, instructors being brought in from north eastern states of India, besides soft skills trainers from international professional settings. A community-driven group from Toronto very aptly called, 'Break the Divide' also joined in this initiative, to acquaint participants about how they had inculcated intercultural competencies amongst people of diverse cultures .This training and course were very well appreciated by all the participants ,and ,gave all a clear idea of the necessity of honing their soft skills in a highly globalised but conflict prone situations that nations, regions, work spaces, neighbourhoods and campuses may have to reckon with. The faculty coordinators, who were from the Philosophy and Sociology departments of the college, brought in their respective disciplinary intellectual moorings, along with theoretical perspectives about cultural as well as sports related dimensions of the north eastern region of India. At the time of launching this course, there was a need felt for developing soft skills in times when hatred, suspicion and stereotypes seem to have almost overshadowed harmonious co-existences of different cultural groups, within the country as well as elsewhere in the world.

This course attempted to analyse concepts like ethnocentrism, prejudices and stereotypes as well as hone soft-skills for building empathy and sensitivity towards people belonging to different ethnic backgrounds. Knowledge of indigenous sports would be seen as the prism through which one could understand different cultures, especially those that had been othered by the rest of the country. The North East in India has invariably been at the receiving end of stigma and discriminatory practices by many. Plus, knowledge of indigenous sports was seen as the prism through which one could understand 'other' cultures. Those who brought in inputs from their respective states, offered very insightful contributions for all the participants, who were exposed to many of the cultural aspects from their own country but felt that their knowledge of the north eastern part of their own country was much less than should have been the case. The resource persons who came from international settings to train them on soft skills were able to engage the participants in necessary traits of communication, empathy, sensitivity as well as willingness to coexist, co-work and even befriend people from different cultures and regional groups.

Students enrolled for the course not only got exposed to a less visible (courtesy media) and marginalised part of their country but even learnt how hard skills of getting degrees alone were not going to stand them in good stead. They learnt that people as well as cultures, including work cultures, academic culture and even sports eco systems need to accommodate, in fact equip them with necessary soft skills for a humane as well as inclusive approach to live in our pluralistic worlds. The course coordinators wanted to use the culture of sports as well as the seemingly different, often marginalised region of North East India as a template, a model, to critically analyse our attitudes and behaviour towards people. Questions that came up for discussion were centred around aspects posed thus: 'Do those who dress, eat, appear and live differently from what we erroneously consider to be the mainland India, deserve to be othered or looked down upon or equated as foreigners or, due to their appearance being similar to a neighbouring nation?' The emphatic 'No!' for an answer came through the lively proceedings of this course where everyone was reminded about not only the diversity of India but how difference of cultures, even appearance ,are not to be translated to discrimination, prejudice and inequality. The desire for this course germinated as a consequence of this writer's visit to the north eastern state of Manipur, along with 10 students of Hindu college as part of a Delhi University and Indian Railways collaboration, to get better acquainted with the various nuances of of the North eastern states. So groups were divided as per different research interests and the states of north east became familiar land to many who had never even imagined they would venture to that part of the country. Aptly named Gyanodaya Mission, this exploratory study turned out to be a paradigm shift for many who realised that there were quite a few similarities with their own regions and states ,which they would not have been exposed to, had they

not interacted with these 'different' people. As a consequence of this interaction between students coming from different cultures, students were made aware of the need to be cautious about negative generalisations and preconceived notions that they were so used to nursing that they did not even realise that it could be the death knell of harmonious coexistences.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that Universities are not just academic spaces. The need for building soft skills is even more important than hard skills, especially in today's conflict prone world. The simple traits of having empathy, building rapport with people coming from different cultural backgrounds, are hard to come by for those focusing too much on competition, assessments and excellence in curriculum centric education. Intercultural competencies are part of soft skills development which would make for a better, harmonious and peace loving world

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