

Mental health and the university

The education system must treat mental health as a valuable public good in its own right



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The Mental Healthcare Act was approved recently by Parliament. From now on, stigmatising a mentally ill person, and denying him or her the wherewithal for treatment will be illegal. As a teacher, I am interested in a special provision in the Act where public institutions such as universities are urged to treat mental health as a valuable public good in its own right.

Parents send their sons and daughters to university. On graduation, they expect the latter to chase the 'Indian dream'. What goes unnoticed in this pursuit of dreams is the undue strain on well-being or inner resourcefulness which experts call mental health. Because it seems intangible and yet ever-yielding, we tend to treat mental health as a kind of black box, tucking it away until it becomes absolutely essential to retrace anomalies that precipitate a crash. Surely, universities cannot afford this.

Pressure to perform

In the higher education scenario, sidelining mental health may still happen amid a belief that the latter is anathema to rigour. Mental health takes a back seat even within something as significant as a doctoral programme. For one thing, PhDs demand long-standing cerebral commitment on the part of the students and their beloved. Over five-plus years, students learn to grapple with hypotheses, narrative frameworks, and research methods. Can a protracted doctoral training in methodological prowess render graduate students feel wanting from within? Yes, it can. In fact, it may potentially undermine their wherewithal to weigh real-life challenges such as a shaky knowledge of English, attention deficit, competing gender demands, knowledge accessibility, and ups and downs of an unforgiving employment market. They may even be prompted to ignore at their peril a structural evil such as caste discrimination. Conversely, graduate students may slowly become self-serving, or be wrongly perceived as such. In like manner, a million instances of social regression may affect doctoral candidates during a student tenure and beyond.

Doctorate is a specialist training. It aims to prepare someone as a full-fledged professional researcher in a given field. An undergrad programme, on the other hand, aims to offer a generalist training in one or a selected

cluster of knowledge systems. Furthermore, an undergrad course is designed with the premise that its clientele are straight from the school, and are in formative stages of life. Naturally, tertiary classroom is an ideal place to test the scope, depth, and the reception of any field of knowledge. A mental health-aware teaching plan may potentially strengthen such disciplinary manoeuvrings from the foundations up.

Opening up young minds

Take a literature class, for example. College teachers may make use of a supreme role of literature such as an advocacy function. During an advocacy adventure, teachers and students gain a rare freedom to explore something as ghastly as disability discrimination caused by an ill social organisation. Towards this end, they may examine a circulation of a malicious stereotype, and much more, in favour of a disability-enabled literary criticism. All the same, to introduce the three-dimensionality of a discriminatory environment, I will prompt students to imagine situations where one is pushed against the wall, harassed, and, for that matter, offered an unexpected healing touch. Such a narrative imagination, I contend, may enable students to open up. Further, it may help them appreciate something as fundamental as emotional fulfilment, and factors such as discrimination that can potentially wreck it from inside. Likewise, teachers may encourage students to consider how their respective disciplines add value to human well being. A teacher of computer science, for example, may offer a module on the impact of robotics and the digital revolution on human emotion. In a similar vein, a civil engineering teacher may introduce a module on the close link between habitat, architectures, and human resourcefulness. The possibilities are endless! It all depends on the will of the teachers who are in some sense unacknowledged pillars of the much-talked-about knowledge revolution.

'Guru Brahma, guru Vishnu, guru dhevo maheshvaraha'. I will not hesitate for a moment to ignore the mythical import of this Sanskrit dictum. However, I cannot afford to discount the special role of a teacher in the creation, preservation, and destruction of knowledge. Great teacher and student bonding facilitates a creation of priceless ideas, the preservation of human goodness, and a war against bigotry. It is for this reason we should reinstate mental health as a binding principle and an everyday reminder of human dignity in a university setting.

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