

08 University Education and Cultural Conflicts: The Way Forward



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Cultural differences, religious, regional, ethnic, racial and other prejudices leading to conflicts, wars and

destruction are not new. Cultural fault lines appear to be the fundamental reason for differences and conflict in large parts of both the Global South and North. Some of these conflicts are so intractable that they can potentially engulf an entire region, or

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indeed the whole world, into perpetual hatred and bloodletting. We are on the horns of a dilemma having to choose between our desire to break new knowledge grounds through inter-galactic voyages on the one hand and raging conflicts on the other. It is paradoxical. The spectre of resolving the paradox seems to cast a dark pall of gloom over our own agencies and progress. We are faced by the old question, what is the way forward to get out of this maelstrom?

The Challenge of Cultural Pluralism

The problem of cultural pluralism has both an internal and external face. Internally, we confront cultural differences within our own societies. These differences arise because of contemporary critiques of cultural practices and beliefs. These critiques purport to expose the way traditions perpetuate entrenched status relationships. For example, are religions a source of values to be protected or to be cabined? Externally, the differences between us and others are not merely variant interpretations of common standards. Rather, we have radically different understandings of appropriate social norms. The problems of cultural pluralism reflect a battle between the completing first principles: universalism and particularism. In their most extreme expression, they provide no foundation on which to make any compelling criticism of different cultures. There is no way to make cross-cultural comparisons between values. Are we forced to say either too much or too little? If we focus on the difference itself, we cannot solve the problem. We will keep alternating between the rhetoric of universalism and particularism without any resolution. In this diabolical context, let us see if universities, which occupy an important space in our moral imagination, can help in resolving the dilemma.

Universities and Intercultural Dialogue

Aware of the cultural pluralism and conflicts around the world, the Council of Europe organized a conference in 2009 titled “Universities as Actors of Intercultural Dialogue in Wider Society” which clearly acknowledged universities as vehicles for the promotion of intercultural and cross-cultural communication. Universities can promote positive communication across cultures in two ways. Firstly, by holding programs on their own campuses for their students and secondly by reaching out to society. The internationalization of education and institutions of higher learning is yet another method that brings people belonging to different cultures in contact with one another as learners. It is an excellent vehicle through which people can learn about each other. The Global

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International Association of Universities (IAU), founded in 1950, is the leading global association of higher education institutions and university associations. It convenes and connects 600 Members from around 130 countries to identify, reflect and act on common priorities.

IAU partners with UNESCO and other international, regional and national bodies active in higher education and serves as the Global Voice of Higher Education.

Academic Exchange Network (GIAN) initiative of the Ministry of Education, Government of India, is a commendable initiative which is worth mentioning in this regard.

The service rendered to the community remains one of the objectives of the university since the founding of Al-Azhar in Cairo, Bologna in Europe, or much earlier Nalanda or Taxshila in India. These institutions became well-known and famous because of their international outreach and quest for learning and appreciation of scholarship transcending their own cultural settings. For example, the Chinese traveller and Buddhist monk Hieun Tsang visited Nalanda University in the 7th Century to study Buddhism and later began to teach there. There are numerous such examples from around the world that recur on the universal character and openness of universities.

Universities are deeply committed to shared values of pluralism, diversity and openness through dialogue which help us establish a bridge of communication between cultural divides. Dialogue reflects unity of purpose and reason. Institutions of higher learning have a huge role to play in achieving the same.

Universities represent globalised spaces. Therefore, interculturality, multiculturalism, cross-culturality and transculturality are important ideals, not only in theory but also as practices which typically come to life on campus. We need to reform our pedagogy in universities to eliminate stereotyping and discrimination. In my understanding, universities – as platforms of sharing and learning – must draw on their own and other cultural resources to develop a new pedagogy that encourages learners to become truly global individuals.

Cultural Conflicts and their Antidote

We may have to draw upon the insights of our own historical experience to reduce conflicts that arise from privileging certain belief systems and cultural symbols over others. The Indian intellectual tradition, for instance, overwhelmingly promotes the idea of pluralism. The idea is encapsulated in Vedic writings in form of *Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vedanti* (Truth is one but we call it by different names) or India’s civilizational motto expressed as *Vasudhav Kutumbakam* (The world is one family). Gandhi Jee, Ravindra Nath Tagore, Swami Vivekanand and numerous others struggled in their lives to follow the righteous path. They are perfect examples of tolerance and intercultural communication and dialogue. Other non-Western and Western traditions harbour any number of inspirational events and individuals as significant promoters of the ‘principles of universalism’. We thus conclusively emphasise that our resources can provide new perspectives to create an effective pedagogy in the system of teaching in universities.