

The road to empathy in our education

Entrenched privilege of all kinds, especially caste, delivers more privilege, exclusivity and elitism in an India sleepwalking into a disaster

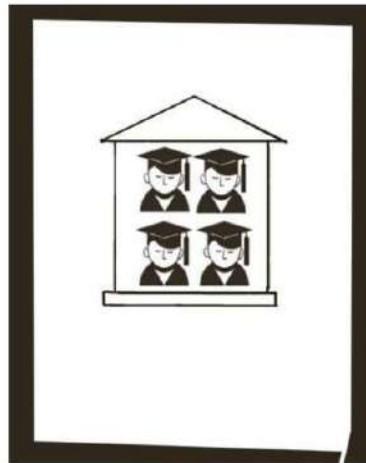
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Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud has made some timely and significant comments on the state of our elite institutions in the light of the suicide of a Dalit student at IIT-Mumbai on February 12 and of an Adivasi student at National Law University-Odisha last year. Delivering the silver jubilee lecture combined with the nineteenth convocation address recently at the National Academy of Legal Studies and Research (NALSAR) University of Law, Hyderabad, the CJI said: "The incidents of suicide of students from the marginalised communities are becoming common. These numbers are not just statistics, they are stories sometimes of centuries of struggles." The CJI asked for "institutes of empathy" rather than "institutes of eminence", setting the tone for what must become a national debate on the state and indeed the role of education in modern-day India. This must open questions on how and why the Indian education system has largely failed to deliver graduates informed on ideas of equity and equality, and larger ideas of service, community, and values.

Broadly speaking, eminence in the system itself is in doubt, given that many questions have been raised about the readiness of the large number of technically qualified graduates that pass through the system every year to give us, for example, among the world's largest scientific and technical manpower. But that only enhances the appeal of a smaller, elite pool that many Indians still think highly of. An example is the IITs that have escaped critical scrutiny on the road to building a supposed scientific temper in India that has been encashed by many a graduate to mean a one-way flight to the United States – often for a job and only sometimes an entrepreneurial venture.

The economist Ashoka Mody in an insightful book – *India is broken* – notes, for example, that the IITs and other elite places have brought about a "shambolic mess". Mody, an IIT graduate himself, writes: "Rich Indians and senior civil servants sent their children to privileged private high schools, whence they either travelled abroad for university or launched into elite liberal arts colleges,

the IITs, and the best medical colleges. From there, they joined the civil services, found scarce high-paying private sector jobs, or went abroad to work." This meant "millions of Indian geniuses remained undiscovered" and the best Indian institutions were starved of faculty and funds, an example being Allahabad University, once considered the "Oxford of the East". Over the years, more jobs have opened up but the imbalance cited by Mody hasn't been fixed; it only got worse.



It is the lasting misfortune of this nation that entrenched privilege of all kinds, caste being a particularly pernicious variety, delivers more privilege, exclusivity and elitism that is normalised in an India sleepwalking into a disaster of our own making. It is this system that the CJI has spoken against, and his framing is particularly useful – 'institutes of empathy' rather than mere eminence – at a time disregard for empathy is killing humanity and indeed everything else progressive and valuable that the India of tomorrow should stand for.

The idea of the eminent elite is antithetical to the idea of empathy. In so far as empathy opens doors to the hearts and minds of the other, it helps make for better inquiry, more openness, and adds the missing element of humanity and values to a scientific endeavour that otherwise can go berserk, remain narrow-focused, with the tendency to bring solutions that are worse than the disease.

That makes empathy a good value, indeed a prerequisite, for building scientific temper. It is a good antidote to the hegemony of mechanistic science, a way out of the reductionist approaches that have landed us in the Anthropocene, and opens the doors to the world of Systems Thinking that tells us that all systems are intelligent and interconnected, and that the earth is alive.

This is at the heart of the very Indian idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – the world is one family. This is a very different approach from Francis Bacon's "torture of nature" to force her to reveal her secrets at the start of the Scientific Revolution.

In the immediate context in which the CJI spoke, empathy is the bedrock of social justice. "Societies that empathically attend to the needs of their more vulnerable members are societies that are good for everyone. Data now shows that when empathy levels fall in a society, violence increases, economic inequality increases, instability infiltrates the social institutions, health conditions worsen, and educational systems are short-changed... Individual wellbeing and communal stability suffer under conditions of low empathy and significant economic inequality," to quote the highly-regarded Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research.

The unfortunate part is that the conversations among common Indians, anecdotally speaking, appear not to grasp the deep damage that is being done to the nation by a language that speaks of power, control, growth, confidence and a 'biggie-ness' that celebrates some short-term numbers while the real assets in people and their concerns are trivialised or ignored. There is a culture that refuses to understand the pain of an entire class of population subjugated over the centuries, a harshness that translates in general to every other aspect of Indian life, superimposed on which is the ever-present threat of violence (State and non-State) that makes the claim of a nation that stands for non-violence hollow.

These are big issues that need more debate. What does not need debate is some quick fixes that can answer the immediate problems in our society. As Justice Chandrachud noted in his speech, there is no reason why hostels should be allotted on the basis of marks of students, or results be declared or grades calculated in a manner that can make a set of students feel small. There is no reason why disrespect is tolerated on campuses and in our workplaces. These practices, guided by well-written codes of conduct, can be put to an end with clear guidelines and a clear-headed leadership. The problems India faces in the areas of caste and various other forms of discrimination will not go away in a hurry. Yet, strong messages and regular reminders can help. In that light, Justice Chandrachud's speech is an important milestone and will be referred to for a long time.

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR. Views are personal)
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