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To Question or Not to Question? That Is the Question

ROMILA THAPAR

Public intellectuals are not absent in Indian society, nor are they alien imports. But where there should be voices, there is now often silence. Are we all being co-opted too easily by the comforts of conforming? Are we fearful of the retribution that questioning may and often does bring?

Nikhil Chakravarti, the founder-editor of *Mainstream*, respected intellectual and academic opinion about public matters. He provided space to those who questioned the nature of the interdependence of society and politics. Today that space has shrunk and the intellectual parameters have narrowed. It seems that those in authority and those influencing public opinion have less respect for the public intellectual now than was so before. I would like to ask whether or why this is so, a subject that I suspect would have interested Nikhil Chakravarti. It becomes pertinent where there is a concern with the kind of society we want and why we want it.

I shall refer briefly here to what I think is implied by the presence of public intellectuals. As a historian I cannot help but instinctively go back in time. So I will begin with mentioning a few persons from the European past associated with the kind of thinking that in modern times gave rise to the public intellectual. And then I will mention some from the Indian tradition who played a similar role. There is no connection between the two but I think they are parallel in many ways. And finally I shall suggest what could be the role of public intellectuals and why there should be a greater visibility of such persons in our society today.

Public intellectuals frequently concern themselves with issues related to human rights and to the functioning of society such that it ensures the primacy of social justice. These issues cover an immense span. I shall choose a couple from among them, those that I think have priority. One is the question of what we regard as authority – whether it be religion, the state or anything else, in accordance with the issue under discussion, and how do we assess the choice.

The second is how we draw upon knowledge and the use to which it is put. We must expect, for instance, that new knowledge opposes existing orthodoxies or well-established authorities. How do we handle the opposition? This hinges on the primacy of reasoned, logical argument, in explaining the world around us as well as its past. In emphasising the rational I am not expunging imagination as a process of thought, but the distinction should not be ignored.

Such concerns are not recent. They go back to antiquity and were addressed many centuries ago. I shall mention a few people from the past whose thinking laid the foundation for our right in the present to ask questions from those who are shaping our society. In earlier times the questions emerged largely from rational argument and logical thinking, but tempered by recognition of the human condition. Their answers did not foreclose the imagined future of a better society on earth, and did not require us to wait for heaven, or the next birth. Europe claims a tradition of such thinking. And its presence in Indian thought is more often dismissed. But I would contest this dismissal. Societies invariably have to allow the questioning of orthodoxy and authority, at least at challenging moments, or else they rapidly become moribund.

To turn to the European past. The forerunners of the public intellectual indulged in philosophical questioning but this thinking also penetrated the political sphere and was reflected in suggested social action. Such persons claimed the right to critique authority even if on occasion they had to suffer for it, as did Socrates. The Athenian Greeks objected to his denying the existence of deities and to his criticism of the methods of justice in Athens. For this he was condemned to drink poison.

However, an important strand of European thinking traces itself back to the Socratic method of the fifth century BC. A statement was subjected to many questions, and was prised apart to observe the interconnections of its component parts. These could then be linked

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causally in a hypothesis and tested. A proposition counterposed by its opposite could lead to a dialectical form of debate. The Roman orator Cicero, of the first century BC, who exposed the corruption of some of the Roman governors, claimed the right to question whatever he thought needed to be questioned, and used his legal brilliance to do so.

Questioning the Church

In the second millennium AD the Catholic Church wielded power over kings. This power was subsequently questioned. It was one of the issues that stoked European thought into the movement known as the Enlightenment. Philosophers, with whose names we are familiar – Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau and others – began questioning conventional knowledge and practice. There were disagreements among them and with others, but by and large their questions were conceded because they drew on critical reasoning. This brought them together, apart from their common challenge to the moral authority of the Catholic Church, especially in matters concerning what we would today call civil society. The latter was now seen as constituted of essentially secular institutions, some run by the state. Religious exclusiveness and intolerance was viewed as backward. Progress, it was argued, lay in inclusiveness and the tolerance of differences.

It was not because of wanting to oppose religion per se that the Church was criticised but because of opposition to the hold that formal religion had on the institutions of society – the family, education, governance and justice. The divine sanction of these institutions was rejected. Thus the source of authority for governance was said to be a social contract among people. Apart from other things an emphasis on reasoned analysis rather than on quoting faith, made it easier to locate the mainsprings of social functioning, and to suggest changes in society where necessary.

However, the public intellectual, as distinct from philosophers, is said to have emerged as a recognisable category in the 19th century, linked to what has

been called the Dreyfus Affair. A Jewish captain in the French army, Dreyfus, was wrongly imprisoned charged with leaking secrets to the Germans. Those opposing this action argued that the general staff of the army in league with the politicians had unjustly punished Dreyfus. This accusation written by Emile Zola carried the support of a large number of writers, artists and academicians, all of whom jointly came to be called, “intellectuals”. Eventually an enquiry, divorced from an emotional anti-Semitism, declared Dreyfus innocent, and reinstated him. The meaning of “intellectual” crystallised around the notion that such a person need not be a scholar but had to be someone who had a recognised professional stature, and who sought explanations for public actions from those in authority, even if such explanations required critiquing authority and power.

Such questions come more easily if there is a critical analysis of the intellectual tradition of the society. Basing arguments on accepted modes of reasoning involves verifying and analysing the evidence, even if the historical context changes the mode of questioning. (Incidentally, this method is now basic not only to the sciences but also to the social sciences, providing intelligible explanations of social and political institutions and activities. Unfortunately it is not always appreciated when applied to historical research and conventional views are therefore questioned.)

The notion of rational argument over the last two centuries has, however, faced criticism. Its centrality was questioned in the statement that the premium on rationality cannot provide complete explanations, and that all explanations – rational or otherwise – are equally viable. Critiques based on rational thought could be diverse depending on the evidence and the logic inherent in causal explanation. However, although the idiom of critical reasoning may differ in changing historical contexts, critical reasoning itself, can and does continue.

It is worth remembering that many of the roots of modern thinking, such as liberal values and democracy, by which we describe ourselves as not being

medieval or feudal, go back to these debates among philosophers and others. Nor were the debates confined to Europe since some of these ideas met with confirmation or rejection when they arrived in other parts of the world, initially riding on the back of colonialism.

Let me turn now to the Indian tradition and randomly refer to a few persons that challenged existing ideas and practices and who advocated reasoned and logical explanations for change. We have been so implanted with the theory that our ancestors had no use for rationality as an avenue to knowledge that we tend to ignore our heritage of rational thought.

The Buddha

The Indian philosopher who encouraged questions and who explored causality and rational explanations was a close contemporary of Socrates in the fifth century BC, although they lived continents apart and had no links. I am referring to the Buddha. The latter fortunately did not have to drink poison, but his teaching was strongly opposed by early brahmanical orthodoxy. It was described as delusional and misleading. This was one among many other reasons why Buddhism got slowly edged out of India. It went into neighbouring lands where it flourished, and in some places became in its own turn, orthodoxy.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the history of ideas is the diverse ways in which societies explain their evolving structures. When asked about the origin of government, the Buddha explained that at the beginning of time there was a pristine utopia where everyone was equal and had equal access to all resources. The first change came when families were demarcated and became the units of society. Subsequent to this came claims to ownership of land as private property. These changes resulted in confusion and conflict. So eventually people came together and elected from among themselves one person – the *mahasammata*, the great elect – to govern them and to provide them with laws that annulled the chaos. It was effectively a social contract. Let me hastily add, tongue-in-cheek of course, that neither

Jean-Jacques Rousseau nor Friedrich Engels had read the Buddhist texts!

This Buddhist explanation contradicts the many brahmanical versions. In these the story involves the gods and demons at war, and since the gods were faring badly they appealed to the great god Prajapati for help. In some versions he appointed his son, Indra, to lead the gods to a victory – in which action lie the roots of governance. Appeal to deities and divine sanction is essential and it colours the attitude to authority. The Buddha's notion of the "great elected one" is in some ways the reverse of the king – who was divinely appointed, concentrating power in himself. The assumptions in the two myths, differ.

When religion is referred to in these early texts, there is of course no mention of Hinduism – a term invented much later. The multiple sects that constituted Indian religion are referred to by their individual names. When speaking generally they tend to get assigned to one of the two streams: *brahmana* – associated with brahmanical belief, or *shramana* – representing Buddhist and Jaina teaching. (*Shramana* was the term used for Buddhist monks.) This is the form in which the religions are mentioned for over a thousand years, from the edicts of Ashoka in the third century BC to Al-Biruni's account of India in 11th century AD. The Sanskrit grammarian Patanjali, writing at the start of the first millennium AD, provides an additional perspective when he compares the relationship of the two, to that of the snake and the mongoose. Clearly the debates could be virulent, as happens in societies where some believe unquestioningly in what they are told, but others raise questions.

Carvakas

And then there were the Carvakas, also called the Lokayatas. They were opposed to most philosophical schools as they adhered to a materialistic explanation of life, making virtually no concession to other ways of thinking. No text of theirs has survived, but references to them keep cropping up unexpectedly in various nooks and crannies of known texts. The Buddha describes the

arguments of some of these sects as "the wriggling of an eel".

At the turn of the Christian era, when Buddhism had the patronage of royalty, traders, landowners as well as popular support, important brahmanical texts registered sharp opposition to them describing them as heretics, referring to them as *nastika* – non-believers. From the brahmanical perspective, the Shramanas, Carvakas, Ajivikas, atheists, materialists and rationalists, were all one category – *nastikas*. And this because they questioned the existence of deity, and therefore also of the Vedas as divinely revealed; of the rules of caste practices; of the existence of the *atman*, soul; and their views on *karma* varied as some rejected the idea altogether. (I am reminded of the followers of Hindutva in our times for whom anyone and everyone who does not support them, are all put into one category and called Marxists! Interestingly, I am told that Muslim religious fundamentalists in India have also started putting liberal Muslims who oppose the orthodoxy into one category, and are calling them Marxists.)

The Manu *Dharma-shastra* is almost paranoid about the heretics, calling them atheists and preachers of false doctrines. They are said to be like diseased men and are a source of *tamas* – the condition of darkness. It was in some ways a time of troubles for the orthodoxy, given that some dominant schools of philosophy were striated with degrees of atheism. But that is what makes it an intellectually exciting time.

Wherever the heretics had a popular following, the attack on them became stronger. The *Vishnu Purana*, of the early centuries AD, is replete with negative references to a person called Mayamoha and his followers. Delusion and deception, as the name, *maya-moha*, implies, are characteristic of the group. Mayamoha collects all the evil ones – the *asuras* and *daityas* – and converts them to his way of thinking. Some of their practices point to their being Buddhists and Jains: such as wearing red robes, removing their hair, not observing rituals and living off alms. Discourse with them is not permitted, since such discourse is declared polluting. A record of such a

dialogue would have been fascinating but only brief references survive.

The Carvakas continued to be part of the landscape even if not always directly visible. Shankaracharya in the ninth century AD refers to their theory of the primacy of matter over spirit. And the *Sarvadarshana-sangraha*, a discussion on major philosophical schools put together in the 14th century, by Madhava-charya, begins with a lengthy discussion on the viability of Carvaka thinking. Although he finally rejects it, he nevertheless discusses it at some length. If the Carvaka thinking had been of no consequence, it could as well have been ignored. This, of course, did happen later in the world of 19th century colonial scholarship, when some colonial writers argued that rational thought was absent from Indian civilisation and was one of the causes of Indian backwardness. This argument, although unacceptable to nationalist thinking, was not confronted in any significant way by Indian scholars. Those that ask questions are anathema to any kind of autocratic authority. Similarly, those trying to build a single national identity based solely on Hinduism would not have conceded the significance of teachings that contradicted the brahmanical.

The heretics were dismissed by the orthodox. However, some of their ideas and other similar ideas were explored in philosophical schools of the early centuries AD. At the scholarly level, discussions among learned brahmanas and Buddhists, gave rise to various impressive philosophical schools. Logic and methods of reasoning were sharpened, as also were other methods of thought more sympathetic to idealistic philosophy. The major logicians, at this point were interestingly largely Buddhist, such as Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Dignaga and Dharmakirti, some of whom had been born brahmanas and educated accordingly but preferred to be Buddhists. They teased out the ideas, and especially more so when discussing the nuances of atheism. Views were not uniform and were widely debated, the argument sometimes taking an almost dialectical form.

What would have been of much intellectual significance but which is

unfortunately difficult to locate, are conversations between philosophers using critical reasoning with astronomers or mathematicians, even more closely allied to rational thought. Aryabhata on the basis of mathematical calculation argued that the earth went round the sun. This theory preceded that of Copernicus and of Galileo by a millennium. In Europe the potential of these ideas was feared by Catholic orthodoxy as undermining the Bible and therefore also the control of the Church on society. Galileo had to recant. In India there was a debate among astronomers on the heliocentric model, but its wider implications seem to have been bypassed, possibly because there was no Catholic Church. But if I may suggest another reason, adopting the heliocentric system would perhaps have upset some astrological calculations. Astrology was one mechanism by which royal power was controlled by religious orthodoxy. Old knowledge therefore continued unshaken in most places. Indian theories of mathematics and astronomy expanded creatively in their own space, but ironically became more influential when taken to Baghdad, the then centre of proto-science.

In India, meanwhile, other sects provided an ambience in which similar questions were being raised. Scholars questioned beliefs and practices upheld by religious authorities and by those who governed or they questioned other orthodoxies, other than the brahmanical. Some among them were women, such as Andal, Akka Mahadevi and Mira, flouting caste norms, who were listened to attentively by people at large, creating their own social codes. But we seldom give enough attention to this aspect of their discourse, focusing as we do largely on religion.

Amir Khusrau was not unknown to the Delhi Sultans. He provides a poetic view of court politics in his *Tughlaq-nama*, composed in the 14th century as a form of traditional history. His study of astronomy, however, underlining a heliocentric universe, distanced him from orthodox Islam, as it implied questioning accepted truths. And it was his poetry and musical compositions that gave him a status and

a following, such that even though he was regarded as a court poet, the Sultans and the orthodox thought it better not to antagonise him. His mentor and friend, Nizam-ud-din Auliya, a Sufi of the Chishti order, kept his distance from the Sultans and made a point of asserting the distance.

A few centuries later Ekanath in Maharashtra also questioned the control exercised by formal religion. His versions of the *Bhagavata Purana* and of the *Ramayana* defined his brahmanical scholarship. This did not stop him from questioning the viability of the social order and caste practices.

Not everyone who was teaching a new form of worship was questioning authority, but where they were, this has to be recognised by us. We have hesitated to do this since the form in which social commentary occurs in earlier times is unfamiliar to us. We tend to brush aside the views of such people on matters other than those referring to belief and worship, forgetting that religious belief does make the claim to be all-encompassing, and to speak on all aspects of life. Therefore, even those who were primarily religious teachers did have views on society and social values. These views are of considerable interest and especially at moments in history

when religious sects were incorporating ideas from a wide range of sources.

Questioning by Nationalism

Turning to modern times, the ideology of nationalism made attempts to re-order society. Nationalism may have opposed colonialism but was not always averse to appropriating theories from colonial scholarship. Social reform movements pertaining to upper caste Hinduism, such as the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj, suggested new forms of Hindu religious organisation and the role of caste. We are all familiar with Raja Ram Mohan Roy and socio-religious reform, but so little is said about his exact contemporary in Tanjore – Serfoji II, a minor Maratha raja. He questioned orthodoxy by focusing on the content of education. His reading of Enlightenment authors convinced him that knowledge was based on processes of reasoning and that these were taught through education. The schools he established were intended for this purpose, as were the books and objects that he collected for the Saraswathi Mahal Library.

Although these movements were not intended to critically question the intellectual traditions, they did occasionally scrape the surface. Despite the centrality of caste hierarchies legitimised by religion,

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the interface between religion and caste was seldom investigated. In the 19th century Bal Gangadhar Tilak supported the Aryan foundations of Indian civilisation and upper caste culture, even if, according to him, the Aryans did have to trek all the way from their Arctic homeland to India. But Jyotiba Phule saw the coming of the Aryans as a logical explanation for the oppression of the lower castes. For him the Aryans were brahmanas who oppressed the indigenous inhabitants who were the *shudras*. Tilak extended the accepted view, Phule questioned it to explain existing society. Both readings were historically faulty, but Phule was asking an incisive question.

There were others who were also questioning the legitimacy of caste, and were critical of brahmanical beliefs. Periyar, or EVR, although not an academic, was known to be as well-read as were his academic colleagues. He was critical of the contradictions in Hindu mythology which, as a rationalist, he dismissed as fabrications of the Indo-Aryan peoples. He took a strong position in favour of social equality, and more particularly the equality of women.

The people I have mentioned were not public intellectuals in the modern sense. They were among those who questioned the existing reality as a means of attaining an improved society. They were listened to because they were respected in their diverse professions. The point is not the similarity or otherwise of their questions. It is the way in which they reasoned even if the nature of the questions changed in accordance with the issues of the moment. Such questions are not arbitrary. They have to be governed by acknowledged critical reasoning. And people who question, were and are, articulate at moments of significant historical change.

Moments of historical change coincide with the exploration of new ways of ordering society, as has been happening off and on in the Indian past. Now we have more insightful ways of understanding social and economic conditions and how they give a form to society. These connections require exploration. Public intellectuals, playing a discernible role are needed for such explorations, as also

to articulate the traditions of rational thought in our intellectual heritage. This is currently being systematically eroded.

Mainstream anti-colonial Indian nationalism and the emergence of a liberal democracy, aspiring to be secular, made space for the visible presence of the public intellectual. More than a few took on this role, especially in the years just after Independence. They were responsible for wide-ranging debates. Later events, be it the Emergency or the genocides of religious communities, heightened our awareness of the need for public intellectuals, if only to speak out and prevent a repetition of such events. We must remind ourselves that Nikhil Chakravarti, Romesh Thapar, and others like them, opposed forms of censorship, and the attempt to silence alternate voices.

Silence of Academics

Today we have specialists in various professions, but many among them are unconcerned with the world beyond their own specialisation. It is sometimes said that they are replacing the public intellectual. But the two are not identical. There are many more academics, for instance, than existed before. But it seems that most prefer not to confront authority even if it debars the path of free thought. Is this because they wish to pursue knowledge undisturbed, or, because they are ready to discard knowledge should authority require them to do so?

Much has been written on trying to define the public intellectual. Such a person, it is assumed, should take a position independent of those in power, enabling him or her to question debatable ideas, irrespective of who propagates them. Reasoned critiques are often the essential starting point. The public intellectual has to see himself or herself as a person who is as close to being autonomous as is possible, and more than that, be seen by others as such.

An acknowledged professional status makes it somewhat easier to be autonomous. The public intellectual of today, in addition to being of such a status, has at the same time a concern for what constitute the rights of citizens and

particularly in issues of social justice. And further, there is a readiness to raise these matters as public policy.

A justification for the critique is the claim to speak for society and to claim a degree of moral authority. The combination of drawing upon wide professional respect together with a concern for society can sometimes establish the moral authority of a person and ensure public support. This is a conceded qualification and not a tangible one. In the past it was those who had distanced themselves somewhat from society who were believed not to have ulterior motives in the changes they suggested. But this was not always so. Formal affiliation to a political party in our times can inhibit free-thinking and prescriptions for action, even if it has the advantage of providing a support.

As an attitude of mind, autonomy is more readily expected of the professional specialist or the academic. Such persons, and they are not the only ones, can suggest alternate ways of thinking, even about problems of the larger society. Such thinking emerges from reasoned, logical analyses. Yet academics today are hesitant to defend even the right to make what might be broadly called alternate, if not rational interpretations, however sensitively they may be expressed. This is evident from the ease with which books are banned and pulped, or demands made that they be burned, and syllabuses changed under religious and political pressure, or the intervention of the state. Established publishers are beginning to suffer from a paralysis of the spine. Why do such actions provoke so little reaction among many academics and professionals? The obvious answer, usually given, is that, they fear the instigators who are persons with the backing of political authority. Is this the only answer?

Many today comment on the narrowing of the liberal space in the last couple of decades. It was fought back, and now it is upon us again. To question those that represent conventional authority and to demand responsible action, needs to be repeated again and again, especially where it involves a negation of justice. The social media were thought of as a free space and to some extent

they are. But people now hesitate to share critical comments on religious activities or on contemporary politics, for fear of action against them. More specifically when it comes to religious identities and their politics we witness hate campaigns based on absurd fantasies about specific religions and we no longer question these frontally.

Acting in Name of Religion

Such questioning means being critical of organisations and institutions that claim a religious intention but use their authority for non-religious purposes. They invoke the rules and regulations of formal religion, sometimes recently invented, in order to legitimise their actions. Their actions may bring murder, rape and mayhem. Those not associated with such organisations maintain that the values of religion are such that none preach violence. But that is not the issue. Of course all religions endorse virtuous values. But it is not the values that are under question, it is the beliefs and actions of organisations that act in the name of religion, but not always in conformity with religious values. We are only too familiar with such organisations that have identified with Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism and have not hesitated to breed violence and terror. Can the law be brought to bear against those that disrupt the law even if they speak in the name of religion? Although necessary, it is not enough to castigate such actions and rest at that. We have to understand why such actions, supposedly to defend religion, are resorted to and how can they be brought to a close. Do believers, identifying with the religion, endorse such actions? And if not, should they not be defending the values of their religion by disassociating themselves from the perpetrators of violence and the terror, using their religious identity?

There are many reasons for the decline of the public intellectual. I can only mention some. The most obvious but least conceded are insecurities generated by the neo-liberal culture. These have arisen out of the economic boom it was supposed to bring, but which boom has misfired. Jobs have become far more

competitive and this adds to existing aggressions and erodes a reliance on human relationships. Almost obscene disparities in wealth further the aggressions. Values are being turned to tinsel with the endorsing of ostentatious display. The ready acceptance of corruption has become normal. Money is the new deity lavishly worshipped among the rich. The rest wait anxiously for the trickle down. There is a clash between the excitement of having the right to demand equality but of its being denied because of new versions of caste and money power.

The neo-liberal culture and economy cannot be easily changed but its ill-effects can be reduced, provided we are clear that society must be rooted in the rights of the citizen to resources, to welfare and to social justice. This after all was the issue at the time of Independence when the nation state was created. I can recall the arguments and debates in the 1960s and 1970s, on how to create a society where citizens had equal rights, not just in theory but in actuality. If such discussions are to continue, as they should in a vibrant society, and questions be raised, then we have to turn to public intellectuals to bring them to the fore. But beyond that, it also needs a public that would regard the asking of such questions as appropriate.

How can we create a public that is aware of what needs to be discussed and why; a public that would respond to questions drawing from critical reasoning. The response does not invariably have to be an affirmation of what is being suggested, but at least alternative ideas can be subjected to discussion and solutions suggested. This assumes, for a start, an educated public, a public that would not only appreciate the role of public intellectuals but also the need for them.

Educating Ourselves

In order to become an educated public, how should we be educating ourselves? The question involves both professionals in various disciplines and many public intellectuals who in part draw their alternative authority from their professional standing. Today there are effectively two sources of educating

ourselves. One is the informal indirect visual media as an oral form, and the second is the formal category of educational institutions. The intermediary here is the internet, and like the other two, at present its catchment area does not include the entire society. TV channels, with rare exceptions, imitate each other with panelists playing musical chairs on the channels. Everything, but everything is seen in terms of current politics, even where this may be irrelevant. So every discussion is over-loaded with representatives of each political party whose propaganda disallows searching debate. Seldom do programmes investigate the reality beyond their statements. I have begun to wonder whether it is not possible to have an alternate channel on TV, and if this is difficult to finance, then even a broadcasting station on radio, which is not solely concerned with commercial profit. One that encourages exploring alternate ideas and solutions, and goes well beyond the single byte, and draws its inspirations from a critical enquiry. How do we finance the voice of those that have more than a momentary interest in society extending to the next election? And who are thoughtful about its future?

Then there is the other source, that of formal education. This has to be seen at two levels: the content of education and the autonomy of educational institutions. Education is moving out of the hands of educationists and into those of politicians and of political organisations, pretending to be cultural and religious institutions. This makes it crucial to be aware of how politicians today relate to intellectuals – if at all they do so.

Ideally, the essence of learning lies in enabling a person to think in forms that are analytical, logical, and autonomous, not to mention creative. It is only by

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using the power of reasoning that an educated person can, for instance, be made aware of the fact that knowledge where it takes the form of a technology has a particular context that produces that knowledge and sustains it. It cannot take shape from nothing. Specific technological inventions of the 20th century can only have been made in that century. They cannot have existed three thousand years earlier without the technical and associated knowledge. Scientific inventions have a long gestation period and historians of science can mark such a period by drawing out the evidence for it. They can observe how the technology and knowledge that has made the invention possible at a particular point in history has evolved and advanced.

Role of Science

If we are to claim scientific advance in our society then we have to track the role of science in the past both at the level of knowledge and its application through technology. Instead of claiming the prior existence of 20th century inventions in ancient India, many thousands of years ago, we should be investigating the nature of the knowledge and technology that we had, and which is proven to have existed during the course of our history, and what we did with it. If the Kerala mathematicians discovered calculus in the 15th century AD, what use was made of this discovery as a method of advancing knowledge?

The first step in education is to provide information of existing knowledge. The next step is to assess whether there is a need for replacing existing knowledge with new, improved knowledge through the process of learning. The educational system today does not even reach the first step in most schools. Some suspect that the acute shortage of schools and the poor condition of those that exist may be deliberate policy, arising from the fear of a citizenry that is not only literate but educated. Hence the striking neglect of school education in the last half century. We have an absurd situation where there is virtually no preparation even for secondary school, leave alone university, in terms of

handling knowledge. Yet, we are rushing to open more universities, IITs, IIMs and what have you. Inevitably this situation leads to diluting education to the point of being almost meaningless – in fact to reduce it to the Lowest Common Denominator, what might therefore be called “LCD Education”. For most young people the methods of thinking that are essential to the nurturing of enquiring minds and those that might resonate with public intellectuals, are stymied by the very system of education. One is thankful that there are some who do manage to think independently and creatively despite the system. But they do not add up to the critical mass that we require. Imagine what an energetic, thinking society we would have if the concept of education we adopt were to encourage students to ask questions and be provoked to think independently.

One might ask, what are the issues that could be raised by contemporary public intellectuals. For the underprivileged citizen, in fact the majority of Indians, good governance would require changing the current ways of survival in an anachronistic system clinging to its colonial roots. The unjust distribution of national wealth keeps poverty high. Caste and religious priorities still prevail using the same categories as were created by colonial policy. The colonial administration invented majority and minority communities and encouraged the identity politics of religion. These are now treated as permanent categories. They disallow democratic functioning because in a democracy those that make up a majority change from issue to issue. Reservation in education and employment, if retained on a permanent basis, reiterates these religious and caste identities whatever the marginal benefits may be. The solution actually lies in ordering our society and economy in a different way, such that these colonial identities are set aside and attempts are made at a more equitable distribution of wealth.

Need to be Secular

The ultimate success of a democracy requires that the society be secular. By this I mean a society that goes beyond the co-existence of all religions; a society whose members have equal social and

economic rights as citizens, and can exercise these rights irrespective of their religion; a society that is free from control by religious organisations in the activities related to these rights; a society where there is freedom to belong to any or no religion. Public intellectuals would be involved in explaining where secularisation lies and why it is inevitable in a democracy and in defending the secularising process.

Public intellectuals are not absent in our society, nor are they alien imports. They do have a lineage as I have argued. Historical change requires us to recognise that their role, although not entirely dissimilar to that of earlier intellectuals, nevertheless needs to be extended in our times. Their predecessors added new dimensions to understanding our society. Were they nurtured subconsciously by earlier heterodoxies that explained the human condition through rational and logical argument; and by exercising a secular moral authority over those that controlled society; and closer to us in time, by negating colonial dominance? Public intellectuals drawing on critical reasoning are the inheritors of this bequest.

Since the title of this talk is about asking questions, I would like to conclude with a long question. It is not that we are bereft of people who think autonomously and can ask relevant questions. But frequently where there should be voices, there is silence. Are we all being co-opted too easily by the comforts of conforming? Are we fearful of the retribution that questioning may and often does bring? Do we need an independent space that would encourage us to think, and to think together?

[Deciding on a topic for this lecture was problematic. As has been rightly said Nikhil Chakravarti was a man of many parts. He was a warm and affectionate friend, he was curious about people, about politics and about the general ambience of the world we live in. There were some things we had in common – we both politely declined a Padma award. Nikhil maintained that it would interfere with his autonomy as a journalist, and I felt it would do the same to me as an academic. His occasional snippets of political gossip were always worth waiting for. I feel that in the current spate of writing memoirs, had he written his, the TV channels would have exploded.]