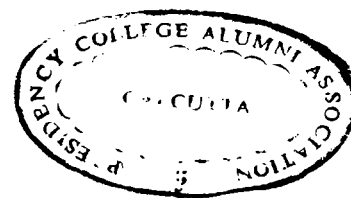


Student Indiscipline

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ABOUT half a century ago when a British Professor of the Presidency College was assaulted by a student a shudder went through society and several public meetings were arranged to devise ways and means to prevent a repetition of similar incidents in future. The occasion which led to that unfortunate incident was partly political and partly racial bitterness. The student unrest which accompanied the freedom movement was also inspired by political motives and directed against foreign rule. Since, then, however, we have made considerable progress both socially and politically. Foreign rule has come to an end and racial bitterness has disappeared, one would expect that the changed environment would bring about a better understanding between the teacher and the student and establish an atmosphere of peace which is essential for academic pursuits.

Unfortunately, however, student indiscipline in the post-independence period has increased to such an alarming extent that it is now taken for granted that the head of an educational institution is paid by the authorities for being insulted, humiliated and occasionally beaten up by his students. The incidents which took place in recent years in Orissa, Gauhati and Aligarh are cases in point. What happened in Orissa in 1964 provoked Prof. Haldane to cry out in despair that it was a mistake to treat the student community as a privileged class and to argue that a student who violates the law should be treated as an ordinary criminal because everybody is equal in the eye of law. This may seem to be an extreme view, because generally speaking, when a student indulges in lawlessness, he does so not for any personal gain like ordinary criminals but for some cause supposed to be common to all or to a section of the student community. There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule.

As a proposition of law Prof. Haldane's statement is unexceptionable. No privilege is conferred on a student qua student by the criminal law of our country, though some exception is made in respect of juvenile delinquents below a certain age irrespective of the question whether they are students. The courts of law of our country, however, are always inclined to take a lenient view when they have to deal with student offenders.

The question I have before me, is not however, a legal one. It is a social problem how to eradicate student indiscipline from the academic world. In order to find a solution it is necessary to enquire into the causes which are more than one.

Active participation in current political controversies by the student community seems to me to be a fruitful source of student indiscipline. The association of the student community with current political agitation is a heritage from pre-independence days and is difficult to root out. The union Minister of Education, Mr. M. C. Chagla, presiding over the two-day conference of Education Ministers at Srinagar appealed to the politicians "not to trespass on the University grounds". He said that the Government, the opposition parties and the teachers were to be blamed for indiscipline amongst students; politicians and the Government should establish a healthy convention to treat the University Campus as a sacred ground. But this is not a complete solution of the problem; student rallies within the University Campus are seldom attended by political leaders who exercise their influence from outside. The doctrine that the University Campus is a sacred ground and that the University is a temple of learning is lost sight of when the student politicians themselves break the law, and is pressed into service only when the police, as guardians of law and order, enter the Univer-

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sity Campus to prevent lawlessness. The theory that the police should not enter the University Campus has no foundation in law, but it is a healthy convention so long as the students themselves observe the sanctity of the Temple of Learning. What is really needed is to effect a re-orientation in the minds of the students themselves by inculcating the doctrine that it is in their own interest that they should not take an active part in political agitations.

This proposition is objected to in some quarters as unconstitutional. It is said that in a democracy based on adult franchise every adult student has the constitutional right to vote and to take part in political agitations. The first part of this proposition is correct but not the second part. An adult student may exercise his franchise at the time of elections but that does not mean that he should also be an agitator. All voters who vote at the elections are not political agitators. A student is a student of political currents and cross currents; he may exercise his right of vote without taking any active part in political campaigns.

Student Unions which were established for the purpose of promoting academic activities have now become hot-beds of politics. Different political parties vie with each other in sending their representatives to the Student Unions with a view to increase their hold on the student community. This is very unfortunate. There can be no objection to the students discussing the merits and demerits of the different political creeds from the academic point of view. What is objectionable is an attempt by the students to force their decision on the authorities by force or show of force. Breaking of heads or breaking of tables or chairs in the examination hall is not a democratic solution of political far less of academic problems, and it would be disastrous for society if the belief spread that the academic authorities could be made to favour those who give the greatest trouble. It is sometimes said that protests go unheeded unless they are accompanied by individual or collective fanaticism. This proposition is wholly unacceptable in the case of academic disputes. Every University

has regulations for the consideration of students' grievances and they are scrupulously followed by the authorities.

A very obnoxious practice has recently grown up of keeping heads of academic institutions confined in their offices by actual or threatened violence. We are familiar with managers of factories being kept confined in their offices by industrial workers. The Industrial Disputes Act contains suitable provisions for the solution of Industrial disputes. The extension of the analogy to the academic world, however, is extremely dangerous, because students cannot be treated as industrial workers nor can Students' Unions be treated as trade unions. There can be no conflict of interest between the students and the academic authorities and there can be no Academic Disputes Act like the Industrial Disputes Act for the solution of academic disputes. In the academic world the interest of the authorities is identical with the interest of the students, namely, advancement of learning. If this be the correct position it is difficult to see why Student Unions should behave like trade unions to force their decision on academic authorities. It is not generally realised that the heads of educational institutions are not dictators who can do anything at their pleasure. They are servants of the Governing Body or the Executive Council and have to carry out its decision. If the one pulls them in one direction and the student community in another they often find themselves between the devil and the deep sea.

It is sometimes said that the real trouble with the student community is that they have lost their academic moorings, do not find any interest in their studies and run after political slogans rather than acquisition of knowledge. This may be true in respect of a section of the student community but cannot certainly apply to all. There are good students as well as bad, but the difficulty is that in times of acute political or academic disputes the saner element remains in the background leaving the lead to the disorderly element. Here as elsewhere, the elementary rule of mass psychology is that the opinion of the majority is determined by the

views of the most rowdy and vocal section and the saner element hardly asserts itself. Interested political parties sometime exploit the passions of impressionable young men and make them political heroes of unworthy causes. Lure of leadership sometimes induces immature students to do acts which they repent at leisure. What is essential is that Students' Unions should be guided and controlled by really good students. In some American and English Universities a Dean of students is chosen from experienced teachers to guide the deliberations of Students' Unions and he acts as a link between the students and the authorities.

A sense of frustration sometimes induces a section of students to indulge in acts of indiscipline. A student who has no real interest in higher studies is often forced to pursue higher courses in the absence of any alternative occupation. In foreign universities admission to undergraduate and postgraduate courses is very strictly regulated and it is said that about eighty or eightyfive per cent of applicants for admission are refused permission. This does not cause any discontent in those countries

because a student who is denied admission in the University finds alternative occupation in trade and industry. In a country like ours the avenues for employment in vocational training are extremely limited and though in the post-independence period some polytechnic institutions have been started the openings afforded are far short of the demand.

Student indiscipline in so far as it is based upon a sense of frustration can be remedied only by affording increased opportunities for absorption in trade and industry for those who are incapable of pursuing higher studies.

The reason why I am against the participation of students in political campaigns is that whereas the duty of students qua students is to search for truth, in political campaigns, as in war, truth is more often than not the first casualty. After a student has completed his studies and settled down in life he will have enough time and opportunity to take part in political disputes, if he is so inclined. This view may appear to some to be antiquated but it seems to me to be the principal means of halting the spread of student indiscipline.





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