

# Nirmala Rao - II. 8, 9, 10

## (Asian University for women, Chittagony, Bangladesh)

**II. Democracy** (Why is public participation in matters of education important? And how can it be ensured?  
Mission of education for democracy)

8) How to bring education matters to a wider, non-technical audience or group of stakeholders so that citizens can participate directly in matters of public interest?

9) Empowering young people and adults to be as critically engaged citizens.

10) Autonomy of the educational system. How realistic is it? To what degree is it essential?

*This session will address issues of education for democratic citizenship, the importance of opening up education to a wider group of stakeholders, so that citizens can participate directly in matters of public interest and the necessity of maintaining academic freedom and institutional autonomy.*

### **Abstract**

In a short work entitled *The Spirit of the Age*, the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, writing in 1831, reflected that the large majority of people will never have the opportunity to cultivate their intellects beyond their own field of occupation. A doctor might understand health, a farmer might learn a lot about agricultural science, or a banker about the economy, but to be a democratic citizen a person will need to be able to know all-of-the-above, and few will have that opportunity. In our day and age, this fragmented education is even more pronounced. Even within academia, medical practitioners must rely on the expertise of statisticians to examine concerns with public health; and economists must trust the findings of sociologists and psychologists to forecast behavioral patterns in the market. Each field finds itself codependent on others about which it knows relatively little. In order to empower citizens to participate directly in matters of public interest, we must first find a way to provide a generalists education for citizenship.

**A liberal arts paradigm** *Italic text* supplies a way to bolster civic education, particularly to vulnerable populations, including women, rural populations, the urban poor and even stateless refugees. The liberal arts are essentially a model of teaching and learning that encourages exploration; critical analysis; evidence-based reasoning; and intellectual flexibility that teaches empathy, mutual respect and openness to new beliefs. The curriculum introduces students to a broad array of ideas and concepts, spanning disciplines that will enable students to navigate a number of social institutions with insights into the norms and practices encountered there. Instead of requiring specialist texts, a liberal arts foundation curriculum is broad and accessible. The instructional model consists of teachers eliciting answers from students through a combination of interrogation, discussion and debate.

**This model of enquiry** has parallels in Reformation era educational innovations, when universities transitioned from *scholasticism*, which emphasized dialectic reasoning as the main pedagogical approach, to *humanism*, which gave importance to critical thinking and empiricism. During the Reformation period, as well as during the Scientific Revolution, academic freedom and critical inquiry were viewed as a part of a broader set of practices that reflect principles of freedom of thought, which is a basic human right. Historically, such academic freedom has been widely protected by institutional autonomy, collective bargaining agreements, and the customs and traditions of higher education. In more recent times, it is under threat from both government regulation, as well as from corporate entities investing in some research programs at the expense of others. This suggests, as some have argued, that even democratic societies cannot promise such academic freedom.

In the absence of such freedoms the liberal arts still contain promise, because they not only teach what to think but how to reason across several situations, and when to use one's voice for impact. Consider the situation of a rural woman observing challenges caused by national agricultural policies on local populations. When she is given an opportunity to express her views, and is able to clearly articulate the difficulties facing her community, she might receive rebuttal arguments from others in her society. Armed with a liberal arts education, she will know how to engage in debate and discussion, have the empathy to try and see the value of the ideas of others, and respond in kind. If she believes she is not being heard at all, she will then have the resources to organize with other likeminded individuals to participate in activism and magnify her voice on a larger stage.

No doubt this assumes that her government will encourage outspoken citizens and some political dissent, as long as it is respectful and non-violent. Indeed educational opportunities and democratic participation must go hand in hand to foster inclusion and engaged citizenship. So one question might be what schools and Universities can do to produce the sort of citizens to whom governments are willing to afford such rights.

Envision for a moment a university education that can help produce citizens who develop mutual respect for one another, are capable of compassionate and innovative thought, who can criticize the government without angry rhetoric or the catalysts of political instability, and who can contribute to economic prosperity. Furthermore, suppose there is evidence that exposing students and learners to a diversity of people and views, and fostering their ability to assess a situation from multiple angles and across different worldviews, encourages political stability by cultivating attitudes of tolerance, as well as instincts towards reconciliation after disagreement. Without these civic capacities, governments engender systems of local violence that are costly for citizens, and eventually undermine the legitimacy and authority of political institutions. In such cases, the government has incentive to cultivate such citizens.

Regarding the groups with which I began my analysis – namely women, the rural and urban poor, and refugees – their vulnerabilities are horrifying for them but also contribute to state fragility. Economic disenfranchisement, absence of solidarity, political discontent, and excessive violence are the outcomes of not investing in their education. The idea that regulation of curricula and suppression of academic freedom will lead to a more stable political society is highly questionable, if the alternative still breeds dissatisfaction with the government. States typically have incentives to offer educational opportunities that will create a thriving citizenry. In short, expanding education for democratic citizenship requires developing new strategies for inclusion within a liberal arts paradigm; but also ensuring that public institutions are ready to accept the capabilities of new democratic citizens. This session on democracy will deliberate the challenges and opportunities on both these fronts.

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