

## **Towards Social Commitment: Building Social Consciousness in Mumbai's Catholic Colleges**

**Fleur D'Souza** is the Head of the department of Tourism at St. Xavier's college Mumbai.

### **Abstract**

Social Commitment would constitute the advanced level of social awareness. This paper seeks to explore the philosophy of education and processes by which social consciousness became implanted in two premier Colleges of Mumbai city- St. Xavier's College and Sophia College. Using the St. Xavier's College model and a fifty year time span, the paper traces the approach that proceeds from "charity and social service" in the post-independence era to the construction of social consciousness through involvement and social inclusion in present day policies and programmes both academic and non-academic. To what extent do organizational goals translate into an agenda that truly affects change? Will these well known institutions be recognized as "Citadels of conformity"<sup>1</sup> or will they churn the currents of change.

---

**Keywords:** Social Commitment, Social Consciousness, Social Inclusion, Transformative Education

---

All historical experience demonstrates the following: Our earth cannot be changed unless in the not too distant future an alteration in the consciousness of individuals is achieved. Hans Kung Higher education, especially in India should serve to promote and further development for the greater good of society. St. Xavier's College, Mumbai with its motto "*Provocans ad volandum*" "encouraging to fly" and Sophia College, Mumbai living up to its motto, *Urdhva Mula* - "Roots Upwards" have been steadfastly committed to their goal of quality education moored in the tradition of service to God and society. Both institutions are known for high standards in academics and accredited accordingly by the national accreditation body (NAAC). With the endorsement of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council that includes "extension work" along with research and consultancy as one parameter of quality systems, the institutions of higher education are encouraged to factor in the social dimension in programmes at the college level. Through collaboration with external agencies, curriculum development and community outreach, the 142 year old St. Xavier's College and 71 year old Sophia College for Women stand committed to transformative education, soaring the skies while rooted in the tradition of excellence and Christian values. Well known for their "student centric" policies, the philosophy of education in both colleges lays great stress on student formation and holistic development with a social dimension.

### **What are the Goals of Higher Education in Christian Institutions?**

In 1966, a group of College Principals of Christian institutions from all over India met at Tambaram, Tamil Nadu for a Consultation. The world and India were awakening

<sup>1</sup> Fr. Arrupe, Superior of the Jesuits, in a speech to the educators of the American Assistency, quoted in Gregory Naik (ed.), *Jesuit Education in India*, Ahmedabad, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987.

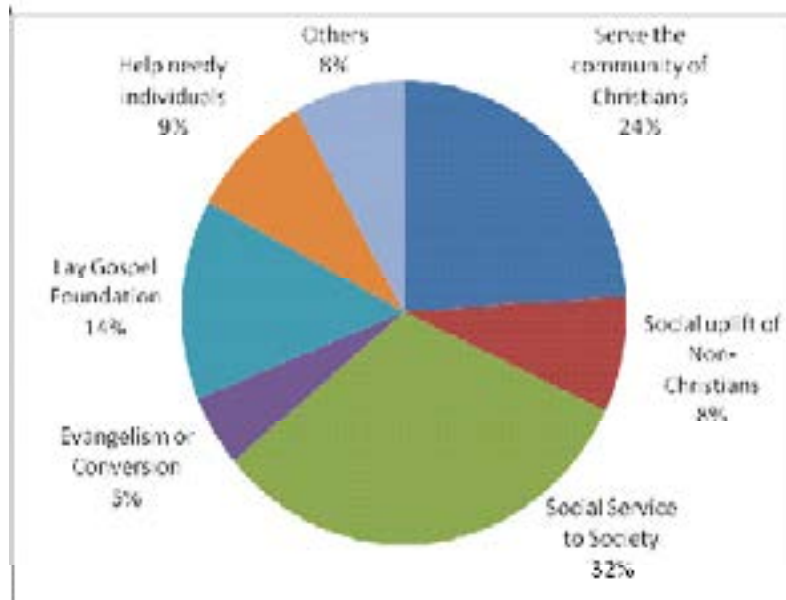
to revolutionary changes and discussions wove around the themes of the role and relevance of Christian higher education in India. <sup>2</sup>

Among the many scholarly papers presented, one based on a survey of Christian institutions brought interesting perspectives to bear on the discussions. Besides providing statistical data on the number of institutions, the student profile, library books, student services provided etc. the paper questioned the Principals present at the Consultation with regard to the motivations of College managements in the development of Christian higher education in India.

What emerged clearly was a shift in emphasis from conversion or even “Lay Gospel foundation” to “a commitment to serving the higher education needs of certain “deprived” groups of the populace (Women’s education or education among the tribals and the lower castes) partly as a means for giving expression to the conviction that all groups should be considered equal in Christ; and a commitment to service as a whole without conversions in mind, as for example, in the concern to train leaders for the needs of Independent India or in the inauguration of professional schools to meet some of the manpower needs of society.”<sup>3</sup>

Motivations of College managements, 1966<sup>4</sup>

### Background History of the Two Institutions



<sup>2</sup> Christian Literature Society (CLS), *The Christian College and National Development: the ISS-Feres Consultation of Principals of Christian Colleges, Madras, 1967.*

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dickinson, “Christian Colleges in India Today” in *ibid* p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dickinson, “Christian Colleges in India Today” in *ibid* p. 60.

Historically, St. Xavier's College Mumbai founded in 1869 and Sophia College for Women founded in 1941 responded to the need felt for quality education for the Catholic community. Situated at the southern end of a longitudinal metropolis and the residential spaces in the city moving northwards, the demographic profile of both colleges have seen a change in recent years. Both cater to students from varied religious, social and geographical backgrounds.

### **St. Xavier's College**

Several reports testify to the vision of certain individuals of the Roman Catholic Community of the city of Bombay who lamented on the deplorable educational standards of the youth of the community in the mid-nineteenth century and mooted the idea of a Catholic institution devoted to higher education. Most young Catholics had a basic education in primary parish schools in the Portuguese medium and had to be content with, as one observer put, "a smattering of English acquired in some private school, provided such smattering sufficed to enable him to drive a quill in a public office"<sup>5</sup> ....Young men of other communities and even some Catholics found their way into Protestant Colleges like the Wilson College at Chowpatty. Under these circumstances, Bishop Hartmann wrote to Cardinal Fransioni, "In my opinion which is shared by others, it is above all imperative to start a college in Bombay."

The task of setting up this institution was entrusted to the Jesuits. St. Xavier's School and College were established in 1869. The Jesuits in the early colonial period had a strong presence in the region and made a re-entry in 1855 after a hiatus of a century. British power had been firmly established. The world order demanded new pedagogical principles and education that was secular. The Jesuits rose to the challenge opening schools first and then a College, Teacher Training institutes, institutes for Technical education, Management and Mass Media.

### **Sophia College for Women**

On its first anniversary Sophia College in 1941 was the only college affiliated to the University of Bombay<sup>6</sup> (as it was then known) that catered "exclusively to women's education."<sup>7</sup> This temporary affiliation of the Arts Course was started with just twenty-nine students. Sophia College's aims may be succinctly expressed in Mother Andersson's words in 1940, "to prepare girls to fulfill their mission in life by the harmonious development of women's special gifts." Though the Home and Social Culture Course made way for other University courses it continued till 1947. "The name 'Sophia College' has been chosen not only as expressing the ideal we hope to impart by our education but above all as indicating our ultimate ideal. For us, religious, the highest

<sup>5</sup> Wenceslaus Pereira, J.P as quoted by J.H Gense, *The Church at the Gateway of India 1720-1960*, Bombay, 1960, p. 289.

<sup>6</sup> The University of Bombay formally changed its name to the University of Mumbai in 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Anila Verghese (ed.), *Down the Corridors of Wisdom: Sophia College 1941-1991*, Unpublished MSS, Bombay 1990.

wisdom will always be the love and service of God...May Sophia College ever lead its students nearer to the source of this highest wisdom whence they will derive enduring happiness." Mother Andersson.<sup>8</sup>

Sophia College views itself intrinsically as socially dedicated to serving women as a deprived section. "Sophia is essentially a women's college, committed to the integrated development of women for individual and societal transformation"<sup>9</sup> and further "The upliftment of women through education, which is perceived to be the means of both individual and societal transformation, was and is the vision of the College."<sup>10</sup> "By giving quality education to women we are serving national development."<sup>11</sup> With the programmes of the Women's Centre the College management feels it has fulfilled its societal role.

### **What is Social Commitment? Social Consciousness?**

Social Commitment would constitute the advanced level of social awareness. Working for social causes, campaigning for social justice, providing political leadership and generating support for those on the margins of the mainstream. The fact that several alumni chose careers in education, social service and social activism is testimony to their formation during their student years. As Anu Aga<sup>12</sup> an alumna of St. Xavier's recently revealed, "It was a place we acquired knowledge, had fun and learnt to reach out."<sup>13</sup> Shaheen Mistri's early support to her now internationally recognized efforts at non-formal education came from the management at St. Xavier's College that provided her a space for her class. Akanksha's early "teachers" were recruited from among her peers at St. Xavier's. Bernadette Pimenta, Arun Ferreira and several unnamed others could be considered as socially committed. Only a few students reach the level of social commitment. However several students may be considered as socially aware and would respond to social injustice. This paper examines the construction of social awareness among a great number of students both through classroom interaction and beyond it.

It is well known that policy without programmes renders the institution ineffective and irrelevant. Programmes without the moorings of policy appear directionless.

### **Processes**

Historically one can trace the process by which social consciousness became implanted or embedded in the institution using the St. Xavier's College model and a fifty year time span. The approach proceeds from "charity and social service" fifty years ago to the

<sup>8</sup> As quoted by Dr. (Sr.) Anila Verghese in *Down the Corridors of Wisdom: Sophia College 1941-1991*, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Sophia College Evaluative Report for Reaccreditation by NAAC 2008, Vision and Mission.

<sup>10</sup> Sophia College Evaluative Report for Reaccreditation by NAAC, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Former Chairperson of Thermax India.

<sup>13</sup> Souvenir of the 140 years celebration St. Xavier's College.

structuring of social consciousness through involvement and social inclusion. It could be shown that it progressed in four phases:

Phase I, External to the classroom/curriculum and voluntary; Phase II, From 1996 an integral part of the academic work through the foundation of the Social Involvement Programme or Summer Schools with social themes<sup>14</sup>; Phase III, From 2008 compulsory as “project work” at the First Year undergraduate level. An integral part of the Autonomous College curriculum (under Special Subjects category) and Phase IV, Integrated into subject syllabi through “Service Learning” or socially relevant research.

### **Phase I**

St Xavier's College's social outreach was formalized, in 1950, with the establishment of the Social Service Unit. It was enlarged and christened the very next year as the 'Social Service League', popularly known as the SSL. In the spirit of the times, students began with Fund collection drives and “the necessity to do service to the less fortunate, illiterate and poor brothers of theirs.”<sup>15</sup> Charity and service strengthened the resolve. In the words of the Principal at the inaugural function, “...be selfless and sincere in your work and always look with active sympathy towards those of our poor brethren who are in need of help and enlightenment.”<sup>16</sup> The spirit of “self-sacrifice and self-surrender in the cause of humanity” typified the staff member Professor N.K Bhagwat who was the Vice-President according to the report.

Sixty years later it is heartening to know that some of the current annual activities of the SSL like the exhibition on themes like Child labour, Climate change and Global warming, Street children etc. promote awareness on social issues by students for students. The baton of literacy, one of the earliest endeavours of the SSL, seems to have passed on to other College programmes. Visits to Cheshire Home (a home for aged) like the annual exhibition and Social Service week, Blood drives, remain SSL staples after half a century. The rural outreach of the SSL reflected the “charity” theme<sup>17</sup> with hard physical labour demanded of the participants. Not much has changed sixty years later though briefly in the 1970s “Buddhidan” and not “Shramdan” urged students to “use tact, patience and perseverance to carry out case studies in view of adopting a village.”

The reports of the “League” in 1977 admit of ‘service to handicapped humanity’ as

<sup>14</sup> Summer School 2000, had the theme “Changing use of space in Mumbai city in a historical perspective”, and the student project work centred on the study of the sale and reuse of the Mill lands in Central Mumbai. Rachana Aggarwal one student wrote, “Leaving the world of metaphors and abstractions aside what the summer school succeeded in doing on a more personal level, was that it brought these living spaces closer to us. The issues were no more only subjects for intellectual debate but personal issues that we needed to look into with better insight, knowledge, perception and above all, greater sensitivity.”

<sup>15</sup> St. Xavier's College Magazine 1950-1951, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> St. Xavier's College Magazine, 1951-1952, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> “To build a house for the poor Katkaries means to create a permanent home in the heart of a poor yet unsophisticated child of nature like him.” SSL report, St. Xavier's College Magazine, 1952-53.

'band-aid efforts for huge gaping wounds'.<sup>18</sup> In the 1980s students began to question if the SSL's activities had changed "the oppressive structures of society."<sup>19</sup> The motto of the SSL, "God's Service in Man's service" inspired earlier generations of students to devoting their time and effort to the programmes of this body. Today the SSL remains a significant student organization though the staff and management involvement is peripheral.

## Phase II

### Towards Socially Relevant Education: Social Involvement and Academics

Jesuit urban colleges like St. Xavier's Mumbai have always carried the elitist tag and academic excellence is easily the most recognizable hallmark of its existence. The College in an effort to make undergraduate education more socially relevant collaborates with social and community welfare organizations to challenge students to consider complex and harsh social realities.<sup>20</sup>

### The Social Involvement Programme (SIP) at St. Xavier's Mumbai

The pivot of the Social Involvement Programme was the idea of engaging students to think, question and even take a stand on issues of the day through service to deprived sections. One student wrote in her journal,

I got a brilliant opportunity [to participate in a social justice yatra in rural Rajasthan] to learn about some of the core issues facing rural communities...the trip was an absolute eye opener for me. Just a few months earlier I had by virtue of being spokesman in the Youth for Equality (YFE) movement, given fiery speeches against reservations. However, what I saw would change my perspective forever... be it issues of caste discrimination or of tribal land rights; this yatra definitely broadened the horizons of my understanding of the social justice challenges before the country<sup>21</sup>.

Started fifteen years ago in 1996,<sup>22</sup> it became part of the Honours Programme, a co-curricular academic activity for the brighter students. Other non-honours programme students who completed a minimum of 60 hours of social work would earn a merit certificate. With an initial enrolment of 175 students and twelve non-governmental

<sup>18</sup> "No, we have not pulled our village brother out of the clutches of the money lender...but ..we have learnt that he is our brother." SSL Report for the year 1976-1977, The St. Xavier's College Magazine, 1977, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> SSL Report 1981-82, St. Xavier's College Magazine, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> From the Annual Report of the Social Involvement Programme, College Magazine, 2008, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> From the Report in the College Magazine 1997, it goes on to say that "The Social Involvement Programme stresses on the direct involvement with the under-privileged, viz street and slum children, orphans, ailing, handicapped, domestic workers via activities ranging from non-formal education, art and craft sessions, play groups, drug resistance education to environmental and health awareness, assisting slow learners, paraplegics and caring for infants."

organizations, the programme is now shepherded by three social workers. Going beyond just devoting time to read out to the visually challenged or teaching street children, students would reflect on their work, discuss changing power relations, address issues of inequality, “examine thoughts and prejudices” and strive for social justice. “Transform self and society” became the guiding principle.<sup>23</sup> The SIP model of working in a myriad NGOs in fields as varied as education, (formal- non-formal/ rural-urban) health, the environment, empowerment through the Right to Information, vis-à-vis adopt a village/slum/school for tangible transformation may be debated but its relevance to the philosophy of education of the College stands.

### **Phase III**

From 2008 with an element of compulsion, the SIP now involves all First Year students numbering 789 and 120 organizations working in the city and in the rural areas. From 2008 with an added element of compulsion, the SIP involved all the First Year students numbering nearly 800 and engaging with nearly 120 organizations working both within the city and in the adjoining rural areas.

### **Phase IV**

With St. Xavier's College recently transitioning to Autonomous status, tentative steps and future plans to incorporate Jesuit social ideals into research and teaching are proposed. Departments are encouraged to build social consciousness through relevant curriculum and syllabi design involving research and experiments in 'service learning'. Each Department choosing and implementing transformative programmes may perhaps be the way forward with active participation from the academic staff. Early experiments in this area are the Summer School 2009 with a focus on Human Rights of Migrants, research at the first year level in Economics that studied the informal sector of the city's economy by tracking commodities from origin to sale, the economics of solid-waste management, gathering oral histories of a tribal community,<sup>24</sup> testing water in slum pockets etc.

Beyond the classroom, through organizations like the A.I.C.U.F or All Indian Catholic University Federation that was founded in St. Xavier's in 1988, a section of the students got exposed to ideas of “building a better and more just society, where every wo/man is free to live a truly human life free from exploitation and where the basic values of truth, love and peace prevail.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In conversation with Ms Chrissie da Costa, Co-Ordinator, SIP from 2000-2010 on April 12, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> We look for human association and human meaning in the research undertaken. In a very humble way this was an attempt to understand and interpret History as the community's internal struggles for survival. As new methodologies emerge and interdisciplinary studies came on the scene. It reinforced the idea that we must dispel the notion of politics as the “backbone of History” to borrow the term of Jacques le Goff (from Fleur D'Souza, My search for the histories of forgotten peoples: hesitant explorations in Oral History)

<sup>25</sup> A.I.C.U.F report in the St .Xavier's College Magazine 1988, p. 80.

## **The Sophia Centre for Women's Studies and Development**

Set up as a "permanent memorial of the Golden Jubilee of the College in 2001, the Sophia Centre for Women's Studies and Development is now a flourishing research and documentation centre. It holds courses for women, outreach courses and even publishes a research journal *Urdhava Mula*.

The management takes pride in the fact that the College serves women, an inherently deprived section of society and fulfils its goals in helping "students develop a degree of self-reliance and determination to respond with courage and sensitivity to personal and social issues." At the level of awareness the College has several activities "to generate among students an awareness of women's issues, human rights and environmental issues so that they understand and respond constructively to these." The College has moved into "transformative education through networking and collaboration as well as through outreach work and extension of educational services to the community with special emphasis on the needs of women."<sup>26</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

"Training good members of society" has been an established *raison d'être* for University education. "...it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, purifying the national taste."<sup>27</sup> A vision of a better world inspires many in the field of education. Dismantling unjust structures of this world may be a dream for the future. "So the notion of an intellectual life lived in terms of justice remains controversial and threatening to many in the academy and in the church. Jesuit schools continue to use phrases "faith and justice", "option for the poor", and "men and women for others" and most Catholic schools join them in insisting that care for the poor and a general concern for justice are part of their educational mission. Indeed, the integration of such terms into mission statements and publicity materials is almost universal. But developing programs to implement these ideals remains unfinished business."<sup>28</sup>

This paper throws questions that future research will perhaps answer. For Sophia College for Women, education of women is the primary objective and often seen as an end in itself. St. Xavier's College for which "the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement"<sup>29</sup> further reiterated in GC 34, "we are committed to the promotion of justice as an integral part of our mission."<sup>30</sup> "Option for the poor" strives to make its curriculum socially relevant and its primary stakeholders - the students - responsive to social justice issues. Cultivating values that encourage students on campus to question

<sup>26</sup> www.sophiacollege.com

<sup>27</sup> Gordon Rupp quotes Newman in "Christian Learning -the University Education" in Hillard et.al, *Christianity in Education, The Hibbert Lectures 1965*, London George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966, p.100

<sup>28</sup> David J. O' Brien "Disciples and Citizens" in Joseph M. O'Keefe (ed.), *Catholic Higher Education at the Turn of the New Century*, Garland Publishing, Boston, 1997, p.191.

<sup>29</sup> Decree 4 of General Congregation 32, 1974.

<sup>30</sup> Decree 3 of General Congregation 34, 1995.



injustice, banish prejudice and foster change- an attitudinal change in the admission policy and the opening up of the night Commerce College have reflected conclusions and decisions taken at National seminars.<sup>31</sup>

At its core, the programmes of these highly accredited colleges help students to be socially conscious and responsible citizens.<sup>32</sup> To uphold and sustain these ideals pose tough challenges to current College managements. Academic staff attitudes and early socialization that students bring with them, often conservative and unrelenting, have to be countered. The question remains, should they be recognized as “Citadels of conformity”<sup>33</sup> or will they churn the currents of change?

<sup>31</sup> Consultation on “Option for the Poor and Jesuit Education” (Poona, 1986) in Gregory Naik (ed), *Jesuit Education in India*, p.161.

<sup>32</sup> St. Xavier’s College Magazine 2002, report of the Social Involvement Programme. p. 128.

<sup>33</sup> Fr. Arrupe, Superior of the Jesuits, in a speech to the educators of the American Assistency.