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UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

Abstract

The role of public intellectuals in democracy has emerged as an issue of vibrant debate in Western societies. From ancient times, public intellectuals have played a significant role in transforming "People into public" by their writings, speech, and literary criticism. For this reason, public intellectuals were considered as the 'moral guardian' of a nation. Recently, the researchers in Western societies argue that the role of public intellectuals has been declining over time. Research related to the declining role of public intellectuals encourages research in another area viz., the concept of public intellectuals based on the evaluation of their role in the West to flourish, (see Hughes and Hughes 1990, Lavine 2001, Wolfe 2002). As a part of civil society, public intellectuals can help to establish, deepen and maintain democracy in various ways. Over time, the functions of public intellectuals have increased with the remarkable progress of media. Public intellectuals are now able to communicate with public and play their role in the society very easily. However, it is observed that the idea of public intellectuals is mainly a West-centred concept. Consequently, very little research has been done about the role of public intellectuals from the perspective of developing countries. The paper argued that in order to understand the role of public intellectuals in the context of developing countries, proper analysis of the concept of public intellectuals is indispensable.

Introduction

The idea of public intellectuals has created one of the most vibrant debates in the Western world. The public intellectuals, who

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have one foot in their own profession and the other in the public realm of media and publishing, shaped the recent cultural debates over diversity and multiculturalism. They are easily maintaining both and are considered as the ambassadors of the society who serve valuable public functions by explaining their research in a way that is easily understood by the public. In doing so, the public intellectuals often compromised with the quality of their work, their professional duties and responsibilities, and considered as 'more public than intellectuals' (Posner, 2001:167). Therefore, the role of public intellectuals still remains quite ambiguous in the society. *Albeit* this ambiguity, it has been observed that the public intellectuals have been playing a very significant role in the democratic process of the society.

In the above context, this paper will focus on the key contemporary dilemma on public intellectuals and, hence, on the identification of the specific areas of concern. The first concern is the emergence and development of the concept of public intellectuals with a focus on its different aspects. The second concern is the identification of the criteria and requirements of public intellectuals. These also include the factors that need to be avoided by the public intellectuals. The third concern is the role of public intellectuals in democracy and civil society. In addition to the above, this paper also examines the problems related to the public intellectuals in brief. Thus, the main purpose of the paper is to understand the various concepts, criteria and roles developed in the West in relation to public intellectuals. However, the main thrust of the study is to explore all these in terms of developing nations where the concept of public intellectuals is still remain less known.

Development of the Concept

The term 'public intellectual' was first used by Russell Jacoby in his book, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture at the Age of Academy* in 1987. However, the functions of public intellectuals have seen in existence even in ancient time. In ancient Rome, for instance, Cicero and Seneca were known as the public thinker as they were involved with public related issues (Griffin, 1976:128). Similarly, Maceville, Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Kant were the very pioneer writers for a general audience. Recently, Barthes,

Lytard, Lacan and Derrida have writings about public affairs. Some independent and non-academic intellectuals like Lewis Mumford, Tom Wolfe, and Betty Friedman have contributed as public intellectuals by their writings and speaking although they are not academics *per se* (Posner, 2001:23-35). Thus, the concept of public intellectuals is not a new one. The notion and activities of public intellectuals were very much present in their function and behaviour. It is, thus, a matter of the West which was in existence in the past and was formulated very recently. There may have obvious reasons behind the re-emergence of the concept of public intellectuals in recent time. An attempt is made below to explore some of them.

The Declining Public Role of Intellectuals in the West

Jacoby (1987) first illustrated the declining role of public intellectuals in American society. He observed that before 1940, there were a number of superb analyser and good writers inside and outside of the academy who used to write for a larger public and who had the direct connection with the public. Thus, they were considered as 'economists, critics, polemicists' of their society. However, the young academic intellectuals as public intellectuals failed to contribute significantly compared to their predecessors in the American social life. The young intellectuals are virtually locked in the departmental affairs of the university. Today, specialization and commercialization have significantly increased in academia. In the circumstances, the young researchers are not interested to write columns for public purpose or they have no time to write and translate technical and specialized writings into easy and communicable writing for the public. They are busy in writing their thesis or paper for conference and engaged in other academy related activities. Thus, Jacoby (1987) commented, 'young intellectuals no longer need or want a larger public: they are almost exclusively professors, campus is their homes, monographs and specialized journals are their media'.

Jacoby (1987) also observed that now-a-days 'present generation intellectuals' are not interested to write in magazines, little magazines which create insular societies. Similarly, they are not interested to think over public, not to write for public or not to communicate with public. They are occupied and pre-occupied by

the demands of the university career. Jacoby (1987), thus, complained, 'as intellectuals became academics they had no need to write in a public prose; they did not and finally could not'. Therefore, 'present generation intellectuals' are not as active as past public intellectuals were. In the process, academicians have lost their connection with the people and also the power to influence the people. In this way, they became 'missing' and 'invisible' to the larger public audience (Jacoby, 1987:7-10).

Ignatieff (1997), in a series of public lectures called *illuminate* broadcasted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1996 and also in an article entitled "The Decline and Fall of Public Intellectuals" in 1997, has complained that the role of public intellectuals has decline severely. He observed that the public intellectuals had created ideas in the West which made social and liberal democracy possible and when social democracy becomes dysfunctional, it was the public intellectuals who provided the way to go with it. They also fought to establish public rights, freedom, gender rights and against social injustice in spite of oppression and even execution. Thus, they established the notion 'to speak to the truth' for the betterment of their people (Ignatieff, 1997:399). But, such functions are absent in present-day public thinkers. Therefore, he characterised the current situation as 'the decline and death' of public intellectuals (Ignatieff, 1997:395). Like Ignatieff, Posner (2000) has expressed similar opinion in his book, *The Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, as the most of the intellectuals became 'safe specialist' instead of being 'public thinker' (Posner, 2001:3). In this way, the scholars virtually sketched a very gloomy picture about the role of present-day public intellectuals' which testify to the declining role of public intellectuals in Western societies.

The 'declining' theory not only explain how the past public intellectuals who were considered 'public voice', 'moral guardian' have been locked into the 'ivory tower of the academy' now but also calculated it's impact on the society (Jacoby, 1987:3). It is observed that the public intellectuals are 'safe specialist' who engaged themselves in specific areas or discourses rather than the general debates of the society. Therefore, whenever they write on social and political issues for the general public, they move beyond their area of

expertise. The quality of such works become low compared to the past public intellectuals. As a result, it makes public intellectuals' job 'less distinctive', 'less interesting' and 'less important' (Posner, 2001:3). This declining role not only affects the public intellectuals' activities but also affects the democratic environment of the society. Because, public intellectuals are those who are supposed to promote democracy by participating and empowering the public sphere through the media both electronic and print and other spaces, which is linked with democracy (Keller, 1995:441). But, the public voice has been decreasing because of the declining role of public intellectuals. This seriously affects the multiculturalism and democratic values of the society. Therefore, in this situation, there is a common wish in the West to return of the public intellectuals and to take the public role again. Thus, one common notion seen in the Western society is, 'we must return to something we have lost' (Finn, 2000:16).

Advancement of Media and Technology

New communication revolution has forces to reconsider the understanding of public life and its 'partner' terms, such as, public opinion, public life and public good (Keane, 1998:58). In this connection, Internet becomes a forum for public sphere which allows equal opportunity to participants in sharing information and holding the promise to advance various public discourses on common goods (O'Brien, 1999:6). It turned to be truly global sphere allowing the public around the world to communicate. With the advancement of digital technology, public intellectuals emerged as the 'cyberspace frontier' in communicating with public through Internet in the West (Ashdown, 1998:12). Various forums have been set up by intellectuals to communicate to the public through cyberspace which encourages the public to participate in contemporary debates of the society. Consequently, public also respond to this attempt actively in the West. Some influential newspapers and magazines like *Prospect* and *Nation* also encouraged public in selecting influential public intellectuals for their society. In this way, the communication between public and intellectuals has started through media and technology in the West (see *Prospect*, July 2004; *Allgemeine Zeitung*: February 2, 2002). As a consequence, public intellectuals' activities gain popularity among public through media in advanced and developed societies.

Role of the Universities

Remarkable professionalism has been developing in many universities in the West. In the process, the academics are turning into professionals and producing knowledge for the purpose of scholarship, market-based research, promotion, tenure which ensures 'bureaucratisation of knowledge' – which finally met the 'private goal' rather than 'public good' (Brett, 1991:513; Smyth and Hattam, 1999:157-175). As a result, universities lost their spaces and turned into 'ivory tower' to the general people. Consequently, the increasing commercialization of academic works is given greater expression towards press and press-related, team funded projects but away from individual unfunded research. In this situation, they cannot do research independently due to lack of fund and many of them are busy with consultancy and research which are based on market needs. However, the terms and conditions of the donor funded research and market based consultancy sometimes do not match with the real situation of the society. In many cases, in order to satisfy the donors, researchers have to compromise with their research. Therefore, the role of academics has reduced in market-based universities.

However, for the sake of democracy, it is necessary to hold the vision for equality, justice and demand for a vibrant public sphere. Thus, the Western universities have started to show their concern about the engagement of public intellectuals in the society. Therefore, the nature of professionalism redefined the intellectuals and the public sphere to allow responsiveness to the culture and asked the intellectuals to become active rather than remaining 'remotely' present in political and cultural life in the West (Small, 2002:1). In this connection, universities in recent years came into the debate of public intellectuals in the West.

Several universities have already started various academic programmes to include the concept of public intellectuals in order to popularize their role and function in the society. For instance, the Florida Atlantic University is offering 'the first interdisciplinary programme to educate public intellectuals'. In introducing the aim of the programme, it was argued that the loss of public well being of those who once would have been public intellectuals is great. They proposed to try and return to public life some of its intellectual

ballast by instituting a degree programme which is preciously not geared to the specialised market and which leaves in the space to think (Brennan, 2000:1). The University of Illinois, Chicago has started a centre named '*The Centre for Public Intellectuals*' and it organizes various programmes to popularise the concept of public intellectuals. It has also opened a new course on public intellectuals entitled 'public intellectuals and their social influence'. The University wants to advance a mutually beneficial relationship between the public and its intellectuals. In this way, the idea of public intellectuals' is gradually becoming popular in Western universities. In the circumstances, many universities and academics are interested to return to their previous role, which is to maintain the leading role in the society.

Public Intellectuals' Concept in Developing Countries

Researchers concerned about Western societies have failed to focus on the concept of public intellectuals in other cultural perspectives where the public intellectuals may appear in other roles. The West is characterised by high professionalism, stable democracy, and independent media and cyberspace based on state-of-the-art technology. The developing countries represent unstable, sometimes, transitional democracy, and not independent, sometimes, state controlled media, mostly with out-dated technology. Only a few studies (Rapport 2005, Reynolds 2001, Sriyaranya 2000 and McCargo 2000) are found on the role of public intellectuals in developing countries. Their role varies from culture to culture and from country to country. Limited scope of professional advancement encourages public intellectuals to take an active part in politics in many developing countries (Canivell 2004). Consequently, in many developing countries public intellectuals are considered as an agent of social and political change (Hiram 2001, Reynolds 2001, Canivell 2004, Gu 2004, Parvin 2006). But, public intellectuals' debate has not yet taken place that much in the perspective of developing countries.

Though the concept of public intellectuals was primarily developed in the West and for the West, very recently the importance for systematic study of public intellectuals has emerged in the developing countries also. For instance, as a mark of importance of

public intellectuals in developing countries, 'The Asian Public Intellectual's Fellowship' (APIF) has organised a programme entitled 'The Future of Asia and the Role of Public Intellectuals'. This programme is sponsored by 'Nippon Foundation' and organized with the collaboration of several countries as Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. The main purpose of this programme is to prepare the leadership for future Asia who will work for the well-being of the society (Hiram, 2001:1). In this way, the concept of public intellectuals has gained popularity in developing countries also.

From the above discussions, it has been observed that the concept of public intellectuals has gained popularity in the West mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the declining role of public intellectuals in the West encourages Western researchers to conduct evaluation-based research on public intellectuals. Secondly, the communication revolution in the West has made a connection between public and the intellectuals through cyberspace. This development encourages intellectuals to perform their role for the public cause. However, the development in the Western societies failed to focus on the concept of public intellectuals in other cultures, particularly the developing nations. In many societies in the developing world, this concept still remains unfamiliar or even unpopular. It is primarily due to the fact that in the developing world digital technology has not developed that much yet and the people have lesser chance to interact with the public intellectuals through internet. Thirdly, the universities of the developing countries have not turned into 'market oriented' ones as those in the West. It is an important asset in the developing countries as the intellectuals are engaged in various public related activities. However, before discussing the role of public intellectuals in a society, it is necessary to explore the definition, criteria and activities of public intellectuals. Following is an attempt to probe into these and related issues.

Defining 'Public Intellectual'

Public intellectuals are learned, influential and articulated community of generalists. However, it is not the only way to define public intellectuals. Public relationship is considered as an important feature of public intellectuals. Thus, public intellectuals are those

persons who devote at least some of their time and energy in thinking and addressing diverse public issues related to the society (Halwani, 2002:496). They are having 'public attention' and are concentrating on public issues and considered as the 'thinkers with public voice' (Fish, 1995:123; Edgeworth, 1999:2; Gordon, n.d.: xi). Posner thus argued:

The reader may begin to sense a certain redundancy in the term "public intellectuals". Not only is "public" of essence of the most common understanding of what an "intellectual" is ("a thinker with a public voice") but part of that understanding is that the intellectual writes for a broader public than the scholar, the consultant, or the professional does, or even than many policy analysts do (Posner, 2001:22).

Public intellectuals are often trained in a particular discipline but are operating through multiplicity of domains for larger and broader public and sometimes move beyond their professional expertise to do the job properly (Dessaix, 1998:13; Lightman, 2002:2). Critical perspective remains one of the important notions of public intellectuals. Elshtain observed:

A public intellectual is not a paid publicist, not a spinner, not in the pocket of a narrowly defined purpose. It is, of course, the temptation, another one, of the public intellectual to cosy up to that which he or she should be evaluating critically. I think, perhaps, too many White House dinners can blunt the edge of criticism (Elshtain, 2002:3).

Therefore, public intellectuals are generalists in nature. They have critical perspective and interest in addressing major public issues of the society. Thus, from the above definitions, it has been observed that public intellectuals are those groups of people who are generalists in nature, critical in terms of their approach to social issues and interested to communicate to the public directly or indirectly their view regarding the major issues of the society. There are ample ways of doing the same, such as, books, pamphlets, essays, articles, audio and visual medium to contact people. However, it is not important which one they are using but the basic thing is that public intellectuals are required to be interested in using any of these ways to contact public *at large*.

Several scholars are critical of the concept and function of public intellectuals. For instance, Edgeworth (1999) critically defined

public intellectuals in feminist perspective. She pointed out that the word 'public' essentially means to exclusion of women who normally stay at private space. She observed that many issues which are considered vital in private space may remain excluded from the public space. As a result, women are absent or can contribute less in public debates. The similar expression was shared by Edward Said when he explains, "there is no such thing as private intellectuals" (Said, 1994:9). The basis of the argument is that the intellectual community has been working for the society or people since the ancient time. Therefore, to use the term 'public' before the word 'intellectual' in order to understand the public role of intellectuals is unnecessary.

Theoretically, the concept of public intellectuals is looked upon as 'chaotic, unorganised and problematic' which has made difficult the systematic study. Posner (2001) has presented the only systematic study in recent times. However, his theory has faced a lot of criticisms. Scholars criticized him as reductionist and 'anti-intellectual' for his approach (Boynton, 2002:1). The methodology, which he has taken, is not out of criticism also. Posner (2001) has taken scholarly publication, media analysis and website search to identify the influential public intellectuals in the American society which is not appropriate in developing countries.

Notwithstanding such criticism, there exists a clear distinction between the terms intellectual and public intellectual. Public intellectuals are not synonymous with *pundits* who produce bookish knowledge only. They are also different from *intelligentsia* which considered a group of people, who comprise a relatively homogenous stratum of well educated, alienated critics of the existing regime in the society (Gella, 1976:12-13; Gagon, 1987:5) because public intellectuals are devoted to public related issues of the society. Thus, they are not alienated from their society but could either be supporter or critic of their society. Thus, it is understood that all public intellectuals are intellectuals but not all intellectuals are termed as 'public intellectuals'.

Criteria for Public Intellectuals

For being a public intellectual, one has to follow some criteria. They need to have public attention and take initiative to

communicate with the public (Fish, 1995:123; Brett, 1991:513; Halwani, 2002:495). They need to engage in substantive social questions, public issues and current controversies (to comment on) in the society. While their profession does not matter much, they may come from a variety of professions, academics, journalists, writers, officials, artists, representatives from think tanks and so on (Posner, 2001:35; Brett, 1991:513). However, their writing on some particular subject may be looked upon as a lens for some kind of broader comment (Willis, 1997:17). Posner, thus, argued:

I prefer the definition that affixes "public" before "intellectual" merely to emphasise that an intellectual who cannot communicate with more than a coterie of specialist readers is not a public intellectual in the sense in which I wish to use the term, however interdisciplinary and politically significant his writings may be (Posner 2001:26).

Their approach needs to be that of a generalist rather than technical or specialist. They are required to have an interest in media because media connection is considered as a criterion for being public intellectual (Ashdown, 1998:1). They may be critical or supporter of the system considering the well being of public. Nonetheless, they are supposed to work against injustice, undemocratic values and culture in the society (Ignatieff, 1997:403).

Hence, from the discussions above, it is revealed that some pre-conditions are necessary to be a public intellectual. Public intellectuals need to be generalists rather than specialists. In this connection, they need to be interested in public related works. It may be scholarly writings or generalist type of writings but the condition is that the general public should understand the message conveyed in those writings, which are based on general public concern rather than other political and ideological cast. They may be critical or oppositional or may be supporter of the system in the context of the well being of the public. Media connection is one of the important criteria of public intellectuals but too much media concentration may affect public intellectuals' work. The criteria, so far considered, may reveal public intellectuals as a myth rather than reality, which may not be present in an individual public intellectual. Nonetheless, at least, few of them are necessary for being a public intellectual. So, to

many academics, the term public intellectual simply means writing outside the academia (Ashdown, 1998:2).

Public Intellectuals' Role in Democracy and Civil Society

Public intellectuals play a significant role in democracy. Since the ancient period, they have been seen as the 'moral authority', 'political guardian' and 'social reformer'. Historically, they protest despotism, facilitate democratic transition and help to consolidate and deepen the democratic process. They are able to identify common issues, raising questions, seeking appropriate solutions and presenting commendable proposals for their implementation through their writings, policy proposals, commentaries, social and literary criticisms, and make people conscious about the major debates in the society.

The consolidation of democracy also depends on free civil society (Linz and Stephen, 1996:7). As public intellectuals come from diverse section of the society (such as writers, academics, social workers, journalists, artists), they may share the knowledge and experience for the betterment of the society and may influence public to formulate a strong civil society (*Asian Public Intellectuals Homepage*, 2000:1). In addition, public intellectuals as the members of the civil society can speak out and engage in public debate through different mediums as radio, television, news programmes, op-ed columns in newspapers and magazines. They can contribute in the public sphere consciously through their works for civil rights, legislature reform, social and political rights for the disadvantaged and minority groups of people. In this way, they can present different ideological discourses to the public in order to shape popular opinion and provide the ground for retrograde public policy (Giroux, 2002:1). Thus, they may help to create the 'breathing space' of the society which is closely related with democracy.

Public intellectuals may play various roles in their society. Such roles, however, may vary from culture to culture, country to country and time to time. In the past, they had played a very influential role in the West (Katznelson, 2003:192). They were considered as 'iconists, publicists and also public philosophers' (Ignatieff, 1997:39). However, increasing academicisation and specialisation have made public intellectuals' role profession oriented in recent

years (Jacoby, 1987:3-12; Posner, 2001:28-29). Similarly, after the Cold War, the social and political role of public intellectuals has diminished as the political parties became very powerful and occupied the majority spaces of public affairs in the Western societies (Diggins, 2003:107).

Every society holds unique values and culture. Culture and responsive audience are associated with the social role of intellectuals (Hollander 1981:193). However, the role of public intellectuals in developing countries is different from that in Western countries. The developing countries represent low income, high population growth, low education, and poor condition in other socio-economic indicators including political instability and social unrest. In this regard, particular reference may be made about the weak and unstable political institutions in the developing countries. This created a void in the society and the public intellectuals are required to play a more active social and political role in the developing societies (see Hiram 2001, Reynolds 2001, Canivell 2004, Gu 2004, Gregory 1998, Canivell 2004, Parvin 2006). In developing countries, limited scope of funding for research makes teaching career difficult for the public intellectuals leading some of the teachers to join active politics in many developing countries (Canivell, 2004:3). Therefore, public intellectuals may play a very significant role in democracy and civil society in a wide number of developing countries.

Conclusion

In recent years, the concept of public intellectuals became very popular in the Western societies, where professionalism and marketisation became the main features of academic life. As a result, the public intellectuals have been locked into the ivory tower of the academy. In this situation, the scholars became anxious due to the declining role of public intellectuals in the Western societies. Thus, their common hope is to see the re-emergence of the role of public intellectuals in the society that is not much widespread in the developing countries.

Public intellectuals are generalists. The criteria for public intellectual is to be generalists, to be involved with public issues apart from their professional interest, and to be interested in communicating public through electronic and print media and other

means of communication. They may work as theorists or policy analysts, that is, they may perform various functions which should be related to broader public issues in the society.

The main essence of the function of public intellectuals is to work for the public with public issues. In this connection, they can influence public mind through criticisms, popular writings, political commentaries and political prophecy. Thus, they may enrich the civil society and vitalise the democratic atmosphere in the country. All these, ultimately, may compel the authorities to become more sensible, responsible and accountable to the public demand. In the long run, such a role played by the public intellectuals may transform them as the 'public voice' and 'moral authority' in the society.

Public intellectuals perform various roles in the society which may differ depending on the nature of the country. Such roles are considerably different in the developed countries than in the developing ones. In the Western countries, public intellectuals mostly perform professional role in the society, while in the developing countries the limited opportunity of professional development encourages them to take part in politics directly or indirectly. Their involvement in politics is also facilitated by the lack of development of political institutions in the country. Public intellectuals are engaged in social roles through media and other civil society organisations. Thus, the role of public intellectuals differs from country to country and culture to culture. In order to understand the role of public intellectuals in the society, particularly in developing countries, more research is necessary.

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