

Demystifying the 'specialist'

Only by democratising knowledge can the world of specialists regain their credibility and help make this world better.

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As the Coronavirus pandemic in the United States continues unabated, one saw President Donald Trump angrily retort against Dr Anthony S Fauci for his views on how to contain the spread. The President sounded disdainful of Dr Fauci's expertise and has in the past questioned his scientific credentials and professionalism.

The Covid crisis has also seen a number of professionals writing articles, running webinars and appearing on television explaining the crisis and what can be done about it. Though the world has never before seen any crisis of this magnitude and uncertainty, each of these professionals seemed to have a view on what needed to be done or not done.

Experts from organisations like the WHO globally or ICMR locally added to the ongoing discussions. One is also seeing groups of professionals coming together and debunking the voices advocating wearing masks or practicing social distancing.

Amidst all this, how does one come to terms to the growing need for specialised professional competence in several areas of human existence? The last century has shown how professionals have become essential to the very functioning of society itself.

Whether it is designing and building a house, styling your hair, fighting a war, policing the streets, educating children or curing disease, judging and punishing violators of law or those running the government, society is today increasingly conducting its business through professionals specially trained for these purposes. Whether it is our space programme or managing natural disasters, we have come to expect our specialists and the agencies that they populate to provide us with the solutions.

While dependence on such professionally-run institutions and individuals has grown over the last several decades, one is also seeing the growing crisis of confidence among the professions over the last decade and more.

Notwithstanding the several incidents of visible failures of professional action encountered in the recent past, the current Covid crisis itself needs to be analysed from this perspective. From promoting the use of ventilation to the flawed recommendation of the use of several medicines like HCQ to experimenting with different anti-virals to advocating herd immunity, one can see how experts have delivered widely disparate and conflicting recommendations.

Information explosion and the growing belief that this enables societal betterment has further consolidated the specialist's claim to extraordinary knowledge in matters of human importance. Hying up concepts like 'scientific revolution' and 'knowledge economy' have furthered the growth of elites

and cemented their long-standing claim to a monopoly of knowledge.

Systems to determine professionals' rights and freedoms, licensing mechanism setting norms on who will be allowed to practice and who needs to be kept out, has further mystified the world of specialisation and insulated the professionals from the 'masses' and created a halo effect.

Objective view

Taking an objective view of the several national crises that are around us - the deteriorating cities, poverty, pollution, energy shortage - shows how they all seem to have roots in the very practices of science, technology and public policy that are being called upon to alleviate them.

Over time, some specialists have also tended to misappropriate knowledge in their own interests and the interest of a power elite intent on preserving its dominance over the rest of the society.

The ongoing Covid situation and the varied manner in which public health specialists, epidemiologists, virologists, cardiologists, mathematicians, policy experts, pharmacologists, public administrators and economists expressing views of their own has brought out the inadequacy of their specialisation and demonstrated how insulated each of them are from the others. Apart from the resulting confusion, it has also exposed the claims of specialists in providing timely solutions to society in times of crisis.

Considering the reality of the 'specialists' having crowded out the people with traditional wisdom and community knowledge, it is now critical that they come to terms with not just their expertise but also their lack of expertise. This is a timely moment for professionals to learn not just to operate from the zones of their competence but also from their zones of incompetence.

They need to learn to work collaboratively, explore embedded community knowledge systems and learn to be less prescriptive and more reflective. As India moves towards implementing the national education policy, universities need to now embed these sensitivities in their graduates and make higher education immersive and experiential.

While the coronavirus pandemic has thrown life out of gear and made each individual experience the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) scenario firsthand, this may also be the opportunity to take a relook at this world increasingly driven by experts and specialists.

This could be the opportune time to find the balance between competence and common sense, between being directive and seeking engagement, between knowing and seeking to know and between having solutions and seeking them from communities.

Only by demystifying and democratising knowledge can the world of specialists regain their losing credibility and help in making this world a better place.

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