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GUEST EDITORIAL

Rediscovering our universities

As a person who has been in one Indian higher education institution or another all his life, also having grown up in the campus of one such, some views on higher education have inevitably lodged themselves inside me. This is a subject on which each of us has strong and different views. Such differences and even clashes of view are welcome (action would be even more welcome). I put down some thoughts here; the general spirit is of thinking globally and acting locally. I hope that some local action will result somewhere, sometime soon, from some of you. I will focus here on what I regard as the natural centre-piece of higher education, namely the university. I have a sinking feeling, commonly shared, that over the decades we have witnessed a great decline in these institutions, both in their 'radius' of action, and in the creation of knowledge through them.

This is odd, because human experience over centuries and over continents has been that the university is one place where all knowledge (humanities, the arts, science, technology, medicine, law, business, agriculture,...) is at home, and where undergraduate education, postgraduate education and research are all together. This is not a new idea. It was said of Nalanda, perhaps the greatest of the Indian universities, and one which lasted for about a thousand years, that you could go in at the age of sixteen and come out at twenty six, and could learn almost everything that was possible to learn at that time.

One reason could be that a kind of caste system has taken hold of our higher education enterprise, through our minds and actions. Somewhat like the fourfold caste system of our society, higher education in India seems to have a triune caste system. The castes are the institutes, the universities and the colleges. That is the hierarchy. The broad functions are: research but no (or very little) teaching, principally postgraduate teaching and mainly undergraduate teaching. (There are, of course, many important exceptions.) There is not much inter-caste mobility or mingling; sub-castes are emerging and are getting established. Casteism, and to borrow a phrase, 'votepank politics' are becoming stronger. The strong interaction of this with the fourfold caste system, which itself has taken new forms in our polity, affects universities greatly. Most of us have accepted this system. Some reasons, a combination of which could be operating, are the following. It

resonates with something we all believe in and practice without thinking. It is the likely course of higher education in a country with limited economic resources, and therefore, one in which focused attention to quality and academic values is possible only in small separate patches. It is in tune with the direction of growth of our society. It is necessary for rapid nation building. It is a consequence of the desire for 'fortification'.

It is not that these different functions of higher education as well as these factors do not exist in other countries. Nor is it that they have not had serious consequences there. In the 1930s, for example, in France, the rigidities of the university system and its inappropriateness for flexible large scale support of research led to the establishment of CNRS, a remarkable and successful network of laboratories in all of science. There is, now, a great deal of churning in France about how to reintegrate closely the two major structures, namely the university system and CNRS. A former President of CNRS commented a few years ago that the integration of the CNRS into the University system and the consequent rejuvenation of both is an imperative! In Germany, after the second world war, the chain of Max Planck Institutes was established partly for a quick building (in many cases a rebuilding) of research strength. A recent review of these world class centres has led to the establishment of IMRS, namely International Max Planck Research Schools in which individual Max Planck Institutes are entwined academically with universities. Germany has also embarked on an ambitious Universities Excellence Initiative in which about a dozen universities have been chosen with the explicit aim of making them among the very highest ranked in the world. Many countries in Southeast Asia have consciously built up their higher education system dramatically, via universities, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in the last two decades.

We seem to be going strongly against these trends, which express the basic fact that our need for higher education at all levels, and for new knowledge (as a society and as individuals) is best met in the university environment. While at certain times, for some time, and for some purposes, deviations are needed, this does not seem sustainable. The university is one of the most long-lived institutions we have in this world. Some contemporary

universities are about a thousand years old. The university has changed its form dramatically with time. In the West, from a largely teaching oriented body it developed into a research university in the 1860s or so. The modern university is very resilient; it has responded quickly and positively to changing societal demands for specialized kinds of education, and to creating knowledge of relevance to the society, without becoming something else entirely. Research institutes and colleges exist in other countries in the world too, but the centrepiece of the higher education system is the university.

The solidification of the above kind of 'caste' system and the continued emergence of monocultural institutions, many of them calling themselves universities in a naturally diverse, multireligious and multilingual society such as ours, is worrisome. Almost two generations of people have grown up in India for whom the threefold arrangement is the natural fact, with the deformed and stunted growth it implies. Also worrisome is the absence of reality checks of equity and global quality. It seems to me that there is urgent need for our universities to become, through appropriate changes in themselves, institutions in which higher education and all its functions are in relatively peaceful coexistence. Briefly, there is an urgent need for universities to rediscover themselves. It also seems essential that they be exemplars of academic values and be an autonomous pillar of strength for our society.

I will mention now some of the things that occur to me in this connection. These suggestions are quite likely to be naive and 'impractical'. I believe, however, that in the long run, if we are to be a knowledge economy in the global village, we have no choice but to see that our universities are comprehensive and are home to academic values. Only that will empower our students in numbers, and make it possible for them to have the kind of skills and values that are needed over a lifetime. India will be home to a population bulge of the largest number of young working age people in the world, starting in a few years. Like a soliton, this bulge will travel nearly undistorted, for several decades. Obviously we need to attach to this fact, and to our future as a knowledge economy, the importance they demand. The need for equitable higher education and research with world level quality is very pressing.

Most universities in the world function as single campuses or as relatively autonomous few campus bodies driven by the academic values shared by the academic community. They are major independent intellectual sources of strength of the society. Fundamentally, it seems to me that this kind of mindset needs to be there in us all. I have not been able to appreciate why it is so uncommon in our society when both traditional Indian and modern Western values converge here. In the absence of such a mindset, human ingenuity will find a way out of almost any maze of policing; policing is not the answer.

Depth (namely having a large number of universities offering education of comparable content, this being confirmed by objective criteria), and world level quality need to be there. The twin goals of equity and excellence need to be kept in view, always.

Universities in our country need to grow in the image of real universities; they need to expand their scope in at least three directions, namely the following. (i) The disciplines in which higher education is possible in a university need to be many more (to include, specially, professional categories such as technology, medicine and agriculture). (ii) Undergraduate education as well as research, in addition to postgraduate education, need to be there in a big way. The universities widely admired by us have this. For example, Stanford University, a great private university, has about 7,000 undergraduate students and 11,000 graduate students. The University of California, Berkeley, a great public university, has about 26,000 undergraduate students and 10,000 graduate students. (iii) Working to our strengths; as an old culture which is so differently rich in different regions, our exploration of this wealth is not sufficiently lively or scholarly.

A striking fact about our universities is that in most of them, the three aspects of a university, namely the campus which gives it an identity, affiliated colleges, and examinations ending in degrees, are conflated. Most often, the latter two overwhelm the first. In many universities, the natural concerns of the affiliated colleges and their dynamics consume the energies of individuals and bodies which are responsible for the university. A release from the MHRD says that the average number of colleges per university in India is about 300. Apparently the highest is 901, this being the number of colleges affiliated to Osmania University. (Pune University has about the same number.) The Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (National Higher Education Initiative) aims to reduce it to 200. My preference is for zero. This is not unheard of in our country. Three well-known examples are: Banaras Hindu University, University of Hyderabad and Jawaharlal Nehru University. I think that the three functions should be separated, and the campus should be made independent, administratively and academically.

I hope that our instinct for long-term survival will prevail. I hope we realize that having a collection of good universities is like having good seeds, if we want a good crop.

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