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GUEST EDITORIAL

Research and public universities

This guest editorial can be summarized by mutating a quote from John F. Kennedy, ‘Ask not what research can do to public Universities, ask what can public Universities do to research’. Most of the times what we find being discussed is how to improve research in public universities. What really needs to be asked is how research can be improved by democratizing it through public universities. Private universities, private state universities and other categories of institutions (see the directory of institutions at aishe.nic.in) are not touched upon as they are not relevant to the discussion here.

‘Begin at the beginning’, the King said, very gravely to Alice, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop.’ This guest editorial has a history like universities, research in India and much else. It began with an editorial board meeting in November 2015 (Ramasamy, R. and Gopal, S., *Curr. Sci.*, 2016, **110**, 752–756).

The talk on ‘science and research in state universities’, which forms the seed for this editorial, is best summarized by Ramasamy and Gopal (*Curr. Sci.*, 2016, **110**, 752–756): ‘...presented an overview of the growth of universities in India as a place of enquiry and the meeting of minds from various disciplines in order to further research and teaching. It was pointed out that State Universities are crucial for research environment and catalysis of ideas in the country. A selected set of three eminent faculties from a State University was used to illustrate that exemplary research has been possible from them. The necessity of identifying and nurturing good researchers, teachers and students in state universities was stressed upon. An example of the remarkable growth of research in a state university was used to show the importance of appointments of good Vice-Chancellors and faculty. The current condition of State Universities in Tamil Nadu was highlighted to show that the growing problems of corruption and conversion into teaching shops need to be tackled, as otherwise this cancer will spread to other educational and research institutions.’

Nevertheless, the appointments of Vice-Chancellors have improved in the last year in Tamil Nadu and academic quality rather than money has been playing a relieving role. And therein lies the rub. On the ground, while providing much needed short-term relief like the summer showers, having qualified Vice-Chancellors

alone does not address the drought of democracy and the spirit of inquiry.

The public universities, especially the older ones, have statutes and acts that provide a great deal of freedom, flexibility and power to the Syndicate (or Executive Council) headed by the Vice-Chancellor. The statutes and acts of the university can with visionary leadership help tackle requirements of manpower and infrastructure for emerging academic and research areas. There are sufficient democratic counterbalances to prevent misuse of such freedom, built in through the possible collective action of the Academic Council and Senate. Much like the Constitution of India, Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha can put a brake on a runaway cabinet and Prime Minister. The problem is the lack of democratic discussion and functioning leading to unchecked transgressions.

In the case of universities, often even elections to these bodies of governance are not held regularly. The remaining voices get further muted if there is an atmosphere of fear and retribution as faculty in universities are dependant on the Syndicate for administering funds and getting approvals for newer ventures. The complete disregard by most public universities of the Lyngdoh Committee and Supreme Court recommendations to have elections to student bodies ensures that the students do not have any voice in the directions taken by a university, nor of its functioning or lack of it thereof. Feudal attitudes, compartmentalization, the ‘never question’ attitude fostered by the school and college education system further exacerbate the problem of lack of spirit of inquiry and the shrinking healthy democratic discussion spaces in public universities.

Much of the ills of the current functioning of public universities stem from the fact that they are like the society in which they are embedded, unlike public institutions which are mostly elitist and do not reflect the composition nor the viscidities of society, and are most often symbols of impregnability. The entry requirements for faculty, administrators and students in these institutions preclude a large majority of society and also help continue their exclusivity by and large. In contrast, public universities tend to be more porous in their absorption of administrators, faculty and students. Feudalness, casteism and nepotism play a dominant role in the functioning of

public universities in general. The lack of social and economic democracy in society, that Bhimrao Ambedkar warned against, naturally percolates into the public universities. This affects their research capabilities since a vibrant research atmosphere requires the pre-existence of democratic discussion spaces.

The importance of public universities lies in the fact that they still feed into the institutions and more importantly, they are not elitist – catering to a large milieu – and are often the initial points of contact for first-generation students wishing to pursue higher education or opt for a research career. During the 25 years of my research and teaching in a public university, I have seen the cascading effect of first-generation students and those from the marginalized sections of society getting motivated by world-class research and teaching that happened in the public universities due to a historical culmination of factors. If only, this could be made to happen in all disciplines in all public universities.

In spite of the overall miasma surrounding public universities, given the right conditions, they have performed path-breaking research. This is borne out by many instances time and again. I have had the opportunity of doing my Ph D in a public university department that once stirred the world and also provided me the opportunity of working in a public university in an area where top-class research and teaching was happening. Research in a public university enhances the quality of teaching to a large section of students. There are many ways by which research in universities could be enhanced (Hasnain, S. E., *Curr. Sci.*, 2006, **91**, 1435–1436; 1591–1592).

The problem is the continued culture of excellence in research which requires consistency in funding, leadership and recognition. The governments have consistently been reducing their funding. The leadership is subject to the vagaries of the political climate. And as for recognition, public universities are the outcasts of the system. Like the two-tumbler system or the spatial segregation that still happens in our villages and many cities that prevent access of the underprivileged sections, public universities face discrimination in the elitist ‘old boys’ network. The number of persons from public universities in committees, awards, academies’ clearly highlights the situation. It is not that there is no worthy research going on in the public universities; it is just that the yardsticks are always elitist.

If one samples news stories and popular articles about science from outside the country – as in *New Scientist* or *Scientific American* or online science media – one sees a preponderance of work from universities. However, going through the small number of news and media outlets in India, one is struck by the disproportionate feed from institutions. Rarely does a university figure in the list. It is not that the quality of research in public universities is

necessarily low, it is just that mostly researchers in public universities are not ‘well connected’. Also, research in public universities is neither fostered or mentored by the powers that be, nor by the breed of scientists-turned bureaucrats.

In the early years after freedom from the colonial rule, Jawaharlal Nehru’s proximity to Homi Bhabha and S. S. Bhatnagar, for a variety of reasons, ensured that research through institutions was favoured over pushing for a broad front of research through public universities, which was the line advocated by Meghnad Saha, who saw the role of universities in building a strong base. Ambedkar had also been in favour of research being coupled with teaching in universities. Much later in the 80s, Janaki Ammal lamented on the situation of public universities and the opportunities lost by a legacy of elitism that had been followed in the beginning.

As Saha, Ambedkar and Janaki Ammal envisaged, had there been a push in the 1950s for making universities the temples of excellence in research, there could have been a million minds going into research. In the US and China, the transformative years indicate involvement of universities in research. Even now, the top-ranking research institutions in the US and China are universities, and not institutions under the guise of ‘deemed-to-be universities’ – a category that is unique to the Indian scenario.

The need for engagement of a broad section of students with research was felt in the 2000s and in the light of the wanton deterioration of universities by the state, a new category of institutions – Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, National Institute of Science Education and Research – were started which directly took students after school for integrated programmes in science. The Indian Institute of Science and other institutions started integrated research programmes. Though these attempts were useful, they were still elitist and mostly catered to the privileged.

A new education policy has been brewing for the past five years. When a new government takes the reins after the elections, it will do well to be bold and imaginative by bringing in a new education policy that does not continue with the mantra of withdrawal of the state from funding education and research. The policy should push for transforming research and education by opening public universities in every district and waiving the tuition fees for students pursuing higher education and research.

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