

50 YEARS OF CURRENT SCIENCE—GLEANINGS

CONSTITUTION OF INDIAN UNIVERSITIES *†

IN his recent Convocation Address to the Travancore University, Sir John Sargent made two basic assumptions on which the main thesis of his address was based. The first was "that standards in Indian Universities are on the whole lower than in most Western Universities". He might, had it been relevant to his theme, have drawn a conclusion from this assumption and asserted that Indian Universities are held in less respect, both by their own alumni and by the public generally, than British Universities. When considering the constitution, the work, and the public estimation, or rather the estimation and respect of the learned world, of a young university like ours, it may be helpful, if we try to analyse some of the reasons why the universities of the West have earned such high and universal respect.

I am convinced that this great respect in which the universities of the West are held is inseparably linked with the absolute freedom which they enjoy, for they are both constitutionally and actually, free from all extraneous interference or pressure. We in India have been accustomed for many years to pay lip-service to the ideals of "academic freedom" and "university autonomy", though with an uneasy conscience, for we are all conscious that universities in India have never been genuinely *free*. University autonomy and freedom, if it is to be genuine, must mean freedom from all forms of non-academic influence, authority and power.

The foundation of the freedom and autonomy of British Universities is to be found firstly in the method by which these universities are created. They are not founded by Acts of Parliament, but by Royal Charter granted by the Sovereign. Neither at the foundation nor at any subsequent amendment are the affairs or constitutions of British Universities debated in Parliament, and in this way the possibility of any political interference or pressure in university affairs is completely removed. It may legitimately be regretted that the first three universities in India were founded in 1857 by a legislative Act and not by a Royal Charter, for this precedent undoubtedly set the norm for the foundation of Universities in India ever since, and the growth of political consciousness and the natural evolution of legislatures have been continual brakes upon any growth of real academic freedom.

Now that a new era has dawned, it should be possible if we have the will and the necessary self-sacrificing

and self-denying qualities, to remove universities from the control of legislatures, central or provincial, and to decree that the foundation of new universities and amendments to the constitutions of existing ones should be the prerogative of the Governor-General or of the Rulers of the States. This is the first method by which academic freedom and the respect which follows from it are secured to British Universities; and the history of the past ninety years seems to suggest that without it genuine autonomy and academic freedom for Indian Universities are impossible. This method of foundation was fortunately adopted in Travancore, this University having been founded by a Proclamation and Act of the Sovereign, and not by an Act of the legislature. I sincerely trust that all future amendments to this Act will be promulgated in the same manner. If this be done, it will be a considerable help in preventing the University from becoming the plaything of politics.

There are many other ways, apart from making universities dependent for their existence and constitution on a politically constituted legislature, in which undesirable interference or pressure can be exerted to the curtailment or negation of autonomy and freedom, and in referring to this question too, it is natural that one should look to the condition of British Universities as providing the ideal.

In the first place, the British Parliament sends no representatives to the Senates or other governing bodies of British Universities. One can legitimately wonder why, if it is not for the deliberate introduction of political interference and pressure, provision is made for the legislatures to send some of their members to the Senates of Indian Universities.

It has often been a matter of concern to many who have been brought up in another tradition that the Senates of most Indian Universities have been modelled on the plan of a legislative assembly. Further, the deliberations of the authorities of British Universities are not open to the press and are never reported, except by official announcements which a university may send to the press for public information. So there is no incentive for that partisan type of argument and debate which sometimes disfigures the deliberations of university bodies in India.

It is true that on the Courts or Councils of many British Universities, which correspond to the Senates of Indian Universities—the Senates of British Universities being composed exclusively of the Professors of the Universities—there are, in addition to educationists representatives of other bodies and corporations. For example the Court of Governors of the University of Manchester and of the larger cities and towns in the

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country of Lancaster. But these representatives are not 'elected'; they are chosen or picked out by their colleagues on the bodies of which they are members, and nominated by them as the most suitable persons to serve on a university authority. The same people might not be the most suitable persons to serve, for instance, on the County Transport Board, for which other persons would be chosen and nominated, who might not, in turn, be at home on a university authority.

In addition to these wisely chosen representatives of public authorities, we find that many British Universities enlist the help of the professions, the learned societies, business and industry. Leeds University, which is situated in the heart of a big industrial area, has on its Court a number of representatives chosen by such associations as the Clothworkers' Company, the Skinners' Company, the Drapers' Company, as well as by the professional bodies like the Yorkshire Board of Legal Studies. The Universities of Liverpool and Sheffield have on their Courts a representative of all the other universities in the country nominated by the Chancellor of each university. In addition, they have a representative nominated by the Royal Society, the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, the Law Society, the General Council of the Bar, the Institutions of Civil and Mechanical Engineers, the Royal Institution of British Architects, the Institution of Naval Architects and the Iron and Steel Institute. It will be clearly seen that all the representatives so chosen are personally and daily concerned, each in his own professional or business sphere, with the work the universities do and with the fitness of the products they turn out. There are no elections in this matter. Fellows of Royal Societies and other self-respecting professional and business men would not offer themselves for 'election', and bear the indignity of standing against one another as candidates. That is one of elements of elections which makes elections out of place in university spheres.

This freedom which British Universities possess to secure only the right men in their assemblies is a priceless gift of the Royal Charter, and it might be well worth fighting for in India.

With the advent of constitutional independence in India, have not the time and the opportunity arrived

for us to consider these things and to take steps to secure the academic freedom of our universities and to raise their present somewhat middling status and reputation in the learned world? If we are to do this, we must first tackle our constitutions in which, if the British Universities can serve as a model, there is no room either for political or so-called 'popular' elements. Universities cannot be efficiently run either by politicians or by the public; they should be the most secluded and exclusive institutions in our midst. Then alone can they remain untarnished and on a higher level than any other secular institution.

So, instead of the so-called 'constituencies'—the very word has a political connotation and, therefore, quite inappropriate in university parlance—which 'elect' so-called 'representatives' to the Senates of many Indian Universities, one would like to see their places taken by professional and commercial organizations, which are deeply and genuinely interested and concerned with the education we give, and, more important still, with the products we turn out. It is not the politicians or quasi-politicians, but the great professions and businesses of the country which are most intimately concerned and handicapped when the universities turn out so many misfits. One would, therefore, like to see a complete change of outlook on the part of the public generally, and a thorough overhaul of constitution of university assemblies. In addition to experienced educationists, principals of colleges and professors of university status, room should be made in the Senates of Indian Universities for representatives nominated by the Institution of Engineers of India, the Medical Councils of India, the Bar Associations, the Research Institutes, the Defence Forces, the Chambers of Commerce, the Trades Associations, the Mill-Owners' Associations, the Planters' Associations and other respected bodies and societies of this kind, whose unprejudiced guidance as to what they expect our highest seats of learning to achieve would be of inestimable value.

If this were done, and if our university constitutions were remodelled on these lines, we could eliminate all elections and all official nominations from the Senates of universities. This, I am convinced, is an ideal worth achieving.