

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 88 Number 4

25 February 2005

EDITORIAL

Reinventing our universities

Our Universities are so engrossed today with the task of conducting examinations and with innumerable meetings of Boards and Faculties, Courts and Councils, Senates and Syndicates that they have no time to perform the highest function of a University which is to stimulate intellectual activity and advance knowledge. There is a danger today of its being forgotten that examinations and Faculty meetings are only a means to an end and not an end in themselves. There is a danger today of the production and advancement of knowledge receding into the background in the intellectual outlook of our Universities, of their being regarded as something beautiful and great, like the white snow in the top of the Himalayas, to be admired from a distance but not to be grasped or touched.

—C. V. Raman

*Convocation Address, Benares Hindu University
January 1927*

Intellectual activity of the highest type such as every University should strive to develop is a force of incalculable power and importance for the national welfare. Apart from the direct results of such activity in promoting agricultural, industrial or commercial progress, its indirect results are even more important. Intellectual stagnation is equivalent to national decay and death. Intellectual activity, on the other hand, leads to a quickening of the national life in all its aspects. ...The mainsprings of intellectual activity in every country are education and the spirit of enquiry, and its quality varies with the standard set by the thinkers and educators of the nation. Thus, in the last analysis, it is the leadership offered by the Universities that determines the level of intellectual activity in the country and therefore also the national efficiency.

—C. V. Raman

*Convocation Address, Mysore University
24 August 1929*

A scholarly friend, recently discovered the Convocation Addresses delivered by C. V. Raman at the Universities in Mysore and Benares, over seventy years ago. Raman's concerns seem even more relevant today. The Supreme Court recently declared the Chattisgarh Private Universities Act, 2002, unconstitutional, stripping an extraordinarily

large number of 'universities' of their legal status. How did a small and young state like Chattisgarh suddenly sprout so many 'universities'? The answer is of course, obvious. Avariciousness, when disguised as populism can be a powerful instrument. The state government was ostensibly driven by the noble desire of making higher education available to all. The easiest course seemed to be to throw the higher education sector in the state open to private enterprise. This move was clearly designed to make the peddling of 'university degrees' a financially attractive proposition, with every local tutorial college and teaching shop being elevated to the status of a university. With hundreds of thousands of gullible students as customers for degrees, there is clearly a wonderful opportunity for free marketeers in higher education. Selling 'education' is undoubtedly an attractive commercial proposition; the customers are uncritical and undemanding, interested only in degrees, which they hope will be a passport to a better future. With money to be made, the inevitable nexus between politicians and profiteers has been quickly forged in the higher education sector. The Chattisgarh episode is only an extreme example, because the state, suddenly sprouted dozens of universities. Fortunately, Yash Pal, a former chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC) petitioned the courts, in the public interest. The Chattisgarh case demonstrates the absence of control by central bodies like the UGC, over events in the states. Since 'higher education' remains a 'state subject', its quality varies widely across the country and the gulf between central and state universities can be substantial.

We need to urgently reflect on the state of our publicly funded universities as the field of higher education is in the throes of a major transition. The agreements reached under the World Trade Organization have opened the area of higher education to foreign participation. Globalization and privatization are words that now affect the higher education system; foreign 'education providers' can now set up shop in collaboration with Indian institutions. Degrees bearing the names of foreign universities can be acquired by studying in local institutions, many of which are of relatively recent origin, with credentials that merit careful scrutiny. The National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), Delhi, an autonomous organization funded by the Government of India, has recently com-

pleted a study of 'Foreign Education Providers in India' (Prabhu, N., *The Hindu*, 14 February 2005). The results reveal that six states, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Karnataka account for 108 of the 131 collaborations listed. The foreign institutions are almost exclusively from the United States and Britain; other exporters of 'education' like Australia, New Zealand and Canada appear to be waiting in the wings. The overwhelming number of foreign courses offered in the collaborating institutions has so far been vocational in nature; hotel management, business management and the ubiquitous courses on human resource management. There are several technical courses including some in areas that seem improbably advanced, like Micro Electromechanical Systems (MEMS). Very few courses provide general education. The glamour of a foreign degree draws students, who often pay handsome fees running to about Rs 2–3 lakhs per year. Peddling degrees, both Indian and foreign, can be a lucrative business. The dramatic transformation of the higher education scene in India is reflected in the 'education supplements' produced by major newspapers. Every conceivable course is advertised, with marketing professionals undoubtedly contributing their skills; selling 'education' may soon be as profitable as selling soap.

Even as private universities and foreign institutions jostle for the higher education market, the vast network of state-funded universities in India appears to be sinking into a state, where academic performance, both teaching and research, is slowly becoming irrelevant in the conduct of university affairs. Controversies dog the appointments of Vice-Chancellors with alarming regularity; testimony to the levels of politicization in the universities. Senates and Syndicates often work at cross purposes with the university administration. C. V. Raman, whom I have quoted at the beginning of this commentary, would shudder to think that many of the mindless meetings that he deplored, have today become active instruments which work hard to prevent any reform. The most distressing feature of our university system is the negligible importance given to academic performance of the faculty, who really are the backbone of the university. Erudition and scholarship are no longer pre-requisites for advancement through academic ranks. Universities are now full of professors, who do no research and do little teaching. Undergraduate teaching was largely banished to constituent colleges a long time ago; a sharp contrast to the situation in Western universities. Research is considered an activity best left to national laboratories and all attempts to infuse funds and facilities into university departments have met with only limited success. Research, both in science and the humanities, requires an ambience where academic pursuits are encouraged, scholarship is prized and mediocrity is not consciously elevated. Such an environment is sadly lacking in a majority

of our universities. State universities, with a few notable exceptions, have been sliding downward in their academic performance at a rate somewhat greater than their centrally funded counterparts. The fall in scholarly output is most evident for universities which were once India's pride. Output today is measured in terms of number of degrees awarded; research output is hardly demanded by university administrators. Raman was prescient when he said, at Mysore in 1929: 'In thus drawings attention to the relationship between national welfare and the work done in the Universities, I would wish to emphasize the danger of allowing such work to degenerate into a deadly routine of formal teaching and formal examination. The tendency of all formal schemes of education is to regard the human mind as a kind of soft metal to be squeezed into shape by intense pressure into the hard steel moulds of syllabuses and examinations. This kind of mechanization of education is, I believe, most deadly in its effects, and is responsible for not a little of the intellectual sterility of the finished products of our Universities... The ideal of University work is the provision of opportunities for special abilities, of teacher as well as students, to express themselves'.

Raman was untiring in his efforts to propagate the idea that Universities must be centres of research. In his Mysore address he was eloquent: 'Indeed knowledge as embodied in a formal treatise or lecture is apt to convey an impression of static perfection which is deceptive and induces the mind to adopt an attitude of uncritical acceptance. The highest qualities of mind are evoked by knowledge which presents itself in a dynamic but imperfect form, calling for criticism and personal investigation for its adequate appraisal. This is the real value of research as an instrument of education in itself'. A few years later at Benares, Raman was more emphatic: 'You must be one of the seekers, or else you will get left behind... You cannot tell the depth of the river or learn to swim in it by standing on the bank and watching it flow by, but must pluck up courage and plunge into it. So long as our teachers and our students are not inspired in their daily work by such ideals, so long as it is not research but administration that dominates the outlook of our Universities, we can hope for no great advance either in the intellectual output of India or the quality of the work done in our centers of learning'.

Our universities are threatened today, both from within and without. The internal threat of degeneration can be met only if there is a confluence of interest between administrators and academicians. The bodies of the government charged with the responsibility of overseeing our university system need to act quickly and decisively in rejuvenating our system of higher education. Reinventing the Indian university will neither be an easy task, nor will it be pleasant.

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