Universities at the crossroads*

André Béteille

Discussion and debate on our universities is marked by sharp and growing disagreement between proponents of two different and opposite points of view. There are those who maintain that the universities should be governed solely by pure merit without any consideration of their social composition; they do not generally pause to consider whether merit itself can be defined unequivocally by one single criterion. On the other side are those who maintain that the universities should become fully inclusive socially and give representation to all castes and communities in proportion to their numbers; they have little sympathy for the university's need to discriminate among students and teachers on the basis of their academic ability and performance. If the universities value their autonomy and want to protect it, they must show more initiative in devising and adopting policies that will change their social composition in the long run and make them more diverse and socially more inclusive. That it is possible to do this without seriously compromising academic standards has been shown repeatedly by universities in other countries.

Keywords: Caste, challenges, crossroads, Indian universities, women graduates.

Beginnings in 19th Century

DISCUSSION and debate on our universities is marked by sharp and growing disagreement between proponents of two different and opposite points of view. There are those who maintain that the universities should be governed solely by pure merit without any consideration of their social composition; they do not generally pause to consider whether merit itself can be defined unequivocally by one single criterion. On the other side are those who maintain that the universities should become fully inclusive socially and give representation to all castes and communities in proportion to their numbers; they have little sympathy for the university's need to discriminate among students and teachers on the basis of their academic ability and performance.

There is a growing feeling that the universities, at least as we have known them up to now, face an uncertain future, not only in India but across the world. That feeling was expressed by many at the symposium on 'The University of the Twenty-First Century' held at the University of Chicago in 1991 to mark its centennial. Edward Shils, the organizer of the symposium, concluded his address to it with the following words: 'Perhaps Napoleon will replace Wilhelm von Humboldt as the guiding star of our academic

intellectual life'[1]. Humboldt created the first modern university in Berlin based on the principle of the unity of teaching and research, whereas Napoleon provided the main impetus in France for the *grandes écoles* which were small, compact and highly selective institutions designed to give expression to the principle of 'careers open to talent'.

I would like to go back to the time of hope and promise in our universities when they first began a hundred and fifty years ago. The university was then seen not only as the centre for a new kind of learning, but also as the setting for a new kind of social life. Speaking at its convocation in 1866, Sir Henry Maine, one of the first Vice-chancellors of the University of Calcutta, said, 'The fact is that the founders of the University of Calcutta thought to create an *aristocratic* institution; and in spite of themselves, they created a *popular* institution'[2]. This may sound strange today because by our contemporary standards, Calcutta University in the 1860s was a small and exclusive place. But by the standards that prevailed then it was in its outlook socially inclusive and not exclusive.

A hundred and fifty years ago, even the idea of the university as a popular institution was a new one, not only in India but also in England and in most parts of Europe. The universities were small, selective and often reclusive places, and they were designed neither to overturn the existing hierarchies nor to produce hundreds of thousands of graduates every year for employment in government and other offices. When the first universities were started in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, such a conception of the social responsibility of the university was still in the future.

The universities and their law, medical and other colleges opened new horizons both intellectually and institu-

tionally in a society that had stood still in a conservative and hierarchical mould for centuries. India had a rich intellectual tradition in disciplines such as mathematics, grammar, logic and metaphysics, but that tradition had stagnated and atrophied partly because of the narrow and restricted social channels through which it was reproduced and transmitted. The exposure to a new and expanding tradition of learning did a great deal to revive the dormant intellectual energies of Indians, and the universities were in the forefront of this revival.

Furthermore, the universities were among the first open and secular institutions in a society that was governed largely by the rules of kinship, caste and religion. In that sense they were islands of modernity in a world bound largely by tradition. Right until the time of independence, the universities were few and far between. Their influence did not reach very far or penetrate very deeply into a society that was steeped in poverty, illiteracy and inequality. But the influence, no matter how restricted, was progressive, both intellectually and institutionally, and this progressive influence appeared to be spreading gradually, though very slowly.

In the last century the universities did more than any other institution to enlarge the role of women in public life. Their presence in the professions, in administration, in management, in the media and in other areas of employment in remunerative and responsible positions would not have been possible if the universities and the colleges had not opened their doors to them. Oxford and Cambridge had been in existence for six or seven hundred years before they began to admit women to their degrees. Calcutta University admitted two women to its B A degree in 1883, and they became the first women graduates in the British empire[3].

Changes were taking place not only in attitudes towards women, but also in attitudes to caste. While it is true that the universities were in principle open to all castes and communities, those who were admitted to them until the time of independence were mainly from the majority community and from the top castes. But caste is not just a matter of the size and distribution of populations, it is also an attitude of mind. Has the attitude of mind, by which caste was sustained, changed in the last hundred years? I believe that it has, and, again until the time of independence, the universities were in the forefront of the change.

If we look at the way in which caste was represented in the period prior to independence, we will find that a large part of the attention was devoted to its ritual aspects, centering around the opposition of purity and pollution. This is what the anthropologist Hutton[4] called the strictures of caste. The strictures described by Hutton and the majority of anthropologists of his time related to the 'avoidance of pollution through water, food or contact'. The present generation of university students, at least in the metropolitan cities, can scarcely understand what that might

mean. If the ritual interdictions of caste now stand largely discredited, at least among the urban middle classes, it is well to remember that the process by which they became discredited first began in the universities and their hostels.

The age-old restrictions of gender and caste did not disappear in the universities, but they came to be questioned there. The education in citizenship also began in the universities. It has been said that in the past India was a society not of citizens, but of castes and communities. A person's identity, particularly among the Hindus, but to some extent among all religious communities, was defined largely by his caste or sect, and also by his or her gender. Citizenship in our constitution is an unmediated relationship between the individual and the state without consideration of religion, caste or sex. The idea of citizenship received a strong impetus from the universities even before the rights of citizenship were laid down in the constitution.

Open and secular institutions

The universities had secured a foothold in Indian society as open and secular institutions, and as autonomous centres of study and research when the country entered the era of independence. Their academic achievements were not spectacular, but the pursuit of science and scholarship was taken seriously and regarded as an important and significant value. As institutions, they were not without blemish, but they were relatively free from the more egregious forms of social discrimination that were still pervasive in the wider society. Their influence in society was beneficial, although it did not reach very far.

The prospects for the consolidation and expansion of the universities and their influence seemed good at the time of independence in 1947. India was in advance of most countries outside the West, with the possible exception of Japan. It was certainly well ahead of China, whose universities did not have the breadth and depth or the self-reliance of the Indian universities in Calcutta, Bombay, Allahabad and elsewhere. The institutions that had been built in China were severely disrupted by the political turmoil through which the country passed before and after 1949. What survived the turmoil through which the People's Republic of China passed in its early years was almost decimated by the Great Cultural Revolution of 1966 with its anti-intellectualism and its open attack of teachers, scholars and authors.

Although the two countries entered a new phase of change and development at roughly the same time, India in 1947 and China in 1949, no two persons could have been more different in their attitudes towards the universities than Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao Zedong. The men who wrote the Constitution of India had a very different experience of higher education and a very different orientation to it from the experience and orientation of the men

who carried China through war and revolution to the creation of a new republic. There is a streak of chronic anti-intellectualism in India, but it did not manifest itself in the Constituent Assembly and remained muted in the early decades of independence.

India was fortunate in having as its first and longest serving Prime Minister, a person who did not just suffer universities to exist, but had a deep and active sympathy for them. It is well known that Nehru loved addressing university gatherings and gave many convocation addresses, both in India and abroad. His sympathetic concern for the universities was expressed in a convocation address he delivered in his home town at the University of Allahabad in the very year of India's independence. That address was an expression of both hope and foreboding. In it he said, 'The universities have much to teach in the modern world and their scope of activity ever enlarges. I am myself a devotee of science and believe the world will ultimately be saved, if it is to be saved, by the method and approach of science'[5]. There was hope that the universities would do well, because if they do well 'then it is well with the nation and the people'[5].

But there was apprehension as well, for 'if the temple of learning itself becomes a home of narrow bigotry and petty objectives, how then will the nation prosper or a people grow in stature?'[5]. Increasingly, the universities have become battlegrounds for the promotion of every kind of personal and sectional interest. The university is by its nature a place where divergent views are given room for expression. Science and scholarship cannot progress unless divergent views are put to the test of reason and experience. But the disputes that now dominate many if not most of our universities are not over the principles and methods of science and scholarship; they are over pay and promotion, and the distribution of seats and posts among different castes, communities and factions.

Between 1857 and 1947, the universities grew at a slow and leisurely pace. With independence, the tempo of growth became faster. There were barely 20 universities at the time of independence. There are now close to 300 of them. Here I will follow the terminology adopted by the Association of Indian Universities and use the umbrella term 'universities' to cover, in addition to universities pure and simple, what are called 'Deemed to be universities', such as the Indian Institute of Science and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, as well as the 'Institutes of national importance' such as the Indian Statistical Institute and the Indian Institutes of Technology. Besides there being a larger number of institutions, there is now a greater variety of them.

There are still a few university institutions in which standards of teaching and research are maintained at a fairly high level, but none of the older universities is any longer in the forefront. In an increasing number of them hardly any research worth the name is done, and even the regularity and routine of ordinary classroom teaching is often dispensed with. In the majority of State Universities virtually the entire budget goes into salaries and other establishment charges, with hardly anything left over for libraries and laboratories. Standards and facilities for undergraduate teaching in many universities are often below what may be found in the better schools in the country.

The growth in the universities in the last 60 years has left most people dissatisfied. There is dissatisfaction with the amount of growth as well as its direction. Many are unhappy that the growth has been slow and limited in extent. They point out that a far smaller proportion of the population is in higher education than in the advanced countries and even in China. They would like to see the government put more money into the universities, and many are now talking about exploring other sources of funding for the universities. Others say that the growth in the universities has been unplanned and haphazard, and in response to political pressures. There has been an enormous expansion of knowledge in the last 60 years, but most Indian universities have not even tried to keep pace with it.

Expansion and declining standards

The universities stand at the crossroads today. Especially in India, they are attacked from various quarters. They are no longer seen, as they were in their formative years, as the outposts of a new kind of social and intellectual life in a stagnant and hierarchical society. They are chronically short of funds, but what goes deeper than the shortage of funds is the loss of nerve, the failure of confidence within the university in its own basic purpose and objective.

The universities are attacked for allowing academic standards to decline steadily in a world in which knowledge is expanding rapidly. They are attacked simultaneously for their failure to act in a socially responsible way in the cause of equity and social justice. Much of the attack is indiscriminate and intemperate, but the universities are losing the composure to address even those points of criticism that are reasonable and well judged.

There is growing anxiety, particularly among our scientists, that India is losing its competitive advantage in the field of modern knowledge to China and other countries over which it had such an advantage until recently. If India is to advance or even keep its place as a knowledge society, it will have to invest far more in research and development and in the institutions of higher education. That India needs many more universities and more funds from a diversity of sources is now generally accepted. However, the resources will be wasted if we continue to act in the belief that all universities, the small and the large, the purposeful and the disorderly, the active and the lethargic, should be given the same resources on the assumption that they fulfil more or less the same social need. There is

enormous political pressure to build all universities according to the same plan and to have them regulated in the same way by the same external authority. The universities cannot discharge their social and academic responsibilities effectively if those responsibilities are defined by the state and the political parties.

The challenge before our universities in the 21st century is to combine two distinct but important objectives. The first objective is to maintain and apply strict standards of academic discrimination, without fear or favour and without consideration of caste, creed and gender. The second is to make the universities socially more inclusive, in practice and not just in principle. The difficulties of keeping both objectives simultaneously in view are not given the attention they deserve.

Some of our best university institutions still maintain high academic standards and their graduates fit easily into the best universities outside the country and perform very well there. I can speak from personal experience of the Delhi School of Economics, and from hearsay about the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, the Indian Institute of Science and the IITs and the IIMs. But these institutions are not the most inclusive socially in either their faculties or their student bodies. In the eyes of the crusaders for social justice they are 'elitist', and woe betide any academic institution if it is singled out in Parliament or in a State Assembly as being elitist.

There are other institutions that have, as a matter of policy, opened their doors to a much wider cross-section of castes and communities. The southern universities, particularly in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, have done so since before independence, and such a policy has now come to be adopted by universities in many other parts of the country. The academic record of these universities has not been very encouraging, and there has been a secular trend of decline in their standards of performance. One has only to compare the University of Madras with IIT Madras, or Bangalore University with the National Law School University at Bangalore to appreciate the point I am making.

Is a relaxation in academic standards inevitable as a university becomes more mixed in its social composition? Such a conclusion would be a mistake and contrary to the evidence from many countries, and indeed from most parts of India until the early years of independence. In fact, a strong argument can be made that in the long run, universities gain academically and not just socially by becoming more inclusive and by learning to accommodate and manage diversity among their teachers and students. What is decisive is the kind of process through which the principle of social inclusion is translated into practice.

The routes through which sections of society earlier largely excluded from the universities came to be gradually incorporated in them, have varied from one case to another. The difference becomes at once evident when we compare the trajectories of women with those of the backward castes and communities. Organized political pressure has played little part in the slow but steady inclusion of women in the universities, first as students and shortly afterwards as teachers. Pressure from political parties in both government and opposition has been the main driving force behind the increase in the numbers of students and teachers from the backward castes and communities. In the former case the accommodation has been achieved without much threat to the autonomy of the university; in the latter it has been at considerable cost to the university's autonomy.

The so-called elite institutions may have failed to admit or appoint many members of the backward castes or communities, but they have accommodated women in increasing numbers. We must not make light of the bias against women that was widespread in academic institutions even when those institutions were formally open to all, irrespective of caste, community and gender. That bias has not disappeared in India or even in countries with fuller provisions for higher education. But it has been steadily worn down and overcome in the face of the academic achievements of successive generations of women. At first the women in the universities were mainly students and not teachers. But when some of the women students performed brilliantly, it became very difficult to keep them out of faculty positions for very long.

It is now much more widely acknowledged than 50 or 60 years ago that having more women in the universities is good not only for women, but also for the universities. That acknowledgement has been won through much toil and effort, and not without many disappointments. It has been a long-drawn process and it should lead us to realize that a university may become socially inclusive in more than one way and at more than one step.

There has been, since the middle of the 19th century, a secular trend for universities to move from being 'aristocratic' or socially exclusive to becoming 'popular' or socially inclusive. This trend did not begin at the same time everywhere, and it has not gone the same distance in every country. Even within the same country the movement, as we have seen, has been uneven. Nevertheless, there is now general recognition of the value that is added to a university when it becomes socially inclusive. In the United States this is referred to as 'diversity' and the social and intellectual value of diversity has now come to be taken for granted. Many American universities, including the best ones, have policies for enhancing their diversity. Such success, as these policies have had, has been due to the fact that the initiative for them has come mainly from within the university instead of their being imposed on the universities by external political authorities.

It is unrealistic to expect that every public institution, irrespective of its specific tasks and objectives, will – in the natural course of events – come to mirror more or less faithfully, all the social divisions in the wider population. It is particularly unwise to seek to arrive at such an out-

come through the intervention of the State. Today the advocates for greater representation for the backward classes are no longer satisfied by their gradual incorporation in the universities. They want representation in proportion to population in the interest of equity and social justice, and they want the State to use all the instruments in its hands to bring this about expeditiously.

Social inclusion: Gender

Even if we admit that each kind of public institution has its own specific functional requirements, we cannot remain wholly indifferent to its social composition. If the secular trend in the world as a whole is for the universities to become socially more inclusive and diverse, why has this trend ceased to operate or why does it operate so feebly in so many of our universities, and particularly in the ones that enjoy the highest academic standing? In a democratic social and political order, this question has to be addressed seriously in the public interest and in the interest of the universities themselves.

Recognition of the fact that the obstacles to free access operate differently for different institutions and for different sections of society, leads to a new set of questions. Access to the most competitive and selective university institutions depends in large measure on how well qualified and prepared the aspirants for admission are. Women from certain classes are now able to enter secondary schools of good quality more easily than are most members of the backward castes.

In Britain, until World War II, not many women or children of working-class families found their way into the better universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge, even though there was no formal bar against them. Their entry into them had to await the expansion of secondary education that took place after World War II. What we learn from the experience of the advanced countries of Europe and America is that it is impossible to make the universities socially inclusive in a meaningful and effective way without first creating a broad-based system of secondary schools, where education of a reasonably good quality is within the reach of boys and girls from all classes and communities. I am not arguing that any of the countries to which I have just referred has achieved complete success in this regard, but they have travelled much further along that road than we have. It is this that enables their universities to adopt policies for greater social diversity, without compromising their academic standards too much.

The main reason why there were few women in the universities in Britain and America before World War II, is that few of them had had the benefit of a good secondary education. Even in those countries, education beyond a certain level was not considered necessary or even desirable for women. With changes in attitudes towards women after World War II and the creation of more room for them in secondary schools of good quality, more and more women were academically prepared for entry into the universities and to perform successfully in them. This, rather than any direct intervention by the State, was the main factor behind the increasing presence of women in the universities.

What happened in Britain and other Western countries in the wake of World War II, was repeated in some respects in India in the wake of independence. More women started doing well in schools and they entered the colleges and universities, where again their achievements came to be acknowledged. At first they did well mainly in the humanities, but soon they entered the departments of science as well as the professional colleges. This change was made possible largely by changes in attitudes and aspirations within the middle-class family, and here some castes and communities were in the forefront, while others lagged behind. Government intervention in university admissions and appointments did not play any large part in the process.

When we look back at the incorporation of women into the universities, whether in the West or in India, we see that what stood against their fuller incorporation was the social bias against their education rather than any lack of innate ability. While such bias was undoubtedly present inside the universities, its deeper roots lay in the family and the community. Till the time of independence, it was not considered proper in many if not most Indian families for mature girls to enter institutions where their fellow students and their teachers would be mostly men. Having separate institutions for women solved the problem to some extent, but it was not a satisfactory solution for post-graduate study and research. It was only when women were allowed to move more freely on their own that they made their way more fully into the universities, and their successful performance there led to a further easing of the bias against them.

It should be pointed out at once that the women who are entering the best university institutions in increasing numbers, do not come equally from all castes and classes. They belong mainly to the upper castes and the middle class. While caste is undoubtedly important in determining life chances, the divisions of class based on income, wealth and occupation are no less important. Women from the middle and upper–middle classes in the metropolitan cities have better chances than all other women. The pressure of early marriage is weakest among them. Good, though expensive, schools are available in metropolitan cities and middle-class families are increasingly willing to send their daughters to the best ones, which are often co-educational, which prepare them for admission not only to the most competitive arts and science colleges, but also to the professional ones.

The situation for women, irrespective of caste or community, in villages and small towns is very different.

There the pressure on the girl to marry by the time she is eighteen, and even before, is strong. Good schools are not within easy reach, especially for girls; and the limited resources of the family are used for creating opportunities for sons rather than daughters.

Social inclusion: Caste

Having shown that the social obstacles to the larger presence of women in the universities are to be found more outside than within the universities, I now turn to the complex and controversial subject of caste. Before turning to the specifics of the Indian case, I may point out that it will be unrealistic to expect all universities, the good, the bad and the indifferent, to incorporate persons from every section of society in proportion to their strength in the population. Such an outcome has not been achieved by any university system anywhere in the world, and it is unlikely to be ever achieved in the future.

It still remains true that there are many castes and communities, including some that are quite populous, whose presence in the more select universities is so small as to be a scandal. There is no reason to believe that the distribution of individual ability has anything to do with the social division into castes and communities. The implication of this unusual pattern of distribution is that a vast pool of talent lies undetected, unrecognized and unprepared for admission into the better university institutions. The responsibility for this does not lie with the universities alone; it lies as much, if not more, with a whole range of institutions, from the family to the school, for failing to play their part in identifying and preparing the individuals concerned for entry into the best universities and performing successfully in them.

A comparison with other major countries shows up our disadvantages. The older civilizations, whether in Europe, China or India, were hierarchical in both principle and practice. The movement towards the development of open and secular universities had to face obstacles from the residues of established hierarchies in all of them. Those obstacles have not disappeared in any of them, but other countries have managed to negotiate them better than we have in most respects.

The comparison with China is particularly relevant. Both societies were hierarchically organized in the past, although hierarchical values were more deeply entrenched in India than in China. India and China were both beginning to set up modern universities by the end of the 19th century. In both countries, the universities were small in size and few in number. India had the advantage over China in having started a little earlier and attained higher standards of academic performance. There is no reason to believe that in the early decades of the 20th century, the Indian universities were the more 'aristocratic' and the Chinese ones the more 'popular'.

The Chinese system of higher education underwent a great upheaval during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. One of the principal objectives of the Cultural Revolution was to dismantle the elitism that had survived in the Chinese university system. The movement under Mao provides the most spectacular example in history, of the ruthless attack on elitism in the universities in the pursuit of a political agenda that had no concern for science and scholarship. The attack on elitism has become a routine with certain populist movements in India, but such movements have nothing of the mobilizing power or the destructive energy of the Cultural Revolution in the last decade of Mao's regime.

The Chinese universities have been given a new lease of life in the last two decades, mainly as a result of the remarkable turnaround in China's economic policy. Under Deng, the main thrust of the policy was to attain high and sustained rates of economic growth through rapid industrialization. This has called for a very different kind of policy for higher education from the policy of levelling under Mao. The universities have been steered away from the compulsions of populism to meet the need for creating superior, if not elite, institutions that can compete with the best of their kind in the world. Having burnt their fingers with the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese authorities are very careful to keep their best university institutions away from populist pressures.

Chinese society as a whole has, in the last seven or eight decades, undergone a process of upheaval and churning that has had no parallel in India. Radical movements in India have at best attacked political institutions and structures. They have not attacked, as the Chinese did relentlessly, the basic institutions of family, marriage and kinship. It has long been accepted that the family system was the basic and fundamental institution of Chinese society[6,7]. The continuous attack on it over several generations has shaken up and loosened China's traditional system of stratification. Women have acquired freedom of movement and of opportunity much more extensively than in India. The social standing due to birth in a particular family or lineage counts far much less than it did in the past. In India, that standing no longer has any legal recognition; but it still has wide social recognition.

India has undergone some social churning, but its effects have not spread very widely or gone very deep. To be sure, political conflicts of one kind or another have been endemic, and the university campus has been a battleground for rival parties, rival factions, and rival castes and communities. These endemic rivalries and hostilities have been a major depressant of academic performance, but it is doubtful how far they have contributed to the restructuring of economic disparities or the circulation of persons from various social classes across the different levels of the hierarchy.

Where the universities have become socially more inclusive by a change in their caste composition, this has

happened less through the free and unimpeded circulation of individuals across the educational and occupational systems, than through the adoption of quotas in both admissions and appointments for the different castes and communities. Many advocates of caste quotas concede that they are only a second-best solution, but they add that in India quotas are the only solution that can work. This argument has been so widely and persistently presented, that it requires to be seriously addressed.

While bias and prejudice undoubtedly exist in Indian society, their presence is by no means unique to it. Social prejudice based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity or caste exists in one form or another in most, if not all societies. There is at best a difference of degree between India and other countries. It is difficult to agree that the very limited presence of the backward castes in the best university institutions is due solely to the social bias against them. Why has the bias against them remained unchanged or, as some say, even increased when the bias against women in those very institutions has declined significantly? The trajectories by which women have found their way into the elite universities in India are remarkably similar to the trajectories followed by women in the advanced industrial societies. Why have the trajectories of the backward castes been so different?

No doubt, caste is different from gender, and caste bias operates somewhat differently from gender bias. But the evidence does not suggest that caste bias on the university campus was from the start stronger than gender bias, or that the decline of gender bias, which has undoubtedly taken place, was a smooth and easy process in India or anywhere else.

It will be very difficult to maintain that, in Indian society as a whole, caste prejudice has remained unaltered in the last fifty to sixty years. Strong caste prejudice against the Dalits continues to exist in many but not all parts of the country. Social prejudice against castes belonging to the middle levels of the hierarchy has declined in many respects to a greater extent than social prejudice against women. Again, this is not to say that prejudice of either kind has disappeared.

As I have said earlier, the ritual restrictions of caste have dwindled. The association between caste and occupation has loosened, and the rules of caste endogamy have also become weaker. Where then does the caste bias that continues to exist at the beginning of the 21st century, draw its sustenance from? If caste has acquired a new lease of life in independent India, it is mainly through organized politics. When Srinivas[8] stated in a Presidential Address to the Indian Science Congress nearly fifty years ago that caste was acquiring a new lease of life, many found the statement more surprising than convincing. But Srinivas had chosen his examples carefully, and all of them came from the domain of politics. The use of caste for mobilizing political support has come to be accepted as a commonplace to the point that many now believe that caste bias is inextinguishable.

There were great variations in the extent to which caste consciousness prevailed in the universities at the time the country became independent. Madras university, set up in 1857 and Mysore university in 1916 may be contrasted with Calcutta university, set up in the same year as that of Madras university, and Delhi university set up six years after Mysore university. I can speak from personal experience of Calcutta university, where I was a student in 1950–57 and Delhi university where I have taught since 1959 that in neither of the two was caste a subject of much interest in the early decades of independence, except among specialists in sociology. It was very different in the southern universities. In Delhi university, if one wanted to know about the role of caste in education and employment, one asked the sociologists – or one's colleagues from South India.

Caste consciousness on the campus grew with the spread in the demand for caste quotas to regions where such demands had been absent or weak in the past. The agitations over the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in 1990, brought caste consciousness into many universities that had been relatively free from it in the early decades of independence. To be sure, caste was used for the mobilization of political support even then; as I have said, Srinivas pointed this out in his address of 1957. But the use of caste in politics then was justified on pragmatic and not ideological grounds. The grounds shifted after 1977, when support for caste quotas and, more generally, the use of caste in politics began to be justified ideologically by the appeal to equality and social justice. This brought in its wake a new kind of politics for which the term 'identity politics' is generally used.

As I have already pointed out, caste is not just a form of organization; it is as much a form of consciousness. It is true that the consciousness alone cannot create social divisions out of nothing. But it can bring into the open, divisions that were submerged; sharpen cleavages that were growing faint; and give a clearer focus to practices that were diffuse. If caste has dug its roots deeper into the universities today, the main responsibility for that lies in the way in which politics has come to be organized. Political parties, across a wide ideological spectrum, including the two Communist parties, have thrown their weight in favour of caste quotas. No party can today openly oppose quotas for fear of its vote banks turning against it. We now have a very different political climate from the climate of fifty years ago.

Numerical quotas and affirmative action

Caste quotas in education and employment have caught the public imagination because they draw attention to an unresolved problem. The uneven distribution of castes and communities in university institutions is not just a matter of statistics, it is a social fact. Disparities have de-

clined to some extent, but in the most competitive and coveted institutions they have not declined sufficiently to the satisfaction of all.

There is general agreement that equality of opportunity is a desirable objective, and commitment to it is written into the Constitution of India. Equality of opportunity depends not just on the removal of disabilities but also on the creation of abilities. Access to universities is restricted because of the insufficient and uneven development of secondary education. However, except for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, successful completion of secondary education is frustrated more by low household income than by low status in the hierarchy of caste[9]. Caste is important, but at least in the context of higher education, class is no less important. What is attributed to caste bias can often be more easily explained by disparities in material resources. We must not, in the heat generated by identity politics, lose sight of the fact that disparities of wealth, income and occupation act independently of caste, and act in important ways on the distribution of life chances among individuals.

The Indian middle class is now quite large and it is no longer made up of persons from only a few top castes. There is a growing middle class among the intermediate castes which comprise the core of the Other Backward Classes, and this section of the Other Backward Classes is hungry for more and better quality education for its children, and especially its sons. Its leading members, many of whom are prominent in public life, are not satisfied today with just any kind of higher education for their children; they want places in the best university institutions for them. There they have to contend with children from equally well-to-do upper-caste families, who have had an earlier start in the race for the limited facilities available for the best kind of higher education. When the latecomers are unable to cope with the competition, they demand that places be reserved for them in the interest of equity and justice.

We are left in the end with two questions. First, does social policy have any part to play in making the universities socially more inclusive and ensuring greater diversity on the campus? Secondly, is a policy of numerical quotas for castes in proportion to their population, the best policy for the purpose?

Caste quotas in education and employment have been in operation in one form or another for more than eighty years. Their consequences have been mixed at best. Where they have been used on a massive scale, they have contributed to a better mix of castes and communities, but they have also contributed to a steady decline in academic standards. Their contribution to a better mix of castes and communities is self-evident; their contribution to a decline in academic standards is not equally evident because other factors, not directly related to caste, have also contributed to the decline.

The British first introduced quotas in education and employment in the erstwhile State of Mysore and in Madras Presidency more than eighty years ago. But they were introduced on a small scale, and as a matter of policy and not of right. Since then, the scale of caste quotas has increased enormously and most political parties treat them as matters of right and not of policy. These two features in combination have virtually closed the door to all policies other than the policy of numerical quotas to make the universities more socially inclusive and more diverse.

There are many today who are worried about the lack of diversity in the best universities and the very limited presence in them of members of the intermediate and the lower castes, but they have grave misgivings about the damage to academic standards that is being done by the reckless expansion of caste quotas. Unfortunately, they have given little serious thought to alternatives to numerical quotas for enhancing the diversity of the better universities and making them socially more inclusive. It may not be too late even now to address the problem in a purposive and determined way.

Affirmative action in the universities seeks to create special opportunities for members of socially disadvantaged groups over and above the equal opportunities available to all, while maintaining a close watch on the effects of the policy on academic standards. Such a policy was adopted in the United States roughly forty years ago, and although it has lost favour in recent years, it still has advocates among serious American academics[10]. The great advantage of the American approach was its flexibility and its decentralized character. Although the US courts have become increasingly critical of the programme, there is every reason to believe that such a programme, with suitable modifications, will be strongly endorsed by the Indian courts.

The defining feature of the kind of affirmative action that I have in mind is that it is based on a respect for the autonomy of institutions and on trust in their selection procedures. The two aspects are closely related. The grant of autonomy is predicated on a degree of trust in the university's capacity to administer its selection procedures without fear or favour and in a socially responsible way. Where universities are deprived of their autonomy for lack of trust in their admissions and appointments practices, academic standards are bound to fall, if not immediately, then in the long run.

In the system of affirmative action I have in mind, admissions and appointments committees are encouraged and trusted to act in a socially responsible manner so as to make the university a more inclusive and a more diverse institution in the long run. Other things being equal, a committee will be expected to prefer the candidate from the disadvantaged community over the general candidate. Other things being a little less than equal, the preference could still be for the socially disadvantaged candidate.

How far the committee will go in accommodating candidates from disadvantaged groups will be left to its academic judgement within a broad framework of preferences determined in the university and not outside it. What is crucial is the freedom to exercise academic judgement in the relaxation of standards to meet an agreed social objective.

When committees are given the freedom to act according to their own judgement, they will not all act to produce identically the same outcome everywhere. Some will be more accommodating in the interest of diversity and others more stringent in the interest of academic excellence. Academic committees rarely start from a position of full agreement among all members before reaching a decision. There will also be variation between different committees, different faculties and different universities. Uniformity and standardization are bureaucratic and not academic virtues.

As I have said, it is widely maintained that no form of affirmative action other than strict numerical quotas can work in India. This argument has been repeated for so long that it has become the common sense of most educated Indians. This common sense has never been put to any serious test in India through programmes for affirmative action of the kind that have worked in other countries, including the United States.

Numerical quotas have worked well from the viewpoint of social inclusion, but badly from that of academic discrimination. They have tilted the balance away from academic to social and political considerations. Their application on a large and expanding scale has enlarged the powers of the bureaucracy over the university faculty. The selection process is monitored from outside to ensure compliance with quotas that are themselves determined by the government. The bureaucracy cracks the whip over the university and demands explanations for shortfalls in the quotas. This development has over the years robbed admissions and appointments committees of much of their initiative and undermined their self-confidence.

The problem with quotas is not simply that they have made short work of intelligence but that in the long run, they have acted as a serious depressant on effort. Few will deny that the level of effort among both students and teachers has gone down in our universities. Caste quotas alone cannot be held responsible for this, but they have been an important contributory factor. Beneficiaries of caste quotas have come to believe that their entry into the university of their choice and their passage through it is a vindication of a social claim that cannot be set aside on merely academic grounds. They have been encouraged in this belief by powerful political forces outside the universities, and many within the universities have increasingly yielded to it.

Those within the universities who care seriously for science and scholarship are demoralized by the devaluation of 'merit', which has come to be used as a shorthand for a whole gamut of attributes such as intelligence, talent, ability, effort and perseverance. Advance in science and scholarship cannot take place without the recognition and reward of individual achievement, and the universities are being left with less and less room to provide such recognition and reward.

Universities have obligations not only as centres of learning, but also as social institutions. Those obligations are of a somewhat different kind in a democratic society from what they might have been in a hierarchical one. Our better universities have not been sufficiently mindful of the value that is added in the long run, academically and not just socially, by their enhancing their diversity and becoming socially more inclusive. They have not been proactive, as the better American universities have been, in making themselves socially more inclusive and diverse. They have only reacted, usually resentfully, to dictates from the government to meet quotas in admissions and appointments usually determined through political bargains. The ideal of the university as an ivory tower is an anachronism in the 21st century. If the universities value their autonomy and want to protect it, they must show more initiative in devising and adopting policies that will change their social composition in the long run and make them more diverse and socially more inclusive. That it is possible to do this without seriously compromising academic standards has been shown over and over again by universities in other countries.

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