Perspectives

Pluralism in the Indian University

This essay argues that the university in India needs to foster five kinds of pluralism: in the student body, in the teaching faculty, of disciplines, of approaches within a discipline and of funding sources. It notes that the fostering of these varieties of pluralism has had to face formidable challenges from the countervailing forces of parochialism and populism. These forces need to be resisted, and our universities renewed, by making them plural in all senses of the term. For as we enter our seventh decade of freedom, what we make of ourselves will depend, far more than we presently seem to realise, on what we make of our colleges and universities.

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Earlier this year, the National Archives mounted an exhibition on the founding of the first modern universities in India. A Kolkata newspaper gave its report on this exhibition the headline: 'The Other Revolution of 1857'.[1] This was apt, for the founding of these universities was indeed a revolution, and indeed also the "other" to the better known revolution of 1857. Call it by whatever name, a sepoy mutiny or a war of independence, that uprising was essentially reactionary, looking back to a period before the white man set foot in the subcontinent. On the other hand, the revolution set in motion by the universities was essentially progressive, looking forward to a time when the white man would finally leave the subcontinent.

I

Founded in 1857, the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were the crucible of modernity in India. As André Béteille has written, these universities "opened new horizons both intellectually and institutionally in a society that had stood still in a conservative and hierarchical mould for centuries". These universities were "among the first open and secular institutions in a society that was governed largely by the rules of kinship, caste and religion". Thus "the age-old restrictions of gender and caste did not disappear in the universities, but they came to be questioned there".[2]

The universities were also a crucible of nationalism. It was there that young men and women learnt to question the logic of colonial rule, to hold up, as a mirror to their rulers, the British ideals of liberty and justice that were haphazardly upheld at home and comprehensively denied in the colonies. Gandhi and Ambedkar had their early education under the auspices of the Bombay University, C R Das and Subhas Chandra Bose under the auspices of the Calcutta University, C Rajagopalachari and C Subramaniam under the auspices of the Madras University. Tens of thousands of more "ordinary" freedom fighters were also educated – in all senses of the word – by their time in these universities or in other universities set up in the period of colonial rule such as those in Allahabad, Punjab, Benaras and Aligarh. These soldiers of non-violence, who defied their family and sacrificed their careers to fill the jails on Gandhi's call, came from all sections of society. They were high caste as well as low caste, men as well as women, Hindu and Sikh as well as Muslim and Christian.

It is not just that the Indian university trained those who led and manned the freedom struggle. It was also that they trained those who led and manned the creation of a modern, democratic, nation state. For no new nation was born in more difficult circumstances – against the backdrop of civil war and privation, with eight million refugees to be resettled and 500 princely states to be integrated. That a nation was forged out of these fragments, and that this was henceforth governed on the basis of a democratic Constitution, was a miracle and not a minor one. This miracle was the handiwork of a group of visionary leaders – with Nehru, Patel and Ambedkar pre-eminent among them – aided by thousands of now forgotten civil servants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, social workers and soldiers, a majority of whom were shaped and formed by the Indian university system.

That "system" was, and is, based on constituent colleges. The nurturers of nationalism and the nation state were educated as much in these colleges as in the universities of which they were part. Places such as Presidency College, Calcutta; Presidency College, Madras; Elphinstone College, Bombay; St Stephen's College, Delhi; Government College, Lahore; Patna College, Patna; and Maharaja's College, Mysore, have all contributed in ways large and small to the shaping of modern India.[3]

It behoves us to recognise (and salute) the role played by our universities and colleges in nurturing Indian nationalism and building Indian democracy. But, since we live in the present, we must also admit that the state of our universities (and colleges) is not what it could and might be. I myself live in what is claimed to be the capital of India's "knowledge economy", yet the university that my city houses is less than distinguished. And the university that carries the name of the city in which this journal is published is not exactly in the pink of health either. In these respects the universities of Bangalore and Mumbai fairly represent the state of universities in the country as a whole.

II

I have long believed that while India is sometimes the most exasperating country in the world, it is at all times the most interesting. By the same token, if Mumbai is sometimes the most exasperating city in India, it is at all times the most interesting. The reasons in both cases, and for both characteristics, are the same. They lie in the unparalleled diversity of this particular country and this particular city. Which other land can match India in its mix of

different castes, classes, languages, faiths, forms of dress, cuisines, musical styles, et al? And which other Indian city can remotely come close to Mumbai in containing, within its capacious hold, representative examples of these varied cultures and lifestyles?

For the scholar or writer, at his desk or in his ivory tower, the diversity of human forms is perenially interesting. For the citizen living life on the ground, however, it can at times be deeply exasperating. When people of one habit or temperament – or ideology or social custom – are placed close to people of another, they tend sometimes – oftentimes? – to react with prejudice and suspicion, this sometimes – oftentimes? – manifesting itself in conflict and combat, whether intellectual or physical, individual or institutional. Life would be altogether less discordant if everyone around us spoke and thought and dressed and ate just as we did. But altogether less interesting.

Broadly, there have been two responses of political leaders to the prevalence or persistence of social and cultural diversity. The first has been to flatten it, to try and make citizens as alike as one another in the ways they think and speak and live. Or at least in the important ways – such as religion or language or political ideology. The second response has been to permit citizens their own individual ways of living, while crafting institutions that allow them to collaborate and coexist.

Fortunately, the men and women who built modern India chose the second path. They did not follow Israel or Pakistan in fusing faith with state by granting special privileges to citizens of one religion. They did not follow Germany or the US in making it mandatory for all citizens to speak one language. And they did not follow Soviet Russia and the communist China in constructing a single-party state.

At least in theory, the Indian nation state is the most plural on earth. It demands less conformity among its citizens than every other state we know. The practice of pluralism is another matter. At various points in Indian history, vast influence has been exercised by those who would seek to make one religion (Hinduism), one language (Hindi), one party (the Congress), or even one family (the Nehru-Gandhi) dominant over the other religions, languages, parties and families of India.

The theory and practice of pluralism in (and by) the Indian nation is a fascinating subject. So is the theory and practice of pluralism in the states and cities of India. Take the city this journal is printed in, whose social diversity is reflected most immediately in the different names we know it by. There is, of course, a Maharashtrian Mumbai, but also an Anglo-Indian Bombay, as well as a Hindustani Bambai. But this is also in some part a Gujarati city, also a Tamil city and a Kannadiga city. Every linguistic group in India is richly represented here, as is every religious community and political ideology. At the same time, Mumbai is the capital of a state formed to protect the interests of a single linguistic group. What are the tensions this creates in the lives and labours of the citizens of Mumbai/Bombay/Bambai?

The linguistic division of India has worked very well – for India as a whole. There has been friction at the edges, conflicts about towns and villages on the border, and about riparian rights, but had these states not been created, I believe, the conflicts would have been much more serious. Consider the examples of Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the first of which broke up and the second of which is mired in an apparently unending civil war largely because one community sought to impose a single language on the nation. When, in 1956, Sinhala was made the single official language of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known), a left wing member of Parliament presciently warned that "two torn little bleeding states might yet arise out of one little state".[4] If a single language had been imposed on all of India – as the Hindi zealots wanted – this massive country might have been torn apart into 15 large and bleeding states.

So, without question, linguistic pluralism has strengthened Indian unity. But how does this diversity of language groups play itself out within a state, rather than in the country as a whole? As residents of Mumbai/Bombay/Bambai know all too well, diversity has sometimes produced sharp conflicts. If Mumbai is the capital of the state of Maharashtra, some ask, why must so many of the best or most lucrative jobs be taken by those whose mother tongue is not Marathi? These "outsiders" answer that the Constitution of India grants all its citizens the right to live and work anywhere in the union. For 40 years now this debate has raged in Mumbai. It is now making itself heard in my native Bangalore, likewise the capital of a state based on language, likewise a city where the wealthy and powerful mostly do not speak the local tongue. Here, too, the conflict has manifested itself in the city's renaming, with "Bangalore" becoming 'Bengulooru'.

III

Diversity is a social condition; it is what India is. Pluralism is a political programme; it is a manifestation of what we wish India to be. At the level of the nation, the practice of pluralism poses one set of challenges; at the level of the city or state, yet another. What then, of the university? What are the varieties of pluralism that a university in India must seek to foster? In my view, these are principally of five kinds:

First, the university must foster pluralism in the student body. There must be students of all ages; from those in their late teens to those in their early 30s (or even beyond). One way to do this is to have, within a single campus, programmes running all the way from the BA or BSc right up to the PhD. There must be many women students; in the ideal situation, 50 per cent or more. Students from low caste and working class backgrounds must be adequately represented; so also those from minority religions. Finally, a university is made more Indian if it can attract students from other states of the union.

Second, the university must foster pluralism in the teaching staff. Like the students, these must be both women and men, who come from different classes, castes and religious groupings. And – this is even more crucial here – from different parts of India. But unlike in the case of students, it is not enough that the teachers come from different social backgrounds. They must also have diverse intellectual credos. Some must prefer abstract theoretical work; others, research that is more applied in nature. Since scholars are also citizens, university teachers have political beliefs; but these, again, must be of varied kinds. A university where all the teachers were communists, or all of them Shiv Sainiks, would be a very boring place indeed.

Third, the university must offer a plurality of disciplines. It should have at least some, if not all, undergraduate colleges which offer degrees in the sciences as well as the humanities. There must be graduate programmes in the major disciplines – mathematics, economics, history, political science, physics, chemistry, biology, literature, etc – but also professional schools offering degrees in law, medicine and business as well as, ideally, faculties of fine arts and music. At the same time, the university must have the flexibility and imagination to create new departments

when scientific progress or social developments oblige it to do so.

Fourth, a university must foster a pluralism of approaches within a discipline. Its department of economics must have Friedmanites and Keynesians as well as Marxists. Its department of biology should have space for experimentalists who splice genes, for Darwinians who study speciation, and for fieldworkers who live with animals in the wild. A university department all of whose members were wedded to one particular theoretical or experimental approach would be boring place indeed.

As Max Weber pointed out, unlike political parties or religious seminaries, universities are "not institutions for the inculcation of absolute or ultimate moral values". Put less politely, universities must not be allowed to become vehicles of indoctrination, promoting a particular political or religious point of view. They teach the student "facts, their conditions, laws and inter-relations", serving in this manner to "sharpen the student's capacity to understand the actual conditions of his own exertions…". However, "what ideals the [student] should serve 'what gods he must bow before' these they require him to deal with on his own responsibility, and ultimately, in accordance with his own conscience".

This pluralism of methodological and theoretical approaches must be promoted at various levels: that of the university as a whole, by each of its constituent departments, and by each individual teacher as well. A century ago, in words that seem strikingly contemporary, Max Weber deplored the tendency of some professors "of educating their students into certain political beliefs and ultimate outlooks". He was himself clear that the university teacher "is under the sternest obligation to avoid proposing his own position in the struggle of ideals. He must make his chair into a forum where the understanding of ultimate standpoints – alien to and diverging from his own– is fostered, rather than into an arena where he propagates his own ideals".[5]

Fifth, a university must encourage a pluralism of funding sources. It must not rely only on state patronage, but raise money from fees, from its alumni, and from private corporations. By diversifying its portfolio, so to speak, the university reduces its dependence on a single source of patronage, while also engaging with (and making itself relevant to) a wider swathe of society.

Stated in this straightforward manner, these ends seem self-evident. Surely any self-respecting university will always be plural in all these ways? Not, perhaps, in India, where one cannot say with confidence that any of our universities have met these ideals wholly or consistently. However, at various points in history, one Indian university or another has been plural in one or other of these ways. As André Béteille has noted, it took 600 years for Oxford or Cambridge to admit women, whereas Calcutta and Bombay admitted them from their inception. They also provided avenues of upward mobility for the lower castes: in the traditional system an untouchable like B R Ambedkar would have been condemned to a life of illiteracy. Those from minority religions also got, and took, their chances – some of the best scholars and teachers in the history of Mumbai University have been Parsi and Muslim.[6]

Likewise, there have been splendid examples of Indian universities promoting diversity in the social background of its teachers, and of these teachers in turn, promoting a diversity of intellectual approaches. Determined to make Calcutta University more than a home for Bengalis, Ashutosh Mukherjee appointed C V Raman and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to chairs when they were young and unrecognised – which Ashutosh Mukherjee did not care about – but also talented and hardworking, which he appreciated. Raman and Radhakrishnan eventually moved on to other pastures, but a contemporary of theirs who stayed in Calcutta was the Malayali from Merton, Kuruvilla Zachariah, among whose students at Presidency College were many future leaders of free India.

Third, many Indian universities have been inclusive in a disciplinary sense. The pattern was set by the three founding universities, which all had departments of science and social science, as well as a faculty of law and a school of medicine. Thus in the 1930s and 1940s, Bombay University was perhaps best known, on the research side, for its School of Economics and Sociology, while for the past half century that honour has consistently been held by the university department of chemical technology.

Fourth, the best university departments in India have promoted a variety of intellectual approaches. The long time head of the sociology department in Bombay, G S Ghurye, was a bookish conservative; yet among the students he sent out into the world were the superb ethnographer M N Srinivas and the Marxist theoretician A R Desai. Srinivas, in turn, bestrode the Delhi University department of sociology like a colossus; in turn, he did not impose his methodological preferences on those he taught or guided. Srinivas had little interest in comparative sociology, or in the industrial working class, or in the Sanskritic tradition; yet three of his distinguished students were to make these subjects their own.

It is with the fifth kind of pluralism that the record is most disappointing. The Indian university has relied too heavily on subsidies and hand-outs from the state. Middle class and even rich students pay the same fees as the poorer students; in effect, almost no fees. There has been little attempt to tap the generosity of alumni – even the most prosperous ones. Few universities cultivate active links with the private sector or with philanthrophic foundations.

Pluralism is one important ideal of the Indian university; it is not, of course, the only one. A university must also have an institutional cohesiveness, that allows it to reproduce itself regardless of the particular individuals who lead or staff it. Again, a university must have a particular and recognisable character, that encourages its students, staff, faculty, and alumni to identify with it. And it must set standards of academic excellence consistent with those in the nation and the world, and it must continually strive to maintain them.

These ends might not always be mutually compatible. Thus, in one particular case or another, say, the recruitment of students from under-represented social groups or the appointment of a new dean, pluralism might conflict with institutional efficiency or efficiency in turn conflict with academic excellence. Compromises have to be made, judgment calls taken. It would be foolish not to recognise that a public university serves multiple ends, and that these may sometimes be in conflict. That said, the varieties of pluralism enumerated above are, I believe, among the most important ends an Indian university should strive to fulfil.

IV

In the history of the Indian university, the forces favouring pluralism have had to contend with the opposing forces of parochialism. These are ever present, often powerful, and sometimes overwhelming.

One form of parochialism is identity politics. Particularly in staff appointments, the claims of caste or region or religion can play as significant a role as academic qualification or distinction. Often, the candidate with the best connections gets

the job rather than the best candidate. And so "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".[7]

A second form of parochialism is ideological. When the NDA government was in power in New Delhi, there was much criticism of the role played by the human resource development minister, Murali Manohar Joshi, in placing, in important posts, intellectuals more amenable to his own political ideology. The criticism was just – it would have been more just still if it had acknowledged that in this respect Joshi was merely following the lead of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which, in both West Bengal and Kerala, has consistently interfered with university appointments. No critic of Marxism stands a chance of becoming vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, for example.

A third form of parochialism is institutional. There is, in almost every Indian university, a marked tendency to employ one's own graduates to teaching positions. This in-breeding has infected even the best departments in the best universities. Thus the history department in the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the sociology department in the Delhi University are largely staffed by those who have, at some stage or another, passed through the same portals as students.[8]

Whether based on identity or ideology or institution, these varieties of parochialism have had a corrosive effect on university life. They have undermined the quality of teaching, narrowed the range of subjects taught, and polluted the general intellectual ambience. By now, they have collectively impacted millions of Indians, who have got a more limited education than they hoped for, or, indeed, deserved.

Provincialism apart, there are other hurdles to the fostering of a plural ethos in the Indian university. One is short-sighted public policy. In the colonial period, the best science in India was done in the universities by men such as C V Raman and Satyen Bose in Calcutta; Meghnad Saha and K S Krishnan in Allahabad; T R Seshadri in Delhi and K Venkataraman in Bombay. However, at independence the decision was taken to set up a series of laboratories under the auspices of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). It was made clear that these would be the favoured sites for

research, and that the universities would focus mostly on teaching. The best talent drifted away to these prestige institutes, impoverishing the universities. On the other side, without the challenge and stimulation of students, laboratory science got steadily more bureaucratic, and did not deliver on its promises either.[9]

In any case, in the Indian context what C P Snow called the "two cultures" – the humanistic and the scientific – always had an uneasy relationship. Almost from the beginnings of modern education, Indian men were brought up to believe that the "arts" were inferior to the "sciences". Even in the universities where the two co-existed, science students or professors scarcely came into contact with their counterparts in the humanities. After independence, apart from the CSIR the creation of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) also contributed to the further moving apart of the two cultures. Although the IITs had departments of humanities, their concerns were integrated in a desultory way into the curriculum. The precedent had been set, well before, by the Indian Institute of Science, whose original charter (influenced by its visionary founder, Jamsetji Tata) had room for a department of social science, which, however, remains to be activated a century after the institute's founding. And so the finest young minds in the sciences have been encouraged to cultivate an indifference (and even contempt) to the social sciences and to history.[10]

The plural ambitions of the Indian university have also been severely tested by a now rampant populism. I have in mind the widespread suspicion of what are termed "elite" departments and "elite" universities. There is continuous pressure towards the equalisation of resources, so that the public pie is shared equally by institutions good and bad, old and new. Institutions that were intended to be small and select are urged to let in more and more students, regardless of whether they can maintain standards while doing so. Where institutions of excellence should serve as a benchmark towards which others can aspire, they are instead asked to come down to the level of the lowest. In this manner, policies conducted in the name of democracy and egalitarianism serve only to degrade the education system as a whole.[11]

These prejudices sometimes operate within a single university. Thus the Delhi School of Economics has long attracted widespread (and, for the most part, undeserved) opprobrium. Professors in other departments resented its international

reputation; actually a product of intellectual excellence and an institutional culture of team-work, but in the eyes of its critics a consequence of western-oriented "elitism".[12] Successive vice-chancellors sought to erode its autonomy and bring it on par with, or down to the level of, the other departments of the university. Teaching vacancies were unfilled, sometimes for years upon end. Proposals to reform syllabi were held up. The end result could have been foretold; the Delhi School no longer has an international reputation.

A final hurdle is constituted by the invisible hand of the market. Universities work best when they have an integrated campus, bringing together undergraduate colleges, postgraduate departments of the arts and sciences and professional schools, thus allowing the students and teachers of these different units to mingle with and learn from one another. Among the major universities of India, only Delhi even remotely approximates this ideal. The reason for this is that a large chunk of territory was set aside for it when the new capital of British India was being planned. As the university expanded, the new colleges that sought affiliation had to be located elsewhere, but by then the campus itself had a sufficient density of institutions to have a character of its own. It was also close enough to the city to be connected to it. On the other hand, the universities of our other metros, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Bangalore, grew in a random fashion, so that their constituent units were far-flung and in no real contact. Since the price of real estate forbids the consolidation of these units, the undergraduate colleges remain isolated from one another and from the postgraduate departments; even the latter are often fragmented, spread unit by unit across the city. Some universities, for example Bangalore, then thought to construct a new campus in land available on the outskirts. The postgraduate departments were relocated here, with the undergraduate colleges staying where they were. This new campus has only served to further separate the university from the city whose name it carries and of which it is presumed to be an integral part.

Rising property prices have inhibited the growth of university pluralism in another respect; by making it very hard for Indians to study or teach in parts of India far from their own. In about 1940, a modest apartment could be rented in Mumbai at about 20 per cent of a professor's salary; by about 1970 this figure might have jumped to 50 per cent. Now it must be close to,

or even in excess of, 100 per cent. What this means is that the pool of available teachers has steadily shrunk; it now contains only those who have homes in the city itself. The consequences of this for the quality of intellectual life in the university are depressingly obvious.

The market works in mysterious ways. On the one hand, it has discouraged the movement of students and teachers within India; on the other hand, it has encouraged their movement to distant parts of the globe. In the 1960s and 1970s, large numbers of Indian scientists studied and then found employment in the western universities. Now, they are increasingly joined by social scientists, historians and literary scholars, the trade in whom is especially brisk in the American academy, to meet the demands of the growing Indian diaspora and the new-found fashions of "postcolonial" studies. Once, names such as Ghosh, Mukherjee, Srinivasan and Reddy were quite common in the payroll of the universities of Mumbai and Puné; now, they are more likely to be found in the faculty web pages of the universities of Minnesota and Chicago.

The influence of parochialism and populism on our universities is, in part, a consequence of the clash or contradiction between two varieties of pluralism. For the survival of the republic of India, it was perhaps necessary to create linguistic states, so as to inhibit the dominance of one language group over the others. However, this enactment of a plural politics at the level of the nation as a whole has sometimes led to a denial of pluralism at lower levels. This is particularly true in the state sector, where one can manipulate recruitment in a manner that the private sector forbids. Since an overwhelming majority of our universities are managed by state governments, they are particularly prone to local or regional chauvinism.

Ideally, a university would not want to be parochial even at the level of the nation state. The best western universities seek to draw students and faculty from all over the world. Such was also the original intention of Rabindranath Tagore's university, as witness the name 'Viswabharati'. That our universities become more international in their composition may be too much to hope for, but let us at least try and make them adequately Indian.

V

Writing in 1968, the sociologist Edward Shils singled out student unrest as a major threat to the proper functioning of universities in India. Shils observed that Indian students had been restive in the 1930s and 1940s as well, but that this had found a focus and a constructive outlet through the independence movement. In the 1960s, however, student protest was directionless; it was, in fact, a form of "juvenile delinquency". Indian student agitation, wrote Shils, was "demoralising and degrading the academic profession which is already in a worse situation than one cares to see". If unchecked, student unrest would disrupt more than the universities – "if they go on, they will demoralise the Indian police services and render them incompetent to maintain public order or they will precipitate harsher repression resulting in many deaths which will in turn place very heavy strains on the Indian political system".[13]

These predictions were not entirely falsified. A few years later, students across India found a focus in the JP movement, which did in fact "precipitate harsher repression" as well as the heavy strain on the Indian political system known as the Emergency. Still, it would be unfair to blame the general deterioration of our institutions of higher education solely or even primarily on discontented students. Indian universities have been undermined from above rather than degraded from below, corrupted and corroded by the forces of parochialism and populism itemised in this essay.

This writer is not the first to comment on the dangers of parochialism in the university – nor, to be sure, will he be the last. In September 1962, a month before war broke out between India and China, a group of liberal intellectuals met in Bombay to discuss the prospects for "a national university". The convenor of the symposium, the mathematician A B Shah, pointed to the "growing regionalisation of the universities under the pressures of a developing multilingual society". This "process of regionalisation", he continued, "is accompanied by increasing fragmentation of the intellectual élite and a weakening of the university tradition, which was never very strong in India". Shah felt that the solution lay in "the creation of a few national universities that would keep the tradition of the university alive till experience makes men re-examine the wisdom of what they have done". He identified likely five carriers of this noble ideal, the three "premier universities" in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, plus two new universities to be sited in the north and the south, respectively. These national universities, he felt, "could ensure the continuity and development of all-India cultural life so essential in the context of regionalisation". They would "provide the nation with a window to the world, and also a yardstick by which the work of the regional universities could be evaluated".

In his contribution to the symposium, the economist B R Shenoy focused on the declining quality of university and college teachers. This, he felt, was due to three reasons: abysmally low salaries, which meant that alternative professions were more attractive; the reproduction in the university of bureaucratic red-tapism, which meant that administrators were more important and more powerful than professors; and regionalism, which "on the one hand, repels from the academic profession men from outside the region, and on the other, adds to the pressure for migration out of the profession". Shenoy also called for the creation of national universities which would be "wholly autonomous…, free from interference by the government or any political organisation".[14]

This writer is also not the first to sing the praises of university pluralism. In a talk broadcast over the Delhi station of All India Radio on March 17, 1940, Maurice Gwyer outlined what he saw as the future of the university he was then heading. He called, first of all, for "the transference of all the constituent colleges of the [Delhi] University to a common site where they may stand together as a solid token of that sense of unity and purpose which is perhaps the most vital element in University life; secondly, the extension of the science laboratories and an increase in our present facilities for the teaching of science; and thirdly, the improvement and development of the University Library". Gwyer went on to say that while the other and older universities of India were strongly rooted in their respective towns and provinces, "Delhi University should not be afraid to draw its strength from a whole subcontinent. It should be a symbol of what India herself, above and beyond all her creeds or castes, can offer to the world".

Gwyer also spoke of the importance of the university reducing its reliance on the public exchequer. He hoped that "the time will come when to endow a chair of learning at Delhi University will seem to rich men a way, not less noble than others, of perpetuating their memory". He ended his talk in words that rang true then, and ring truer today:

I am speaking tonight more especially to the citizens of Delhi. Delhi University will always, I hope, be their university as well

as a university for all India; and I look forward to the time when they will feel a great pride in its fortunes and in its work. I hope it will be a civic centre in the truest sense, and that those of its sons who are educated within its walls will learn there how to combine a love of their city with a love of their country, to look beyond the immediate conflicts of community and party to the greater unity which lies behind them, and to remember that of all the civic virtues for which a university should stand, a love of truth, a sense of proportion and a spirit of tolerance are not the least.[15]

VI

Not very long ago, India had some fairly decent universities, but a very poor record in removing mass illiteracy. In the past two decades this situation has been reversed. There is a new energy abroad in the school sector driven in part by the state, in part by voluntary organisations, and most of all by parents. Once, many poor families chose to put their children to work rather than send them to school. Now, they wish to place them in a position from which they can, with luck and enterprise, exchange a life of menial labour for a job in the modern economy. As the educationist Vimala Ramachandran pointed out in 2004, "the demand side had never looked more promising. The overwhelming evidence emanating from studies done in the last 10 years clearly demonstrates that there is a tremendous demand for education across the board and among all social groups. Wherever the government has ensured a well-functioning school within reach, enrolment has been high".[16]

Recent developments in primary education call for a cautious optimism. So, perhaps, do recent developments in the realm of advanced scientific research. The past two decades have seen the creation of several high quality research institutes such as the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad and the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bangalore. The ministry of science and technology has announced that it shall fund four new institutions on the model of the Indian Institute of Science.[17]

On the other hand, our best universities have steadily deteriorated in quality and capability. True, there remain a few well-functioning departments, some very fine scholars and many devoted teachers. Still, I think it is fair to say that in respect of the five criteria enumerated here, the universities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras probably functioned better in the

1930s and 1940s than they do now. The halcyon period of the University of Delhi ran from the 1950s to the 1970s, that of the Jawaharlal Nehru University from the 1970s to the 1990s.[18]

The deterioration that has set in, in these and other universities, has multiple causes. Among them are the varieties of parochialism and populism enumerated above. These malign forces have been stoked by the political leadership. The ministers of education in the states work consistently to undermine the autonomy of their universities by interfering in appointments high and low. The ministers of education at the centre have promoted personal favourites regardless of ability, and also used universities as tools of partisan politics.[19]

Our universities are in crisis, but few people – and none, apparently, in positions of high authority – seem to be aware of this. But perhaps I should amend that last statement. One person in high authority has in fact spoken on the subject of university education. This is the president of India, A P J Abdul Kalam, who recently asked for the creation of a "new Nalanda". Now this is a charming idea, but also a hopelessly romantic one. Surely India's needs would be better served by renewing our existing universities, by making them more plural, in all senses of the term.

Crafting an agenda for the renewal of our universities is the subject for another essay, to be written by another (and better qualified) scholar. Here, I might just suggest a few items for inclusion on that agenda. First, I think we need to think more seriously about university size. Our big cities each have far too few universities for their own, and the public, good. The universities of Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi and Bangalore each have several hundred institutions affiliated to it, with a combined student population that runs into three lakhs and more. How can these institutions be effectively run, how can standards be maintained, by a single chain of authority headed by a solitary vice chancellor?[20]

Second, within each university, big or small, all constituent units must not be treated alike. In particular, colleges and departments with a tradition of excellence in teaching and research should be accorded institutional autonomy, including the autonomy to raise their own funds. Each university must be encouraged to cultivate their own areas of distinction. Those words, "distinction" and "excellence", need to have their meanings

restored. For, as we know only too well, in the realm of the academy, parochialism and populism work only to propel a race to the bottom. Why not instead work to ensure that some institutions of quality exist, and that those not yet there are encouraged to emulate them?

Third, to attract better teachers one needs more flexibility in recruitment policies. Now, most universities allow only full-time faculty, whose jobs are secure until superannuation, in exchange for which they must come to work every day and not take outside employment. However, a university in a city such as Mumbai or Kolkata can and must take advantage of the talent available in the public and corporate sector, in the media, and in voluntary organisations. If a scientist in an industrial lab, an editor in a newspaper, a senior lawyer in the high court, were all permitted to come one day a week to teach one course a year to young and keen students, there would, I think, be a profusion of volunteers.[21] Likewise, with the increasing drift of the finest Indian scholars abroad, statutes and prejudices must be amended to allow some professors to teach for one term only, while spending the rest of the year where they like. The encouragement of adjunct and part-time faculty would, I think, greatly enrich the intellectual life of the university – and also help towards balancing its budget.

At the same time, with regard to full-time faculty our universities need to more seriously combat the pressures of parochialism. A policy of not appointing one's own graduates, at least at the lower levels, would aid a cross-fertilisation of intellectual approaches and perspectives. A policy of setting part a certain percentage of teaching jobs – say 30 per cent – for candidates from other states would make each university less parochial as well as more national.[22]

By making one's teaching staff less parochial one can fashion a student body that is less parochial as well. One function that the best colleges and departments have historically served – and can be made to serve again – was to attract outstanding students from outside the state or region. In their pomp, the Delhi School of Economics, the department of history at the JNU, the school of fine arts at M S University in Baroda, and the department of philosophy at the University of Puné, all had a catchment area that included all of India.

Which brings me, finally, to the question of funding. As of now, almost all universities in India are funded by the state

and controlled by the state. In the long-term, we need to have many more private universities, which might challenge the public universities to reform and redeem themselves, in the same manner, as say, Jet Airways has forced sharp and mostly beneficial changes on Indian Airlines.[23] In the shorter term, colleges and universities in the state sector must more actively woo successful alumni and industrial houses for funds. The money, when and if it comes, can be tied to specific programmes and departments, but its ultimate use must be left to the discretion of the institution.

The ideals that I have outlined here are the product of an experience that is individual but I think not unrepresentative. My mind was shaped and quickened by the University of Delhi, which I was lucky to know and experience towards the end of its glorious period. But what I owe my alma mater is merely what other and greater Indians have owed other universities. The national movement, and the building of a free and democratic India, were both nurtured and sustained by men and women whose minds were formed by the universities of India.

It is commonly argued that the impressive growth rates of recent years will be stalled by poor infrastructure: erratic power supply, potholed highways, inadequate public transport, and the like. My own view is that India's economic and social development depends crucially on a renewal of its higher education system. As we enter our seventh decade of freedom, what we make of ourselves will depend, far more than we presently seem to realise, on what we make of our universities. **EPW**

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Notes

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1 News report in *The Telegraph*, January 12, 2007, p 8.

2 André Béteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads', forthcoming in *Current Science*. Béteille is among the few scholars who have written on the history and social role of the Indian university. The essay cited above contains his latest and perhaps most considered views on the subject, but see also Chapters 6 and 7 of his *Antinomies of Society: Essays on Ideologies and Institutions,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000.

3 Cf the valuable collection of essays edited by Mushirul Hasan, *Knowledge, Power and Politics: Educational Institutions in India,* Roli Books, New Delhi, 1998.

4 See Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka,* Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2004, pp 89-91.

5 'The Academic Freedom of the Universities' (1909), in Edward Shils, editor and translator, *Max Weber on Universities: The Power of the State and the Dignity of the Academic Calling in Imperial Germany* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, pp 21-22. If I may interject a personal note here: I was myself taught sociology by a committed Marxist, Anjan Ghosh, who in this respect was a first-class Weberian. Within the classroom, he suspended his political beliefs while introducing his students to the works of the great classical sociologists – Durkheim, Marx, Simmel and Weber himself – all of whom he treated with equal seriousness and empathy.

6 Béteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads'.

7 Béteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads'.

8 When six new appointments were made to Delhi University's department of sociology in 1993, five of those selected had previously been students at the department. The sixth, the present writer, was not really an "outsider" either, for he had a degree from the sister department of economics. However, in the past few years the department has more consciously chosen to recruit scholars trained elsewhere.

9 Cf Shiv Visvanathan, *Organising for Science: The Making of an Industrial Research Laboratory,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1985.

10 Very occasionally, the snobbery can run in the other direction, as in St Stephen's College, Delhi, where the "science types", derisively so-called, study in a building set in an obscure corner of the campus and are discouraged from taking part in the extra-curricular life of the college.

11 For valuable suggestions on to how to retain academic standards while at the same time being socially inclusive, see Béteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads'.

12 Cf Dharma Kumar and Dilip Mookerjee, editors, *D School: Reflections on the Delhi School of Economics,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995.

13 Edward Shils, 'Students, Politics, and Universities in India' in Philip G Altbach, editor, *Turmoil and Transition: Higher Education and Student Politics in India,* Basic Books, New York, 1968, pp 2-3, 9.

14 A B Shah, editor, *A National University,* Popular Book Depot, Bombay 1964, pp 5, 30-1, 34-41. In the 1970s, the central government did establish one national university in the north (the Jawaharlal Nehru University) and another in the south (the University of Hyderabad). These two institutions, along with the far older Delhi University, have (as Shah hoped) helped in keeping some kind of all-India intellectual discourse alive. On the other hand, the three founding universities have become more parochial rather than national in their orientation.

15 'The Future of Delhi University' in Maurice Gwyer, *Convocation and Other Addresses,* Cambridge Printing Works, Delhi, 1942, pp 183-91.

16 Ramachandran, 'The Best of Times, the Worst of Times', *Seminar,* April 2004.

17 There have been no comparable developments in the humanities and the social sciences. Here, existing centres of research have been undermined and even destroyed by the politics of patronage. While scientists are usually allowed to choose heads of science institutes, heads of social science or history centres are more often appointed by political preference.

18 The general decline of the five universities named in this paragraph has been slightly compensated for, perhaps, by the rise of some fine departments in the humanities in the smaller (and less high profile) universities such as Puné, Punjab, Hyderabad and Jadavpur. One should also note, on the positive or optimistic side, the fact that some of the newer universities, such as Hyderabad and the JNU, have taken heed of the mistakes of the past and worked to create some decent departments of science. As I write, a debate rages in the pages of India's premier science journal on the subject of improving the quality of scientific research in our universities. (See *Current Science*, editorials in issues dated December 10 and 25, 2006, respectively.) The topic is current, indeed a speech made by the prime minister recently affirming the belief that "our scientific enterprise and research should be rooted in the university system", and urging that "the centre of gravity of science and research... move back closer to universities" (*The Times of India*, January 11, 2007). These remarks were made in an address to the CSIR's own annual meeting – a significant choice of venue, since they signal, in effect, that the government has been mistaken these past 50 years in making CSIR the nodal point for scientific research.

19 M M Joshi worked assiduously to make the universities a handmaiden in his Hindutva agenda. His successor, the present incumbent, has used his perch largely to woo backward castes and the minorities back to the Congress. This strategy reached its nadir when a delegation led by the minister went to Saudi Arabia to ask its reactionary rulers to fund centres that would then be named after them.

20 *The Times of India* of January 10, 2007 (Bangalore edition) reports that the administration of Bangalore University wants to downsize – as well they might. But their solution to the problem of unmanageable numbers is less easy to endorse. For, they wish to trifurcate the university into three distinct and separate units – the first to oversee the undergraduate colleges, the second to manage the postgraduate departments, the third to conduct examinations and handle affiliations.

21 A model here is the social communcation and media department of Sophia College, Mumbai, which has made superb use of the multifarious talents of the working journalists of the city.

22 Sustaining this policy might require another quota in the university housing, where out-of-state faculty would need to get preferential allotment. But there is a useful precedent in our high courts, where the chief justice has to be from outside the state.

23 Although we have many privately funded colleges, these tend to focus on professional courses such as management, enigineering, medicine and the law. There is, as yet, no private university, in the sense used here.