

Universities as Public Institutions

The democratisation of the Indian university, enabling more social classes to gain access to higher learning, has not always been a smooth process and its consequences, at least in the short run, have not always been beneficial. But as seen in the instance of the European universities between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries, when institutes of learning become socially more inclusive, they also gain academically in the long run. Much depends, however, on the process of becoming socially inclusive and the forces that drive this process. For such an undertaking to be successful, the tensions between demands of social inclusion and those of academic discrimination need to be tackled convincingly.

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It is natural for someone who has spent the better part of his life in a university to speak well of the universities, at least in public. But there was a time in India when others too spoke well of them. Pre-eminent among them was India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In a convocation address delivered at Allahabad University just after independence, he dwelt upon the role of knowledge in human advancement and pointed to the things for which a modern university stands. He added, "If the universities discharge their duty adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people" [Nehru 1967:333].

Nobody can maintain that our universities have met all the expectations placed on them at the time of independence. They have grown enormously in the years since independence, and their growth has been disorderly and often in response to pressures that are far removed from the ideals of scholarship, humanism and civility for which Nehru believed the universities ought to stand. It has become a matter of routine to speak of crises on the campus. Nothing will be gained by seeking to minimise the disorder that characterises our universities today, or by saying that such disorder has been a common feature of universities all over the world in the second half of the 20th century.

However, if we are to understand the place of the university in society, we have to take a broader view of both university and society and see their relationship over a longer span of time. Universities are not only centres of learning, however badly or well they play their part in the transmission and creation of knowledge, they are also social institutions that provide the setting for a very distinctive kind of interaction among young men and women, and between the generations. Here we will try to examine the social significance of the university as well as its contribution to the advancement of learning.

The universities may act as bastions of traditional and conservative values as they did in Europe for much of their existence during the Middle Ages and even later; or, they may provide the setting for a new kind of social imagination and experience as they did when they were first established in India in the second half of the 19th century. I will argue that the Indian university has played a significant part in the education for democratic citizenship although this education, which began more than a hundred and fifty years ago, has not by any means been completed.

India has a very long and a very impressive intellectual tradition. What is remarkable about this tradition is its continuity rather than its range and diversity. It had remarkable achievements in formal disciplines such as mathematics, grammar, logic

and metaphysics, but gave little attention to empirical disciplines such as history and geography. Not only was the range of subjects limited, but the setting for the cultivation of knowledge and the mechanisms for its transmission were socially exclusive even in comparison with other hierarchical societies of the past.

Universities as Secular Institutions

The 19th century witnessed great change and innovation in the institutional foundations of higher learning in the different parts of the world. The changes were all associated, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, with the displacement of a hierarchical order by a democratic legal, political and social one. They took place in many different countries but not all at once or in the same way everywhere. In some countries, notably France, and to some extent also Germany, the changes were rapid and dramatic, whereas in others, such as England, they were slow and gradual. Where universities had existed before, they were often overhauled; where they had not existed before, new ones were brought into being.

The reconstitution of the institutions of higher learning began in Europe at the turn of the 18th century. The reforms took somewhat different forms in France and Germany. The changes in France were the more radical. Although they had their beginnings before the Revolution, the real architect of the new system was Napoleon. What he sought to do was not so much to reform the universities, which in France were then in a moribund state, as to create institutional alternatives to them. These institutional alternatives were the grandes écoles or 'great schools' of which, historically, the two most important were the École Polytechnique set up in 1794 to train engineers for the civil and military services and the École Normale Supérieure set up in 1795 to train teachers for state secondary schools.

In Germany reconstitution was less dramatic. It began with the establishment under Wilhelm von Humboldt of a new type of university in Berlin in 1812 based on the principle of 'Einheit der Lehre und Forschung' or the unity of teaching and

research. Humboldt wanted the universities to be engaged not only in the assimilation, criticism and transmission of existing knowledge but also to become centres for the creation of new knowledge. Under his inspiration the German universities became the most advanced universities in the world. In course of time the German model extended its influence to the US where the first 'research university', Johns Hopkins was established in 1876.

Although they were not universities in the true sense of the term, the grandes écoles introduced principles of institutional organisation that were radically new in their time, but have now come to be accepted widely if not universally. They were open and secular institutions and in that sense different from the universities of the past and in advance of the universities of their time, including the German ones.

The grandes écoles were designed to give effect to Napoleon's ideal of 'careers open to talent'. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the idea of careers open to talent, whether in education or in employment, was a radically new one even in Europe two hundred years ago. It permeated all kinds of institutions in the course of the 19th and the 20th centuries and gradually became a commonplace in one country after another. In the past, recruitment in both education and employment was governed to a far greater extent by birth and patronage than by merit or ability. Napoleon set out to change all this, and achieved success, though only in the long run.

In earlier times, the universities such as those at Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, were regulated largely by religious rules and religious authority. The dissociation of the European universities from the church was a slow and long-drawn process. The grandes écoles were pioneers in being largely secular in their orientation and organisation. The universities in Europe and elsewhere gradually began to follow the course charted out by them. Today, if we take it for granted that the modern university should be a secular institution, we must not forget that the idea was even in the 19th century a new one.

Education and employment came to be linked together through the idea of the career. Napoleon set a very high value on education and training in the formation of public servants. Along with the great schools there grew the 'great services' or the grands corps, recruitment to both of

which came to be based on open, national competition. All of this was begun at a time when the universities of Oxford and Cambridge were still closely tied to the hierarchies of the church, and recruitment to the civil and military services in England was still largely through patronage. This was to change in the 1850s with the Trevelyan-Northcote reforms, which created a new type of civil servant known in the Indian Civil Service as the 'competition wallah' [Trevelyan 1964]. The universities too began to change in England at about the same time.

From Exclusiveness towards Equality

Even though there is a long tradition in India of the cultivation and transmission of specialised and systematic knowledge, what we know as the universities today had their beginnings only in the middle of the 19th century. It was pointed out by the Education Commission of 1964-66 that the universities with which it was concerned had very little genealogical or historical connection with India's 'ancient and medieval centres of learning' [Education Commission 1971:8]. The first modern universities were established in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857, and they did not carry with them the hierarchical baggage of medieval institutions. As we have seen, this was a time of major reconstitution in the institutions of learning in the west. The Indian universities were almost from the beginning open and secular institutions. They were among the first such institutions in the country, and as such have had a social and not just an intellectual significance far in excess of their size and material resources.

I believe that the new universities made a bigger break in the organisation of knowledge in 19th century India than they did anywhere in the west. The type of knowledge they cultivated was new, and the social setting in which it was cultivated was also new. Very little research was done at first in the new universities and for some time also very little teaching. The main centres of teaching were in the colleges, which began to be established a little before the first universities. The universities were set up initially to conduct examinations and confer degrees, and to approve and oversee the courses of study on whose basis teaching was done in the colleges and examinations conducted by the university.

Indians who entered the colleges and universities in the 19th century encountered a whole new world of ideas to which access was mainly through a new language. Educated Indians had been used to operating through more than one language. If they were upper-caste Hindus, it would not be unusual for them to know some Sanskrit and a little Persian in addition to the language of the home. But exploring the world through the English language was a new kind of experience. The Indian intellectual tradition, which had once been active and vibrant, had become stagnant and moribund by the end of the 18th century. The encounter with western ideas in the new centres of learning released a flood of dormant intellectual energy.

A whole array of new subjects and new approaches to them came into view. It is a characteristic of modern universities, in contrast to traditional centres of learning, that new branches of knowledge are continuously added and explored in them. It has sometimes been said that the fascination with western learning led to the neglect and even the denigration of traditional forms of knowledge including much that was of value in it. While this may be to some extent true, no deliberate attempt was generally made to abolish the study of classical languages, classical philosophy or ancient and medieval history in the new centres of learning.

The brahminical tradition of learning was not only narrowly focused intellectually, it was also socially very exclusive. Women and members of the lower castes had little or no access to it. The new centres of learning – the colleges and the universities – opened up new fields of knowledge, and also opened their doors to excluded sections of society.

Sir Henry Maine, one of the early vice-chancellors of the University of Calcutta, said in his convocation address of 1866, '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' [Banerjee et al 1957:127]. It is not altogether clear what the founders of the university had in mind, but it is well to remember that the period in which it was founded was a time of great transition in the universities of the west. Oxford and Cambridge were only beginning to move out of the hierarchical mould in which they had been set for centuries.

Family background had an acknowledged place in the classification of students in

Oxford, and the following categories were officially used: 'baronis filius' (sons of noblemen), 'equitis filius' (sons of knights), 'armigeri filius' (sons of esquires), 'generosi filius' (sons of gentlemen), 'plebei filius' (sons of commoners), and 'clericu filius' (sons of clergymen). In keeping with traditional distinctions of status, sons of bishops were listed with sons of noblemen, not of clergymen. Those of inferior social status paid smaller fees, but those of superior status were entitled to take the first degree after nine instead of 12 terms of residence. It is noteworthy that these categories were used until as late as 1891 when the registrar of Oxford began to record the father's occupation instead of his status. In Cambridge the privilege whereby sons of noblemen were excused from taking examinations (the 'jus natalium') was abolished only in 1884 [Rashdall 1936: 470].

The marks of invidious social (as opposed to academic) distinction were visible also in the internal structure of the college. There were the distinctions, first, between master, fellows and students. 'Students' themselves were of various categories. The core consisted of the 'scholars' who, like the fellows, were supported by the foundation: the college provided them with education as well as bed and board. But there were others who had to pay for what the college gave them: these included 'pensioners' who were ordinary fee-paying students in residence, and 'fellow commoners' who paid extra and had the privilege of dining with the fellows. At the bottom were the 'sizars' who, in Cambridge, were granted the benefits of college life, including college education, in return for menial services rendered to the more privileged members of the college [Stone 1974, Vol 1, chapters I and III].

The hierarchical structures of universities such as Cambridge, Oxford and Paris reflected the values of the medieval societies in which they had originated and grown. From the end of the 18th century onwards those societies began to change in the direction of greater equality. What I wish to emphasise here is that in England, France and Germany the universities responded to changes in attitudes and values that first began elsewhere in the wider society. In India it was the opposite. The wider society began to respond, slowly and not always effectively to changes that were initiated in the colleges, universities and a small number of other modern institutions. In

other word, in India the universities were in advance of society whereas in the west they had fallen behind.

Changing Universities

In contrast to the universities of the past, which were socially exclusive, the modern university is socially inclusive. The Indian university admits students and appoints teachers generally without consideration of race, caste, creed or gender. This is by and large true today of most modern universities. The emergence of modern institutions has been a slow and in many places a painful process. But they constitute the core of civil society and are essential for the creation and sustenance of universal citizenship on the one hand and the constitutional state on the other.

In the past universities restricted admission on grounds of religion. This was natural in a world where the institutions of learning were regulated by religious rules and religious authority. Until the second half of the 19th century Oxford and Cambridge required students as well as teachers to subscribe to the 39 Articles of the Church of England. It is well known that both Herbert Spencer, the most famous British sociologist of the 19th century and E B Tylor, widely regarded as the father of British anthropology, went without a university education as they were religious dissenters.

The most striking change in the social composition and character of the university came when they opened their doors to women. Until well into the 19th century universities and other institutions of higher learning were male preserves. As far as such institutions went, women were largely invisible, except occasionally as servants. Even the grandes écoles in France, which were undoubtedly ahead of their time, remained male preserves throughout the 19th century: careers open to talent meant careers open to male talent only.

Resistance to the entry of women took much time and effort to wear down in the older European universities. Cambridge provides a good example. Permission was granted for the opening of two colleges for women, Girton and Newnham, only in the second half of the 19th century. But, although women were allowed to study in these colleges, they were not allowed to take examinations of the University of Cambridge. Then they were allowed to take the examinations but not admitted to the degrees of the university. It was only in the 20th century that women were

enabled to acquire full membership of the university as both students and teachers.

Whereas it took Cambridge and Oxford several centuries to open their doors to women, the University of Calcutta was producing its first women graduates within a couple of decades of its establishment. Maine was right in saying that it had become a popular institution even though in his time there were still no women in it. Whereas in England the universities followed in the train of changes initiated elsewhere, in India they were trend-setters.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries women came to the universities in very small numbers and mainly from well-to-do upper-caste families. Now they come in larger numbers and from a variety of castes and communities although they are still outnumbered by men, and all castes and communities are not equally represented among them. If anything, there is a larger upper-caste bias among women than men and this is true for students as well as teachers.

Women and the University

In India the university and the college have played a more significant part in the social emancipation of women than any other public institution. Women have by now competed successfully for the best prizes in university examinations and the highest positions in faculty appointments, not in every university or in every faculty perhaps, but in a sufficient number of places for them to be able to feel secure about their academic achievements within the university. The success of women is particularly visible in the better metropolitan universities whether we take the Universities of Calcutta and Bombay among the older ones or Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University among the newer. All of this has been accompanied by a marked change in the social participation of women in the universities whether as students or as teachers. For women, even more than for men, the university is not only a place of work, it is also a place of recreation, and, for some women, perhaps the only place of recreation. There is more equality between men and women in both performance and participation in the university than anywhere outside. But we must see this transformation for what it is: it is largely a middle class phenomenon although the middle class has been expanding steadily and continuously in recent decades.

The very idea of the career woman would be impossible without the college or the

university. To be sure, women worked in the household and on the farm in the past. But household work was confining and women's work on the farm was generally both onerous and degrading. It is in the modern office, more than anywhere else, that college or university educated women are able to work with men as their equals and sometimes as their superiors.

Young men and women unrelated by ties of kinship and community can interact more freely in the university than perhaps in any other domain in society. If this has done nothing else, it has at the very least created a new basis for the relationship between men and women in contemporary India. In the past, whether among Hindus or Muslims, the life led by women was either hard or confined, or both, and that is probably true for most women even today. It is mainly in the college and the university that, as a young adult, a woman can enjoy a little freedom to explore new social relations and to construct a new social identity. In the past in all social classes a woman was already burdened by the cares of domestic life by the time she was 16 or 17; today, if she has the luck to enter a university, a new life might open up for her at that age. The university has provided a new ideal of womanhood even if only a handful of women are able to give shape and substance to that ideal.

The modern university provides a setting for a new kind of interchange not only between men and women but also among persons belonging to different castes and communities. The barriers of language, religion and caste can be overcome relatively easily in such a setting, although here identity politics can also reinforce the boundaries between communities instead of softening them. It is far from my intention to suggest that because modern institutions provide opportunities for individuals to interact on a new basis, those institutions can be guaranteed to operate without friction. No large and complex society can reconstitute itself without experiencing conflict and disorder, and if the universities appear embattled it is partly because they are in the forefront of this reconstitution.

Quality Standards

While a modern university must strive actively and continuously to be socially inclusive, it must be academically discriminating in the treatment of its members. A university or college which is indifferent to the quality of its teachers and

the performance of its students cannot be said to fulfil its obligations as a centre of learning. In a university the objective of social inclusiveness cannot be promoted without consideration of success or failure in academic performance. In looking at our universities today, we cannot wish out of existence the real and pervasive tensions between the demands of social inclusiveness and those of academic excellence.

The Commission on University Education under S Radhakrishnan observed: 'Intellectual work is not for all, it is only for the intellectually competent' [Government of India 1950: 98]. Today, on an occasion like this, it is important to remember not only Nehru but also Radhakrishnan, for those who are responsible for the governance of universities are often willing to compromise academic standards for fear of being denounced as elitists. We can hardly discuss the responsibilities of universities as public institutions in a serious way if we fail to distinguish between unwarranted exclusion on social grounds and justifiable discrimination on academic grounds.

Callous Meritocracy

Napoleon's ideal of 'careers open to talent' was frankly meritocratic in its orientation and he would not fight shy of creating an elite, provided it was an elite based on merit and not birth. Many changes in outlook and orientation have taken place in the two hundred years since Napoleon's time. Social scientists [Arrow et al 2001] and philosophers [Rawls 1973] have raised serious questions about the costs as well as the benefits of meritocracy. Rawls has associated the principles of careers open to talent with what he has called a 'callous meritocratic society'. In this view the single-minded pursuit of merit at the expense of all other values is detrimental to the health and well-being of society.

It has been pointed out by more than one author that the concept of 'merit' is ambiguous and difficult to define. A meritocracy may be viewed as a system which carries the meritarian principle to its extreme limit by excluding all other social principles such as amity, compassion, moderation and tolerance. But one does not need to be an advocate of meritocracy in order to appreciate and support the principle of selection by merit rather than some inherited attribute. It is true that there is no agreed definition of merit and that it means different things to different persons; but that hardly settles the issue. Most things

that are of value are difficult to define, but that does not mean that we cannot take them into account in the operation of institutions. Critics of the meritarian principle often say that what should count in the distribution of benefits and burdens is not merit but need [Sen 1973]. Need should indeed be a consideration of first importance; but then it is no more easy to define need than it is to define merit, for different people have different conceptions not only of merit but also of need.

Academic Criteria

One does not require a general, formal and abstract definition of merit in order to grade MA examination papers in history or to select lecturers in physics or economics without fear or favour and in accordance with academic criteria agreed upon in advance. If merit is given short shrift in such cases, as it often is in India, it is not always in order to meet some higher social objective but for the pettiest and the most mundane of reasons. A public institution, whether it is a university, a hospital or a bank, has specific functions to perform and appointments to such institutions cannot be made without consideration of ability and performance in the discharge of particular responsibilities. It is in this context that discrimination has to be applied in admissions and appointments in a university, no matter how socially inclusive it may aim to be.

A university cannot discharge its responsibilities to society unless it remains vigilant in maintaining and improving its academic standards although these need not be the same everywhere. Universities differ enormously in their material as well as human resources. Such disparities exist not only between different countries but also between different universities in the same country. It would be foolish to expect a small university in a remote part of India to have the same material and intellectual capital as a wealthy private university, such as Harvard or Stanford, in a rich country. But again if there are no resources or if the resources are manifestly inadequate, it may be imprudent to start a university simply because there is a 'social' need for it, and hope that it will somehow run itself.

Every university need not be assessed by the same standards of academic excellence. Indeed, it is of the essence of a university as an autonomous institution that it should, within a broad understanding of

what universities should do, set its own academic standards. To apply the same standards mechanically in every case, without consideration of the disparities in resources between institutions would hardly be reasonable. A university should be free to set its own academic standards after due consideration of the resources available to it; but having set those standards, it cannot suffer them to be treated with indifference or neglect in evaluating the performance of its students and teachers.

Given the variations and changes in the resources with which they have to work, universities cannot adopt a rigid and inflexible attitude to academic standards whether in teaching or in research. Even the balance between teaching and research need not be the same in every university. The manner in which teaching is conducted will depend on the ratio of students to teachers in the college or university concerned, and the scale on which research is undertaken will depend on the funds at its disposal for research. There is nothing wrong if a university with limited resources decides to devote more of those resources to teaching than to research, provided it is recognised that teaching itself suffers in the long run if research is completely neglected.

Flexibility in the determination by a university of its own academic standards should not lead to laxity in the application of the standards it has adopted for itself. A university with limited resources which adopts modest academic standards to which it adheres scrupulously, is to be much preferred to one which has larger resources and adopts elevated standards which its members persistently disregard with impunity.

Thus, academic standards are neither invariant nor unalterable. They change with changes in the volume and diversity of knowledge and also with changes in the size and composition of the institutions of learning. In the last 200 years universities have grown in number and size and have become increasingly diverse in their social composition.

Making Universities 'Popular'

As I have already indicated, the tendency for universities to become socially more and more inclusive is a secular one, and it is probably also irreversible. The tendency began to manifest itself about 200 years ago although in most countries it began to gather momentum less than a hundred years ago. Where it started late,

it was often driven by political pressure and by state policy.

A policy to make the universities fully inclusive socially may not lead to an immediate and significant change in their actual social composition, particularly in a society with many classes and communities whose individual members are very unequally endowed with social, cultural and intellectual capital. India at the time of independence provides a clear example of this. Dalits, Muslims and women were not debarred from entering the universities, as their counterparts would have been in early 19th century Cambridge or Oxford, but they did not in fact enter them in sufficient numbers. This happened either because they lacked the formal qualifications for entry or because they stayed away from them due to social pressures from the family and the community. After independence, the government began to play a more direct part in opening up the universities to all sections of society and pressures from below began to make themselves felt towards the same end. This came to be viewed in a broad way as the democratisation of the universities. Maine had only spoken of the university being a popular institution. After independence government and politics began to take a hand in making them actually so but they did not always pay heed to the academic costs that this imposed on the universities.

The democratisation of the Indian university has not always been a smooth and orderly process, and its consequences, at least in the short run, have not always been beneficial. Pressure to accommodate new classes and communities has led to rapid and sometimes reckless expansion of the institutions of learning. New undergraduate colleges, new postgraduate departments and new universities have been opened without due consideration of the resources available for their successful functioning. Academic standards have been relaxed, sometimes abruptly and even arbitrarily, in the name of equality and justice.

It is probably true that when universities become socially more inclusive, they also gain academically, at least in the long run. This is what happened in the European universities between the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th. Much depends on the process of becoming socially inclusive and the forces by which that process is driven. Where the drive to become socially inclusive leads to a sudden and dramatic increase in numbers without a proportionate increase in material and

intellectual resources, academic standards are bound to become unsettled and be placed in jeopardy. No one can deny that this is what happened in one Indian university after another in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s of the last century.

The ideal of the university as an ivory tower is no longer viable in the modern world. No university can in a democratic country insulate itself fully from the social and political currents that swirl around it. The process of rigorous academic selection affects members from some sections of society more adversely than those from others. Those who are adversely affected find it natural to believe that they have been made victims not of academic but of social discrimination. The political articulation of that belief persistently and aggressively can undermine the university's confidence in its own moral integrity. It will be idle to maintain that in this atmosphere the authorities of the university can exercise academic judgment calmly, and without fear or favour.

The building of open and secular institutions that are socially inclusive and at the same time functionally effective is not an easy undertaking. The undertaking cannot be successful if we wish out of existence the deep and pervasive tensions between the demands of social inclusion and those of academic discrimination. **EPW**

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