

Educational Matters*

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I don't know about the sciences, but in the social sciences in the old days every undergraduate student in Oxford and Cambridge was required to write two essays per week which were then discussed with the tutors. It was hard work; but even though performance in these essays did not count for the final grades, there was never any question of anyone not taking them seriously. It was not just the potential academics and scholars among the students who toiled over these essays, but everyone, including those who had civil service careers in mind; they too had to pore over the writings of Locke, Hume and Berkeley, or other similar luminaries in their respective disciplines, to write their essays. In fact it used to be said that the foundation of the British empire lay in the two essays per week at Oxbridge.

The basic presumption was that no matter what one may do afterwards, the years spent at the university had to be spent in intense intellectual engagement; and the university institutionally insisted upon it through its requirement of two essays per week. There was much criticism of the Oxbridge curriculum, especially during the Left-wing student upsurge of the late-sixties, but never of this institutional arrangement; it was more in the nature of "why only Locke, Hume and Berkeley, why not Hegel and Marx"? This institutional arrangement too could, and should, have been criticized, for it did not allow students enough time to think deeply on their own. But on the need for intense intellectual engagement during the years of higher education, there could be no two opinions.

What is striking, alas, about the higher education scenario in India today is the general absence of any intensity of intellectual engagement. True, there are some exceptional departments in institutions like the Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Jadavpur University or the University of Hyderabad. But the overall situation is extremely and indubitably bleak.

To my mind there is one very rough index of this. Intellectual intensity, at least in the social sciences and the humanities, necessarily transcends disciplinary boundaries, and is nourished in particular by a strong presence of the discipline of philosophy. But while in most centres of higher learning abroad the finest minds are drawn to the discipline of philosophy, which is practiced with the utmost rigour and intensity, in India this discipline has languished. As a distinguished professor of philosophy of a renowned university, with whom I once had an opportunity to spend some time (because we were both on a selection committee for faculty recruitment in a distant institution), had confided to me, students enrolling for philosophy in India mostly tended to treat the university as a waiting room where they would briefly rest before moving on to other, supposedly more important, destinations, such as the Administrative Service, the media, or even marriage. The weakness of the basic discipline of philosophy is symptomatic of the intellectual weakness of our university system.

There has been much lamentation in the country of late over the fact that no institution of higher learning figures in the list of top 100 prepared by [The Times Higher Educational Supplement](#). But this is not the real problem, which consists rather, as already mentioned, in the absence of any intensity of intellectual engagement in Indian institutions of higher education. In fact the concern over the absence of any Indian names in the THES list is so trivial and banal, that it actually demonstrates, if anything, this very phenomenon, namely a lack of intellectual intensity.

A country, if it wishes to remain free, autonomous, and a respected member of the comity of nations, cannot do without an ambience of serious and intense intellectual activity; or else it becomes a parasite on other countries, the metropolitan countries, for ideas. It remains a mendicant, but never self-reliant, let alone capable of giving anything back in

return. And intellectual hegemony by the metropolis begets de facto political, economic and ideological hegemony.

The fact that instead of being concerned with this issue, we have been worried rather about the denial to us of the vicarious thrill of spotting Indian names among the so-called top 100 institutions, and forced to compensate for this deprivation by the occasional vicarious thrill of spotting Indian names among the CEOs of some multinational companies, is indicative of our shameful immaturity as a nation. But then what can one expect of a country whose Prime Minister, no less, declares at a meeting of the country's best-known scientists that the example of Ganesha shows ancient India to have knowledge of plastic surgery?

I may be accused of falling into the "old-days-were-better" syndrome, but in one particular sense the old days were indeed better. The intensity of intellectual engagement in higher educational institutions may not have been any greater then than today, but it was prized as a desirable characteristic of such institutions. The notion of a university was one where intense intellectual activity occurred; but this is no longer the case.

The university now is seen increasingly as an extension of the higher secondary level where students are expected to learn, assiduously no doubt, the material available in some text-book, and regurgitate it as competently as possible in the examination hall. The emphasis is not on questioning, contesting, thinking for oneself, and thinking creatively, but rather on excelling in mastery over a "package" which allegedly constitutes "knowledge". Even in JNU, I have had many fresh M.A. students coming up to me after lectures and asking: "Sir, which text-book are you following?" The idea of a teacher not following a text-book is simply unimaginable for students who have completed B.A. (Honours) in economics in most Indian universities.

This change, I have no doubt, is a result of the rampant "commoditization of education" that has occurred of late. A commodity is not just any product exchanged against another product; a product becomes a commodity only when it is no longer a "use-value" for the producer, only when it represents to the producer merely a sum of money. Commoditization of education presupposes the commoditization of the products of education, i.e. of those "buying" education; and for them education becomes a mere input that should aim to give them command over the largest possible sum of money. The proliferation of private profit-making universities on the one side (which invariably claim, illicitly, that they are not "profit-making" because their "profits" are being ploughed back into the institution) and of students on the other who see education entirely as a means of commanding a larger income, are the twin features of a world where education is getting commoditized. And this ethos affects public universities as well.

This of course is a world-wide phenomenon, but its impact is greater in the newly emerging economies like India, China and other countries of East and South East Asia, than in the countries of the metropolis where old habits and traditions are more resilient to change. This is why, while commoditization of education destroys quality everywhere, it does so with greater virulence in countries like ours.

In any such discussion the question naturally arises: what can be done to raise the intellectual intensity of our institutions of higher learning? As countries differ in their national chemistry, what causes intensity of intellectual engagement in one country may not do so in another. In the specifically Indian context, I believe, there are two requisites for it: one, which is obvious is for a massive expansion of public institutions of higher education so that the tendency towards privatization (and hence commoditization) is not just halted but reversed. The other is the removal of the middle class' monopoly over higher education (without of course excluding it in any way), and throwing it open to all segments of society.

True, there are reservations now for students from socially and economically deprived backgrounds in our universities. But these, which I support, are insufficient. What is needed is large-scale enrollment of students from deprived segments in institutions of higher learning, and doing whatever is necessary for ensuring this.

Our universities must draw in not only those dalits and the poor who wish to advance in society, but also those who carry their anger with them to the universities. That anger alone can produce an intensity of intellectual engagement, both among those who are angry and also among those who experience their anger. It can wash away the stultifying effects of the commoditization of education whose inculcation of self-centredness and social insensitivity among students is so great that even in a university like the J.N.U. there has been a demand, resisted till now, to have a “placement cell”, so that the privileged few who can enter the university are also bottle-fed with jobs.

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