

What Does A University Stand For? Retracing The Fundamentals

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ABSTRACT: *Universities in India both as institutions and ideas seem to be passing through a rough phase in the present times. The recent attack on the autonomy of universities compels one to relook at the fundamentals which comprise the very idea of a university. The paper argues that the constant struggle between the mundane and the ideal constitutes a key part of the university experience and that the values debated and taught within the campuses are themselves utilitarian as they ensure the development of the ability to combine intuition and reason, fundamental for the development of society. The pedagogy in the universities has to stem from a desire to connect with the larger masses in the absence of which ideological dogmatism creeps in thereby labeling the 'university' as either a super-specialized entity or as a complete non-entity. University's nurturing an unsettling temper by continuously questioning the fundamentals is a counter to the growing populism in the socio-political sphere. There is a need for reclamation of the university space in today's time hinged on the idea of providing a 'humane' anti-thesis to the otherwise dominant shiny aesthetics of corporate driven morality.*

KEYWORDS: *pedagogy, populism, university, unsettling, utilitarian.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Noted social critic and philosopher Prof. Noam Chomsky once commented that it is quite rare for an intellectual to be at the centre of public excitement [1]. But it seems that in recent times Jawaharlal Nehru University (hereafter JNU) and its intellectual community have earned that rare feat of being at the centre of public excitement and that too for a long time. Universities have existed at various periods of history starting from Plato's Academia and Aristotle's Lyceum in Athens in 4th century BC to Nalanda in India in 5th century AD to Al Azhar in Egypt in 952 AD to Bologna in Italy in 1088 AD [2]. All these institutions have in some manner laid down the basic foundations of a modern day university. One of the common features or rather tradition in all of these institutions has been to question the yet unquestioned.

But what we observe in recent times in India is that this very act and duty of questioning by the universities is itself being questioned. Currently there is a dual attack on universities in particular and education sector in general. The two primary mechanisms deployed in this regard is first to create an artificial binary of nationalist versus anti-nationalist, and second is to create a false sense of antiquity surrounding the idea of India where there is the creation of 'holy cows' in the form of certain ideas and beliefs which are declared to be beyond the purview of questioning and inquiry. Creation of political and ideological binaries may be tactically helpful for pushing a partisan agenda, but it surely cannot be a means for nation building. This paper delves into the larger meaning and politics surrounding the concept of a university and examines the core issues revolving around this idea.

II. THE UTILITARIAN ASPECT OF THE UNIVERSITY

One of the most common questions which any member of a university structure or intellectual community faces is 'Why invest in Universities?' [3] The primary reason why this question emanates is because the popular public discourse surrounding universities have been largely instrumentalist related to the ideas of affordability, access, intellectual prowess, economic profitability, etc. This is more so in the contemporary period, where there is a retreat of the state complimented by the increasing role of the corporate sector in the field of higher education.

The constant struggle between the mundane and the ideal constitutes a key part of the university experience. The values debated and taught within the university campuses are themselves utilitarian as they ensure the most efficient deployment of the skills (mostly the ability to combine intuition and reason) which are required for the development of society. It is this ability for a layered understanding which is crucial to innovation and creativity [4]. This is one of the central jobs of any university.

The university functioning is basically to be defined by this urge and curiosity, and not by the immediate benefits and implementation aspects of the knowledge gained in the process. The essence of the university does not lie in being prescriptive but in being descriptive and contemplative. But unfortunately within the neo-liberal economic environment there is a sense of urgency of transforming the research outputs in the universities as service products thereby completely undermining the university's role as a creative enterprise [5].

The fundamental question which needs to be settled is what a university is actually equipped to deliver. What needs to be questioned is the linear in-out relationship which is being established between the amount of investment in university research and the economic output of the university. This leads to a sense of disillusion where on the one hand expectations are generated which the university cannot fulfill, while on the other hand the real potential of the university gets undermined and under-utilized. At the policy level instead of merely concentrating on the immediate and the mundane what needs to be recognized is the radical element within the university, because it is this concept which protects the university from falling into the trap of complacency thereby maintaining its relevance. It is this radicalism which promotes an unsettling temper and an urge to rationalize, thus maintaining a nation's socio-cultural and economic vitality. But this creative endeavor demands time, freedom and detachment which in itself is utilitarian as it ensures a seasoned approach towards the acquiring of the necessary skills and also their utilization.

III. SIMPLIFYING THE PEDAGOGICAL COMPONENT

But this necessary academic detachment in no way gives the university the liberty and freedom to adopt a language and attitude which is largely incomprehensible to the larger population. Apart from the question that how the university should function it is also important that how it is being viewed in the public sphere. Often the university is projected as either a super-specialized entity or as a complete non-entity thereby detaching it completely from the rest of the society. Behind the development of this view the Left liberals have been unintentional partners. The Left liberals through their ideological dogmatism and dependence on archaic language (often garbed under the notion of intellectual rigor) have actually hampered one of the fundamental mottos of the university which is to act as a triggering point of alternative thinking. With the growing populism in the larger political discourse around the world, the academia has gradually opted for the safer option of turning inwards and getting stuck in a cocoon. This has indeed been counter-productive and has no direct bearing with creative detachment.

With the tone, selection of words and other linguistic specificities, what one finds, is a sense of tactical detachment and a stultifying ideological conformity thereby often turning the academic circuit into an echo-chamber [6]. The most significant change which has taken place in recent times is that universities have transformed themselves from being a purely liberal social arena to an industrial complex, where there is heavy emphasis on the acquisition of specialized skills which are to be used in a largely predictable setting. This is largely where the universities have lost the plot. The language now also is constructed in a manner which serves this academic industrial complex. The pedagogy in the universities has to stem from a desire to connect with the vast masses that remain on the other side of the university wall and speak in a language which can be easily comprehended by them.

IV. UNIVERSITIES AS NEUTRAL SPACES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Universities because of their unique place both in terms of societal composition and nature of functioning has the ability to provide spaces for constructive engagement which can deeply impact the society in general and social policy formulation in particular. In recent times it is this ability of the universities which is under attack. The shrinking of this space for intellectual diversity is a necessary condition for any sort of populist politics to develop. In the absence of such a space it becomes easy for populist politics to push for a political discourse where thoughts can be streamlined within a codified spectrum thereby undermining the democratic fundamentals of free thinking, dissent, etc. The attack on universities in particular is important because universities till date in spite of the neo-liberal wave have succeeded in retaining a sense of autonomy both at the institutional and intellectual level.

The university community has both the space and the potential to engage with the societal movements and processes directly which very few professional communities enjoy. Universities have an autonomous space through which they can initiate public debate and evolve the larger understanding on issues. It is this very privilege which needs to be understood in the first place and also needs to be protected. But this privilege can be protected only with the university understanding its position in society and sticking to the fundamentals. These fundamentals include maintaining the ethics of teaching and research, being socially inclusive and maintaining ideological plurality and openness.

V. UNIVERSITY'S NURTURING OF AN UNSETTLING TEMPER

The regimentation of the larger political arena is also getting reflected in the universities where on many occasions universities are not providing space to critical voices not in tandem with the dominant political establishment of the day. This denial of space to the dissenting voices is a severe betrayal of one of the core fundamentals of the concept of a university which is to constantly encourage the culture of debate and discussion [7]. At this juncture it is also important to remember that the culture of dissent needs to be maintained and accommodated both at the 'inter-ideological' and 'intra-ideological' levels. To put it simply dissenting voices and views should not only find a place when various ideological forces engage with each other but also when members of the same ideological block engage amongst themselves.

A certain amount of tension between the notion of public policy and the concept of a university is a healthy sign for democracy as it indicates that the concentration is not merely on the 'immediate' and the 'temporal' but on the 'long term' and the 'fundamental'. It is important for universities to nurture an unsettling temper because it provides democracies with the ideas of relevance and sustenance by continuously questioning the fundamentals. This unsettling temper encourages analytical argumentation and sense of adopting principled takes on issues among the citizenry, thus saving them from complacency. The dominant pedagogy in university education has to be hinged on an idea that teaching and research are complementary exercises sharing common values of serendipity, creativity, skepticism, etc. where the larger aim is to sanitise the society of certain fundamental misgivings and misunderstandings, and not itself getting sanitised of certain views and takes. If this particular 'unsettling temper' is not appreciated then a university is bound to fail in one of its fundamental mission which is to forge a culture of cohesion. The failure to do this is bound to bring in its wake the culture of intolerance.

VI. UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE TO THE 'SAFFRON MAN'S BURDEN'

In the rising atmosphere of intolerance which we see in the contemporary times as manifested through various means, both at the national and global level, a university's role and ethical responsibility increases manifold. What we observe in the present times is the rise of a hegemonic culture where a certain ideological group has taken upon itself the responsibility to regulate the socio-cultural dynamics mainly through the political means. It is this exercise which I call the 'saffron man's burden' which at its very core demands passivity and submission. What we see is a movement from openness towards insularity where there an attempt to renegotiate the old socio-cultural boundaries in favour of a particular group.

In this changing discourse of power and power circulation, the question which arises for the university is where it places itself as an institution. One of the fundamental tasks of the university is questioning the assumptions and differentiating between creative thinking and information. It is the creation of a self-reflective discourse which lies at the core of a university's functioning and which is fundamentally against the concept of populist politics.

But in this era of sensationalism and instant gratification, on many occasions universities seem to be failing to present a counter-narrative. The biggest casualty in this regard has been the failure of the university to set the political agenda. Whether it was the great economic debates of the 20th century, Keynes' General Theory, the Left uprising in West Bengal of the 1960s and 70s, etc. universities have played a very significant role in setting the political agenda and tone. But of late universities by and large seem to be failing in this regard whether be it in the case of the Brexit debate, the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the massive policy restructuring going on in the United States, etc. [8] JNU is a considerable aberration in this regard which has been able to put up a counter-narrative. In a populist political environment, the moral credibility and political sensibility of a university has to be robust, for example as displayed by the JNU academic community. This capability to set the political agenda is something which many other universities need to develop by challenging the territorial mindset which a large section of the academia suffers from.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has primarily attempted to look into the various dimensions which add up to form the very idea of a university and the engagements between this idea and the larger world outside. The major intention behind the preparation of this paper has been to clear the air surrounding the larger popular conception of the university as an institution and more importantly a societal component. The larger argument is that there is no need for the alteration or re-appropriation of the university space in today's time; instead there is a need for its reclamation. This reclamation should be hinged on the idea of providing a 'humane' anti-thesis to the otherwise dominant shiny aesthetics of corporate driven morality. There needs to be absolute clarity that providing a university space is not an act of charity on the part of the state but instead is one of its prime duties. Only then can a proper ground be laid for a constructive dialogue and communication between the university community and the society at large. As far as the university is concerned, a balance needs to be maintained between the temporal and the perpetual. Any deviation from this principle risks the emergence of hegemonic stewardship

and is bound to affect the larger democratic composition of the nation. The role of the university is to create one thinking and responsible generation and not a pious generation. If a university can maintain a sound epistemological track, piousness will follow.

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