

Current Crisis In Higher Education

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CURRENT CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Mr. Vice Chancellor, distinguished teachers of Visva-Bharati, graduating students, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen;

It is indeed a great pleasure and privilege to be the Chief Guest at this Convocation ceremony. For people of my generation, Visva-Bharati is not just a University or an institution. It is also an idea and indeed an ideal which has much resonance. I am not sure what the poet had in mind when he named this unique experiment in education as Visva-Bharati. But to me, it always meant that education has to be about all that is important in life – not just “to know the causes of things” or to search for truth, but also to understand and appreciate what is good and all that is beautiful.

The poet was, I am sure, also trying to tell us much more. For him, the essence of Bharat – or Bharatiyatwa, if you like – lay in the fact that India is a microcosm of the whole world, it believes in the whole world being one family, and it opens its mind and heart to winds that blow from all directions. The history, art, culture, science and faith of all times and regions is our inheritance; and we study all of them with equal reverence – and with equal skepticism also if you like. But we build no walls around ourselves. We exclude nothing and despise or reject no part of God’s creation – be it the magnificence of nature or the myriad manifestations of

human creativity. If there are contradictions in life – and indeed there are – we do not deny them. We seek to resolve them as best as we can and strive to evolve a synthesis which too will generate its own contradictions in due course. The Visva that is Bharati is always evolving. There never was and never will be a full stop to the evolution of nature or of the human spirit. There is no golden age to recall or recreate. But we can, if we are wise, make every age a little more enjoyable, a little less ignorant and a little more at peace with itself.

I am sure all of you who get your degrees to-day have your own version of what Visva-Bharati stands for. Whatever it is, please remain steadfast to it. I have no other message to give you. So let me just wish you, as you graduate from yourselves to the wider world, all success, good humour and above all, hope.

I have never understood, Mr. Vice Chancellor, why Chief Guests at Convocations are expected to make long and weighty speeches. Convocations are happy occasions, occasions of great relief before getting lost in another world of anxiety and uncertainty. During this interlude, no one – not certainly the graduating student – is in any mood to listen to lectures. He has already heard enough of them. But since it is the convention that I should sing for my supper, please allow me to make some remarks on a subject of interest to all of us here, viz., – higher education.

Whether higher education in India to-day is in a state of crisis or not, it is certainly much in news, with much confusion and

controversy. There is a great deal of legitimate concern and unease as well as ill-informed criticism and demands for change. There is a feeling in some quarters that higher education has been pampered and has absorbed resources which could have been better devoted to primary or secondary education. Many feel that the present system of higher education is elitist, and should not be pampered further. On the other hand, most educationists are worried about the poor quality of teaching and research in most of our educational institutions. They emphasise the need for much greater resources if higher education is to be worthy of the name and if at least some institutions of higher learning in India are to be world-class and cater to the vastly complex needs of a knowledge society. In the new world of globalisation, it is the quality of knowledge and research and skills which will give competitive advantage to a country – and not cheap unskilled labour or even natural resources. Are we not living on the capital created in the early years of Independence by the vision of a Nehru or a Bhabha or a Mahalanobis?

To these vital questions are added new ones: about how higher education should be financed, whether it should be privatised and bought and sold in the market like any other commodity, the role of higher fees and the squaring of financial provision with the autonomy and accountability of the institutions. Should Universities have the monopoly or the leading role in higher education or should a hundred flowers bloom here as in other areas? In any case, the governance of most Universities leaves much to be desired. I cannot dwell at any length here on these

diverse and difficult questions, but let me at least point to some answers to some of them.

First of all, this whole argument about priority between primary, secondary and higher education is a spurious one. We need more and better primary, secondary and higher education. If there is any question of priority, it has to be between education as a whole as against administration, defence, subsidies and the various pet schemes of politicians to bribe voters without any permanent benefit to any one. Without a sound foundation of primary and secondary education, the super-structure of higher education will remain thin. But it is equally true that without a sound system of higher education, not just primary and secondary education but health, administration, industry, agriculture, defence and everything else will be that much the poorer. In to-day's circumstances, even the simplest needs of society cannot be met without the skills imparted in our Universities.

I would agree that our present system of higher education is elitist. By and large, the middle and upper classes benefit by it and the poor have little access to it. I am afraid this is true to some extent of every country – be it India, the U.K. or the U.S. The relatively better off with higher education in the family for generations have an advantage which gets compounded by their ability to send their children to better schools. To pretend that we can avoid this altogether and everywhere is hypocritical. All we can and must do is to alleviate the situation by making good primary

and secondary education free and universal – a slow and expensive process. Meanwhile, we can select the brighter among poorer children for special help, attention and encouragement at each stage – primary, secondary and higher.

But to carry equality to the point when someone capable of benefiting from and being able to afford higher education is denied access to it because not everyone has had a similar opportunity is not social justice; it is just suicidal envy. Some twenty-five years ago when I visited China first, I was told by a young man: “we Chinese have a different view of keeping up with the Joneses. We think that if our neighbour does not have it, we should not have it”. That was the language of Mao – of the Great Leap Forward. But it was by giving up that attitude that China did indeed leap forward. Let me repeat, we have to do everything possible to ensure that more and more young men and women become capable of benefitting from higher education irrespective of what kind of family background they come from; and as and when they do, they should be helped financially to spend a few years at a University.

As for the concern for the quality of higher education in India, this is certainly the most worrying aspect of the problem. Undergraduate education has expanded rapidly since Independence. But most of our graduates are no better than high school graduates in developed countries. Barring a few exceptions, the quality of teaching and research at the Post-graduate level is appalling. The flood of students wanting to go abroad to very expensive institutions is proof enough of this. The quality of most

of our University teachers is only one reason for this; there are many others. I am not sure what can be done, and frankly, I despair when I think of the quality of our undergraduate education. The numbers are so large and the populist pressures for admissions so great, that insistence on merit for admission of students – or for the selection of teachers – becomes impossible. I am almost inclined to plead that undergraduate education is not really higher education; it is only an extension of secondary education. Here, expansion even with poor quality may be desirable – it can throw up talent from more strata of society.

We should also encourage the imparting of various skills outside the University system in small private institutions which run shorter courses. This will relieve the pressure on the Universities. More can also be done to improve the quality of University teachers by better organized extension courses. Certainly, the present system of recruitment of teachers needs a thorough review. Is there any justification for the UGC prescribing norms such as a Ph.D. degree, or for automatic promotions with passage of time? How long should we have reservations for an increasing section of our society when it comes to the most fateful and important vocation: teaching?

For my part, in India at least, only post-graduate teaching and research deserves the name of higher education, and it is here that we need to concentrate our energies. You need at least a structured masters and Ph.D. degree to be able to meet the ever-growing and ever-more-complex needs of a modern knowledge

society. This is true not just of technical subjects like engineering, medicine or management; it is even more so of basic sciences, humanities and social sciences. We have to admit that despite all our exploits in space research or software and the like, we have little to show by way of basic research. If our learned Education Minister is to be believed, this is true of IIT's as well. Even in subjects like economics and social sciences, we have no institution that can compare with the London School of Economics. After Tagore and C.V. Raman, we have had only a few Nobel Laureates of Indian origin. But none of them have worked in Indian Universities or institutions for any length of time; and we can claim them as products of the Indian University system only to a limited extent.

Again, I have no set of suggestions on how we go about improving the present situation. But I think all those who care for education and for our future, have to give this matter serious consideration. Let me just mention a few things which are crying out for attention.

First of all, let us not decry, denigrate or debilitate such centres of excellence as we already have. The IIM's, the IIT's, the Bangalore Institute of Science, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, the National Drug Research Laboratory, the National Physics or Chemical Laboratories and many others are among the best in the world. We have to strive to make them better – not worse, and not certainly subservient to the whims of passing politicians or bureaucrats.

Making these institutions better may well need more money and equipment. It would certainly need better and specialised teachers. I have never understood why innovative schemes cannot be designed to attract to our universities the large number of talented young Indian academics who work abroad. They will not come for ever and sever their foreign connections. But many will come for a year or two – and a rolling presence of a large number of very gifted teachers – of Indian origin or otherwise -- is possible. The UGC and Indian Industry should contribute for this purpose, as you need extra facilities and incentives to attract foreign scholars. You do not have to pay them fabulous salaries, but we have to look after their special needs generously. I was able to persuade the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to send some of the Indians working there back to India for two or three years by assuring them continued promotion prospects, pension benefits and meeting their transfer and other costs. We paid only our normal salaries and provided housing. Many Indians came for three years – and some stayed on. We have to work vigorously to devise such schemes.

We also need many more free standing institutions for post-graduate teaching and research if we are to meet the needs of a globalised society. Not just more IIM's and IIT's, but more Indian Institutes of Science, more TIFR's, more specialised Research Laboratories in basic as well as applied subjects. We also need Indian Schools of Social Sciences and of Language and Literature.

Financing such institutions is not easy. We need to involve Indian industry more in basic research. This is happening in pharmaceuticals and biotechnology and can happen soon in information technology. I think we can also appeal to local pride. Bengal has always led in basic sciences and in economics. Why should some West Bengal Chief Minister not help in setting up a Jyoti Basu School of Social Sciences and try and make it one of the best in the world – or a Punjab Chief Minister do the same for biotechnology and a Karnataka Chief Minister for information technology? The Central Government is not the sole repository of national pride or resources, and we have to motivate all centres of political and financial power to achieve what we have to.

If I have pleaded for a large number of free-standing institutions outside the University system, it is not my intention to suggest that such institutions can replace the University system as we know it. By their very nature, Universities cater to all disciplines and not just some specialised ones. They thus provide an atmosphere and opportunity for synergy between different disciplines which is so vital for scholarship and development of new perceptions. Literature can contribute a great deal to the understanding of history and society and vice-versa. If mathematics has contributed much to economics, the latter at least provided the original seeds for operational research. To-day, even the study of how children learn to speak can throw light not just on linguistics but neurology as well. It is equally true that many subjects which are not easily marketable like basic science, language, literature, history, logic, philosophy or comparative

studies will hardly find a place in free-standing institutions. It is only Universities which can impart the kind of knowledge which Rabindranath Tagore dreamt of. We cannot, therefore, neglect the quality of post-graduate teaching and research in our Universities.

Some of the things I have mentioned like innovative training of teachers and their recruitment and programmes for welcoming visiting teachers would be relevant for our University post-graduate departments also. I would add to this a few other things which apply particularly to the Universities.

Our Universities need to be much stricter about admissions to post-graduate departments. At that level, only merit and capacity to absorb knowledge at the highest level should count. If this means fewer students, so be it. To some extent, Universities need also to specialise in particular fields leaving others to neighbouring Universities. The UGC should encourage such specialisation which would provide the necessary economies of scale so vital for creative minds. Let us face it, there is no way we can have two hundred and more reasonably competent post-graduate departments in each subject. The Universities can also cooperate with neighbouring free-standing institutions or laboratories and with industry by way of consultancy and cooperation in research. This will lead not just to more resources, but some natural selection as well.

Should higher education be privatised? Whether we like it or not, it will happen to an increasing extent at least at the under-

graduate level. The state is so impoverished, it will not be able to provide for ever-increasing numbers of entrants. And dissatisfaction with poor quality in public institutions will drive more and more students to self-financing private colleges – as it is happening at the School level. Not that all private colleges will be necessarily more efficient or effective; but competition will soon establish a new hierarchy.

However, I cannot believe that self-financing private institutions can meet all or even a large part of the need for post-graduate teaching and research. Very few self-financing institutions have an appetite for research. While a few technical subjects like medicine or management can charge high fees and yet attract students of high merit, this can hardly be true for basic sciences or humanities and social sciences. To be obsessed by technology while neglecting basic disciplines would be like starving the mind in order to strengthen the hands. The truth of the matter is that if we are serious about higher education, we will have to keep alive the social and political pressure for public funding of such education. The need for governmental funding can be reduced by charging higher fees, attracting private money and by inducing national and international financial institutions to play a part. While the burden can be shared, the state cannot escape the responsibility for meeting a significant part of the cost of post-graduate higher education.

Despite appearances, this is true of the U.S. where State Universities are heavily subsidised and even Harvard and Stanford

gain a great deal from government contracts. Thanks to the parsimony of the State, the British University system is losing its shine; and instead of training British students, British Universities are scouting all over the world to attract high-fee paying students by offering more and more technical subjects. It is idle to pretend that this is not affecting their quality. It would be folly to follow their example. While the share of governmental funding can and must be reduced, it will have to remain significant and vital if we are to compete in a knowledge-based global economy – not to speak of turning out well-rounded citizens from all strata of society.

But will not public financing of even a part of higher education affect the autonomy of the Universities? The danger is real and we already know how much the heavy hand of government manipulates the governance of our Universities. But this is one of those things which has to be accepted as a part of the inevitable tension in society. Such tension can be reduced and made even creative by suitable arrangements and conventions. For example, even to-day, it is a moot point whether government is financing the Universities or the students. In the ultimate analysis, Universities are only the medium. The true beneficiaries are the students. Then why not directly finance the students and leave the Universities free to charge such fees as they like, admit whom they like, and teach what they like? This way, most Universities can become self-financing at least on current account. For capital requirements, some bidding procedure can be established under an independent Board with a budget. This will take the discretion away from the government of the day. But let us not forget: even

indirect public finance can pose a threat to autonomy in the guise of accountability.

The Universities have to accept that autonomy has to go hand in hand with accountability. The question is: who should the Universities be accountable to? Surely civil servants and even Ministers are not qualified to judge the performance of Universities. We already have the convention here and elsewhere of UGCs composed of independent experts who can perform this task with the help of such expert committees from time to time as may be necessary. We do not need to reinvent the wheel.

If we are honest, we should also admit that there has so far been little direct interference by the government in the academic autonomy or freedom of Universities. This was so even under Margaret Thatcher's England. This has been true of India by and large so far despite some recent transgressions. One can only hope that such rather clumsy attempts at intervention will cease after the elections. Not that assaults on academic freedom will not be made from time to time – and not just by governments, but also by some NGO or some sections of society. Here as elsewhere, eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. Universities should also not fall into the trap of considering every criticism as an assault on freedom.

The real danger of public interference in India comes from the almost total control of governments over the governance of our Universities and even free-standing institutions. This control is

enshrined in legislation establishing the Universities and has been extended by conventions established by administrative action from time to time. The University authorities and the teachers have also not been above blame by senseless trade union action or sheer partisan and egotistic confrontations in which we Indians seem to excel. Most of us cannot accept that something could be good for everyone. For us, if you go up, I go down so that each of us spends a great deal of energy in bringing each other down.

I do not know how exactly we can reform the governance of our Universities so that academic excellence and academic freedom can be reconciled with accountability –not just to the government but to all stakeholders – students, teachers, taxpayers, industry and trade. For a start, we need a Committee or a Commission which reviews all acts and systems of governance to see how they can be changed and simplified, how all conventions can be dropped or codified – bearing in mind the objective of excellence, autonomy and accountability. This may appear to be a Herculean task. But it is a necessary one to undertake if we are to be truly prepared for the knowledge age. We have embarked on a far-reaching reform of the economic system with good results and the government has withdrawn substantially from economic life. Why is this less necessary or urgent in something so vital as higher education? I firmly believe that individuals apart, all political parties in India today are convinced of the virtues of decentralisation, deregulation and freedom to compete. That heaven of freedom in which the poet wanted the country to awake should surely include not just the

world of commerce but the world of art, culture, science, philosophy and faith – a world which was so dear to him.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have raised many questions to which I have no firm or final answers. But the questions are vital for our future, and they must be urgently and honestly addressed by all of us. I hope the graduating students will join in this debate in the light of their own experience and needs. They are a privileged lot – indeed all of us here are a privileged lot. We owe it to society that we do something to extend that privilege to all the strata of our unequal and differentiated society.

Thank you.

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