

DO OUR UNIVERSITIES CARE FOR RESEARCH?

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It is well known that India aspires for the status of a super-power, to be counted among the leading powers of the world along with USA and China. The main basis for this claim, however, appears to be the size of our population, the size of the economy and the market it provides, and perhaps the size of our army and its arsenal. Quite a few may dispute these criteria, and assert rightly that instead it is the quality of life of people and the level of human development which determine the status of a country. In terms of these criteria, however, we fare rather poorly and rank quite low. Though literacy levels have improved in the last decade significantly, the quality of literacy and education have not received much acclaim. A significant proportion of students who have passed the primary seventh standard have grave difficulties in reading and doing sums. But we still aspire to the status of being counted as a knowledge power on the strength of a phenomenal growth of our IT industry. How tenuous such a claim would be can be seen from the fact that none of the Indian universities figure in the world's best hundred. India and China began their journey to modern economic development almost simultaneously, but two Chinese universities figure among the world's top hundred. In the ranking of countries by patents granted during 2011, Japan comes highest with as many as 238,323 patents, followed by USA with 224,525 patents and China with 172,113 patents. India ranks 17th in this regard, with only 5,170 patents granted.

This sad state of affairs is not because there are no brilliant Indians. They do very well when they go abroad and join universities there. They find a full scope to realise their dreams there without being hindered by caste politics, bureaucratic hurdles and petty jealousy which have stifled Indian universities. The general complaint is that Indian universities do not encourage research, but discourage creativity and depress brilliance.

The crucial importance of scientific research for the progress of India was realised early by our national leaders, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru. Science was needed to solve the problems of hunger, poverty, disease, and all other symptoms of economic backwardness. Nehru was aware that for this gigantic job, it was no longer enough to rely merely on existing

knowledge. Each country had to find its own path of progress, and each had its own distinct problems. It would not just do to merely apply knowledge generated in the west mechanically to the Indian situation. We had to create our own knowledge base. Frontiers of knowledge had to be constantly expanded in solving problems of economic backwardness. If India had to hold its head high in the comity of nations, it had to have a vast magnitude of skilled manpower, backed by a network of leading educational, training and research institutions, comparable with the best in the world. To create it in the shortest possible time was Nehru's dream. He lost no time to turn this dream into reality. This led him to take a decision of lasting significance, namely to start freestanding or autonomous institutions of research and training outside the framework of traditional universities. He perhaps thought that the traditional universities were too bogged down to teaching and acquiring existing knowledge to take on the stupendous task of knowledge creation and innovation suited to a large developing country. As result, the Indian Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and various National Laboratories were started. The Tatas in the meanwhile started the Tata Institute of Science at Bangalore, which later became the Indian Institute of Science. The process continued after Nehru. A few IITs were started as autonomous universities with powers to award their own degrees. Similarly, IIMs were also started to train management leaders and promote research in the field. Under the urgency to solve the food problem and to attain self-reliance in food grains, a new chain of research and extension oriented agricultural universities were started, which did not neglect teaching. The success of the Green Revolution owes in no small measure to the dynamism and creativity of these new universities. The same degree of dynamism was not shown by the new universities started under the traditional framework. Except for a few leading universities, and some bright sparks apart, even social science research in traditional universities turned out to be inadequate and even mediocre. The country needed valuable inputs from social science research too, to solve the country's longstanding problems. This led to the creation of the Indian Council of Social Science Research to support research both in autonomous research institutes and in the universities.

Though these new institutions have contributed greatly to capacity building in scientific research and boosted research output, the implications of their growth outside the framework of traditional universities were not quite welcome to the latter. The growth of the former steadily marginalised the latter in academic significance in spite of their significant

numerical growth. Many of the talented, research oriented and enterprising faculty left the traditional universities to join these new institutions. It was not because the new institutions offered higher scales of salaries. In a way, the terms of appointment were actually more comfortable in universities. Once the minimum probationary period of one year was over, teachers were secure in their positions whether they took classes regularly or not, taught well or not, and research was not a crucial requirement to continue in jobs. The key to prestige and power of professors in several (if not all) traditional universities often depended more on getting positions in the syndicate and senates, cultivating political and caste leaders and heads of powerful *Mathas*, and on building a group of *chemchas* around them, rather than on research reputation. The situation simply disgusted serious academics, and the new free-standing institutions came as a boon to them. These institutions gave them more encouragement in research, more job satisfaction, and more credible career prospects.

The academic gulf between the new free-standing institutions and traditional universities which has developed, is not a sign of health for both. Both have suffered because of this gulf. Ideally both teaching and research should go together, as they complement and strengthen each other. However, in most of the free-standing institutions focused on research, teaching was confined to research guidance and to course work required for research degrees such as M Phil and PhD. They have also of course been organising refresher courses for college teachers which have been rated as useful by the participants. But they do not in most cases teach even at the Master's level, except a few like the IITs and the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics (Pune) among social sciences. This has deprived the students of the benefit of knowledge of the researchers, but what is worse, gave no stimulus to researchers working in such institutions to be constantly in touch with new literature on topics other than those on which they are researching. Researchers tended towards narrow specialisation. This has come in the way of developing a broad and holistic perspective which is required for creative breakthroughs in knowledge creation and problem solving. The universities also suffered as pointed out above due to their inability to attract and retain talented researchers. Teaching in the absence of adequate research orientation suffered in quality and innovation, and tended to get out-of-date in covering latest advances in the field.

The gulf has to be bridged through mutual interaction and collaboration between the two streams of higher education. University teachers can take their sabbatical or Indian equivalent of it to spend a few months or a year in the research institutions and collaborate on research projects of mutual interest. Similarly, researchers from the free-standing institutions can spend a few months or a year in universities teaching special courses. The UGC can provide some incentives for this give and take. Academic exchanges are usually sought only between institutions/universities in India and those abroad, but not between the two streams within the country, though they are almost at the door-step of each other. There is a Kannada proverb (*Hittala gida maddalla*) which says –the herb in the backyard cannot be medicine. A mutual regard, openness and co-operation between them can go a long way in promoting academic benefit for both the research institutions and the universities.

The most important need is to change the attitude of universities towards research from one of non-seriousness to seriousness, from unconscious indifference to conscious care. Many university heads may protest saying that they already care for research. Isn't PhD a requirement for faculty positions? Don't they get research projects and funds? Don't they take research students and guide them? Yes, but not necessarily with adequate seriousness and concern. We are very much behind USA, China and quite a few countries in turning out PhDs. It is not because we care more for quality than quantity of PhDs compared to these countries. We lag behind in both! The interest in PhD programme and its quality is more a formality than a matter of enthusiastic commitment. The PhD programme of many universities and its working leaves much to be desired. Some years ago, the TV comedian Jaspal Bhatti had produced a hilarious episode precisely on the working of the PhD programme in universities, showing how professors exploited their research students. Sadly, the actual facts may be more tragic than comic. I have heard of incidents about a few professors refusing to register their students under their guidance, or to approve the prepared theses for submission, unless they receive some gratification. A few years ago, there was a scandal in one of the universities in Karnataka about a PhD guide allegedly seeking sexual favours from his student! The disease of corruption seems to have also reached the administrative staff handling the PhD section. Some of them are alleged to harass PhD students with petty objections till they are somehow gratified. This can happen with students working within the main campus, but is reported particularly in the case of students working

outside. Take this case of a student approaching the section-in-charge, seeking to submit the thesis. The student is told that he or she could not do so because progress reports were not sent. When the student protests and shows the postal receipts as proof of having sent them, the official says – ‘You may have sent, but I have not received them’. The student says – ‘Will it do if I submit the copies of the progress reports now?’ The official replies: ‘You may. But it would be considered as a case of late submission. You may then be allowed to submit the thesis only after two years’. This is only to illustrate how well-meaning rules can be misused to harass students instead of being sympathetic. The victims of such harassment have normally no courage to complain. The student is always the guilty party. In India, everybody is identified with a caste. If the complaint is pressed and investigation is ordered, there is always the allegation that it is because of the concerned person’s caste that the investigation is ordered. In most of the Indian universities, caste lobbies are very powerful and they rush to the defence of their caste loyalists whatever may be the crime alleged.

There is a rule in most universities requiring PhD students to submit their thesis within a specified number of years after registration. Part-time PhD students, particularly women, find it difficult to do so within the deadline. There are cases, when they are ready to submit the thesis within a few months after the deadline. Even for missing the deadline by just a few months, the student will have to go through the whole process of re-registration and submit the thesis after the required minimum necessary period prescribed in new cases! Even the Vice Chancellor does not have the powers of using discretion to allow the student to submit the thesis by condoning the delay. I know a case of this kind where the VC’s decision was overturned by the syndicate after his term was over, and the student was asked to re-register in spite of having the thesis ready in hand and submit only after two years. This is how the letter of the rules is respected more than the spirit behind them. It is a symptom of wooden-headed bureaucracy holding its sway over academic ethos, a sign of ‘I don’t care’ attitude lording over genuine research concerns and any compassionate regard for students’ interests.

(The article is not necessarily based on the experience of one university alone but on the basis of direct and indirect knowledge of many in general. Apart from having served in a few universities in the state and outside, the author had the benefit of interaction with many students and teachers from various universities in India.)