CHAPTER 14

The Challenges of a Liberal University

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The modern Indian University dates back to the establishment of the three universities in the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in the middle of the 19th century. Indian higher education has taken diverse forms since then, from the prestigious IIT's to the 500-odd public universities. (Mehta & Kapur, 2017).

This short paper reflects on the three central challenges in building a Liberal University in the context of Indian higher education. The debate over the nature and character of a liberal university acquired its full vigour in India at the turn of the 20th century. One of its most succinct expressions was the Convocation address given at the University of Mysore in 1918 by Sir Ashutosh Mukhherjee, Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University. The University of Mysore was the first "liberal arts" university set up in a princely state in India. Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee was a pivotal figure in the transformation of Indian Higher Education. He was instrumental in bringing the Humboldtian idea of a research university to India. This convocation address was remarkable in the way in which it prefigured many of the challenges of setting up a liberal university in India.

Mukherjee begins his address by raising the question of what is a University? He writes: "They have from time to time asked what a University is and found themselves at sea. Is it a set of fine buildings? Is it an education institution which has beneficent patrons and has secured the gift of a million? Is it an aggregate of the Four Faculties? Is it a scholastic guild? Is it a society of masters? Is it an assembly of students? Is it an examining body authorized to grant degrees? Is it a corporation of individuals who investigate the unknown, but neither teach nor test? Is it an association of teaching

institutions without a curriculum? Must it possess any or all of these charac-
teristics?" (Mukherjee, 1918)

In some senses Mukherjee was pointing to the fact that different universi-
ties took on their identities largely as a result of the functions they chose to
emphasize. On the one hand, they ranged from universities that were largely
affiliating universities, granting degrees through the conduct of examina-
tions. On the other hand, there were universities that were, in their own
small way, trying to establish themselves as research universities, making way
for the centrality of the Professoriate. While a healthy system of higher edu-
cation will have room for different kinds of universities, Mukherjee was con-
cerned with one question: Who should define the identity of a university?

Mukherjee's own starting point was a conception of a university as "A cor-
poration of teachers and students, banded together in the pursuit of learning
and for the expansion of the bounds of knowledge." Mukherjee was acutely
aware that the historical, social and material conditions under which a uni-
versity dedicated to these ideals could flourish were rarer than commonly
supposed. Indeed, the bulk of Indian Universities were primarily dedicated
to "certification", not the production of knowledge; and the curriculum was
oriented towards servicing the state, or as a counterpoint, the reproduction
of traditional forms of knowledge. In the debate that took place in India at
the turn of the century, Mukherjee presciently identified a number of condi-
tions that would have to exist for a liberal university to flourish. This short
paper concentrates on three fundamental challenges for a liberal university
in a context like India, but more generally. I conclude that this is a moment
of precarious promise for the establishment for liberal universities in India.

ORGANIZATIONAL FORM/FINANCING

The conceit of the liberal university is the idea that it engages in the pur-
suit of knowledge for "its own sake". What organizing and financing form
would support such a university? Mukherjee very presciently understood that
in some ways the university would have to be shielded from two diametri-
cally opposite logics. On the one hand, it would have to be shielded from
the bureaucratic impulses of the STATE; on the other hand, it would have
to be shielded from being dominated by COMMERCIAL considerations, a
calculus of returns on investment. This was particularly challenging in the
context of a poor under-capitalized country, where a bulk of the financing
of universities would likely come from the state. In such a context, the chal-
lenge would be to design organizational forms that made the universities
accountable, but did not impinge on their autonomy. Can a university be
financed by a state, without succumbing to the imperatives of state power?

On this issue, the record of Indian universities is decidedly poor. At the turn of the century there was something of an elite compact, which tolerated the autonomy of universities. But this compact was very fragile and uneven, and by the 70s had become limited to a few elite institutions. The threat to universities came, in some instances, from direct politicization (the wholescale decimation of a university culture in West Bengal, the original site of Sir Ashutosh's hopes, being the prime example). But, more insidiously, it came from the logic of bureaucratization. In most state universities, the answer to the question: "Who gets to define the identity of the University?" was answered in one simple word: "The state." Mukherjee's hope that the state could finance universities and, yet, let the university community define the identity of the university both in terms of intellectual content and allocative decisions, largely came to nought. All the basic decisions of the university, what you can teach, how you can teach, who can teach, how much can you pay, how much can you charge, largely went out of the control of the universities. The imperatives that led to such state control were complex and need not detain us here. But suffice it to say that cumulative state control over the organizational form of the university impeded innovation and excellence. Indian universities were over-regulated and under-governed.

India is in a paradoxical situation where, on the one hand, there is a deep recognition of this fact. There is widespread acknowledgment that Universities need to be progressively given more autonomy. Several measures have pointed in the direction. A "graded autonomy" scheme has been introduced where universities will get a degree of autonomy depending on "ratings" carried out by a bureaucratic agency. At the extreme end is a scheme called Institutions of Eminence, which will free a select group of institutions from regulation altogether. The idea is to give a select group of institutions the freedom to define their own identities, set their own norms, subject to periodic reviews in terms of the progress they make in climbing up globally accepted ranking indicators. So, on the one hand, there is an acknowledgement that being "world-class" requires autonomy of action; unless a university is free to define its identity, it cannot attain excellence.

On the other hand, the quest for political control continues. Some of India's most influential public universities are the great sites of political contention. Many public universities at the regional level were often made subordinate to the ideological imperatives of the state. But, with the rise of populist/nationalist political parties, there is greater pressure on universities to serve the "national" cause. For example, this contention has taken an extreme form in one of India's most prestigious universities: Jawaharlal Nehru University. In some ways the university was always associated with being a bastion of "The Left". Whatever the truth of that contention may be, the University was accused of being "anti-national" with sedition charges

being imposed on its student leaders. This is not just an isolated instance. The point was to send a message to all universities that unless they served the cause of authorized forms of nationalism, narrowly defined, their freedom would be curtailed. In some ways, universities have always served national projects, and forms of critical thinking that question nation state ideologies have often been suspect. But the recent rise in nationalist politics is putting universities under even greater threat, putting at risk the core freedoms of a university: the freedom to think.

So Mukherjee was far too sanguine that state funding could be made compatible with an organizational form that allowed functional autonomy to universities. But how does the private space fare in this context? Until very recently, the idea that private universities could create the free spaces required for learning and research had not really been tested in India. For one thing, no private university positioned itself as a major research university; most focussed on professional education. There were very few universities that focussed on the basic sciences and liberal arts. Most private universities were also subject to heavy regulatory control, including on curriculum and fees. But, most importantly, most private universities were closer to commercial enterprises, driven largely by revenue considerations. Most private colleges were oriented to professional education. In fact the early phase of private higher education in India was largely a product of the regulatory arbitrage. The state controlled the regulatory bodies that gave permission for colleges to be set up, and it requires considerable political manipulation to get permission to set up colleges. One striking manifestation of this was the fact that, according to one study, close to 80% of private colleges set up in India were set up by politicians of families with political connections. In short, the private higher education revolution in India was itself a product of an unholy nexus between state and capital — far from the insulation from state and capital that Mukherjee had dreamt of.

In the last few years there is beginning to emerge a new organizational form for a private university. This organizational form is relatively new to India. It is based on collective philanthropy. New universities like Ashoka and KREA are the nascent products of this organizational form. The collective philanthropy model has a few advantages. It ensures that the university is not an extension of the will of one or two proprietors. It ensures that governance processes in the university have to be relatively strong since attracting new donors requires credibility in process. In principle, such an organizational form should allow the university a degree of insulation from both the state, and immediate commercial considerations. But this is a very nascent revolution in India. Ashoka has demonstrated some early success with this model and has quickly gone on to become India's leading Liberal Arts university. But it is still an open question whether the cultural and

political preconditions exist for such a model to acquire widespread currency. This model requires a widespread culture of relatively "dispassionate" philanthropy. There is a new generation of philanthropists — largely first-generation entrepreneurs, with strong experience of American universities — who are willing to go down this path. Given that the minimum scale of a viable research university in Indian requires at least $600 to $700 million in philanthropic commitments, it is not clear how many projects of this kind can take shape. This model is also still politically vulnerable in two respects. It requires regulatory clearances that still require "managing" the state; and it will require a state culture that does "pressure" capital and prevent it from funding liberal universities.

India is at the moment experiencing a tension. On the one hand, there is the prestige of the "liberal arts" model, as evidenced in the demand for admissions to top US schools; there is a desire to emulate the success of top global universities, and there is new Indian capital willing to take a bet on Indian Higher Education beyond professional schools. On the other hand, there is desire for regulatory control, formal or informal, the political pressures to enlist in the nationalist or other political projects, and the relatively small size of capital available. How will India navigate this tension? In all likelihood, there will be some room for innovation, since India has to cater to great demand. But India's full potential in the space of liberal Arts universities will still be hobbled. Ashutosh Mukherjee was right: a liberal university depends upon society providing organizational autonomy, between state and capital. We need to reflect on the conditions under which this autonomy can be taken for granted.

Just one more footnote on organizational form. In India much of the debate over university autonomy has meant "autonomy for the vice-chancellors". But what is the right combination of autonomy with accountability within a university remains a very unsettled question. India is still struggling to find an organizational form where the allocation of powers between the "professoriate" and "administration" is conducive to the overall aims of the university.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

We cannot take the organizational form that guarantees university autonomy for granted. But, in a poor country, marked by deep social and economic inequality, the "legitimacy" of elite universities is always open to question. The state was mindful of the social location of universities. A higher education system would be "tolerated" only in so far as it provided a means of social mobility and is not simply the site of the reproduction of social inequality. Arguably, this is an area of concern globally. Much of the "political" backlash

against elite universities is fuelled by the sense that these are not socially inclusive spaces. Often this backlash is experienced simply through exit, a large majority of citizens do not think these are universities where their children belong. The role of universities reproducing rather than mitigating social distinction is a matter of global debate. Most universities recognize the importance of the issue. Affirmative action and diversity programs are designed to mitigate invidious forms of social exclusion that have marked universities. Yet it is hard to argue that universities, or the process to get to them, have been socially inclusive.

Ashutosh Mukherjee had raised this issue as well. Should a society worry about elitism of universities? He thought, quite rightly, that intellectual elitism was inescapable. But he was sanguine that universities did not have to worry about social elitism as much. The ultimate worth of the intellectual elitism would be redeemed by the fact that these institutions would produce graduates who would be exemplars in thinking about the public good. The university would become socially inclusive through the actions of its graduates and their impact on society. This view was extremely sanguine about the role of universities in creating just societies through the action of their graduates.

But societies do measure their universities on the scale of social inclusion. This was a truth that the democratic state in India recognized. Its answer was twofold. It introduced wide-ranging reservations for historically marginalized groups, where the aim of the universities was to mirror the social composition of society. This affirmative action has been the subject of great political contention. But this was also one of the reasons why there was political pressure to keep fees low. One of the criticisms public universities faced was precisely that they were unable to mobilize resources or signal the value of education by not pricing it right. The effects of these of these policies can be debated. They often ended up giving massive subsidies to the middle class as much as they enabled marginalized groups. But they signalled the fact that the university had to be positioned as a socially inclusive institution.

The dilemma for India is this. As the space for "private" education opens up, will the university remain a socially inclusive space? New universities like Ashoka are committed to social inclusion, through generous financial aid programs, with over 60% of students getting financial aid, and an outreach program that recognized social disadvantage. But there are three major challenges. First, the amount of philanthropic commitment and cross subsidy required to sustain a genuinely inclusive model is quite massive. Indeed there is anecdotal evidence that socially inclusive private universities do not do badly in reaching out to socially marginalized groups with incomes under five lakhs a year: conscious outreach and targeting can help. They also do well with privileged groups. But it is the lower middle they miss out on, where the

signal a high price tag sends tends to socially deter these groups. If one were brutally honest about it, even a genuinely "needs blind" admission policy is sustainable only on the basis of prior inequality that is encoded into the admission and selection process. In a country like India a fully needs blind admissions policy would require foregoing almost 80 to 90% on the yield curve. Second, universities are built on the top of great inequality in school education and are yet expected to compensate for the inequality inscribed at the school level. The representation of the most marginalized groups in higher education is hobbled by the fact that the pipeline that funnel of applicants coming from the school system gets narrower the lower down the social or class order one goes. Third, and finally, there is the challenge of the university as social spaces. One of the challenges of elite universities is the fact that their culture is such that often students feel they don't belong there. Even if the university is financially inclusive, the challenge of creating a socially inclusive space. Imagine the challenges of creating a space where a first-generation Dalit student, whose parents are barely out of bonded labour, inhabiting the same space as a fifth-generation millionaire. Even in democratic societies, there is often a polite veil thrown over the fact that these spaces are difficult to create.

Higher education is about intellectual distinction. But the social legitimacy of universities is measured by their social inclusiveness. This social inclusiveness is a pedagogic necessity; it is a requirement of justice. But it is also a prudential political requirement. A university has to be a public trust in this respect: it has to be place where everyone potentially belongs. This is easier to announce than it is to credibly realize.

CURRICULUM

Even at the turn of the 20th century Mukherjee recognized that the liberal university's curriculum will aim to achieve some distinctive goals within a framework of overall excellence. But, as Mukherjee realized, in institutionalising the curriculum, there are tensions between these principles.

1. Breadth: The University must provide 21st century "Intellectual Literacy". What are the contours of 21st century Literacy that allows students to function in varied contexts?
2. Depth: The must be able to claim some credibility in a particular "discipline". At one level this demand is unexceptionable. But the "competence" requirement in each discipline is going up. Typically more and more majors require upping the number of courses required for the major. There is a tension emerging here between breadth and depth.

3. Diversity: The University should be a place where students find their intellectual identities; Students will have a diversity of abilities and temperaments. Each should be able to find their own measure. But does diversity of pathways pose obstacles to the signalling function of the University?

4. Choice and Boundary Crossing: The program structure must enable enough choice. For those students so inclined, there must be the possibility of crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries with credibility.

5. Core: Is there a "common foundation" to a liberal education? This is probably the greatest area of contention in curriculum construction. Broadly speaking there are three points of contention: What is a core stock of knowledge in the context of immense historical and social diversity? Should the core be a "substantive" core or a "methodological" one, organized around styles of thinking? How much of the curriculum should the core occupy?

6. Enablers: The imparting of enough core "skills" that are enabling conditions for all of the above. Initially this list included languages, writing, logical reasoning, but now includes extensive mathematics, programming etc. The biggest tension comes from the fact that serious mathematics is not just becoming part of 21st century literacy but a non-negotiable requirement for most majors.

7. Values: To what extent is the universities capable of imparting "values"? This was very much part of the project of liberal education, both in terms of substantive moral and civic values, but also a disposition to pursue higher values in general. What is the best way of thinking of university as being, to some degree, a site for the inculcation of values?

8. Research: the enchantment of university is not the transmission of knowledge, but the capability to "produce" knowledge, snatch snippets of intellectual order from a chaotic and complex world.

9. Contextual embeddedness. There is little point in disputing the fact that most elite universities take their cues from a global context of the production and dissemination of knowledge. But India in particular faces a peculiar challenge. It is relatively easy for elites to secede from their own contexts, and limit their scope for being meaningful change agents in their society. In India this tension is most apparent since most students from Indian elite universities find it difficult to function in contexts which require mastery of the vernacular. Indeed the suspicion of liberal arts as an "elite" project largely comes from its association with English, and the relative weakness of "vernacular" universities. What would it mean to produce graduates who could navigate the global and vernacular worlds with equal facility?

These curricular challenges are familiar to universities across the world. But in the Indian context the resolution of these tensions has been difficult for a number of reasons. The first is simply regulatory. The Indian regulators have been reluctant to allow four-year undergraduate degrees (with some exceptions). But India higher education will realize its potential only when it finds a creative way of harmonizing or at least mitigating some of these tensions.

India can be a propitious site for the creation of new dynamic liberal universities. It should aspire to be a global higher education hub. But it will first have to create first-rate exemplars of institutions that embody the organizational form, social legitimacy and curricular content of a liberal university.

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