

THE INDIAN UNIVERSITY IS IN A FREE FALL

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Students at a college in India. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

At a time when the political discourse in the country is taken to a different level of absolutism, the pursuit of a more encouraging democratic ethos is the need of the times. Academics must learn to be reliant on spirited discussions. They must be the radiant examples of a field where diverse opinions underwrite a robust critical conversation.

As Marcellus says in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Why else would the government invite universities from overseas to open campuses in India? A sense of competitiveness with international universities of repute would unquestionably retard the free fall of our universities. But there is one fear. The new initiative could make India the new global education destination, but it could also further worsen the problem. Outstanding teachers may seek positions in the various branches of the foreign universities. And we could be left with mediocrity, which would lead to further decline. The University Grants Commission must take cognisance of the possibility of such a fallout. To the dismay of many, there is no desire or exercise to find some mechanisms to retard the socio-academic decline of the university.

Before this debacle becomes a reality, let us examine what ails our universities. The abyss between the public intellectual and the stubborn establishment stands wider than ever. Universities are sliding towards self-deluding and bureaucratized governing bodies that lack the ability to handle views alternative to the retrogressive decisions of the academic leadership that has lurched to the Right. To say that India is the third largest economy is of no value when it has miserably failed to give its citizens a world-class university system. The budgetary allocation for education is abysmal.

The point that is often blatantly overlooked by governing bodies of universities is the crucial importance of an academic environment with the understanding of new pedagogical practices. The present state of affairs exposes the valorisation of mediocrity that has resulted in belittling those who accomplish their responsibility with impartiality and have the requisite credentials and talent. This is in keeping with the current practice of side-lining many distinguished academics and vice chancellors and instead making appointments arbitrarily on the basis of ideological allegiances. It is, indeed, a mockery to be subjected to the arrogance and incompetence of a handful of pushovers who conduct the course of higher education not in the interest of rigorous culture of learning and teaching, but for the mere award of coveted positions.

Governing bodies that have worked efficaciously over the years are being sabotaged by an

ideological belief. They are unmindful of the structure rotting at the core, especially with the insouciant acceptance of mediocrity as the norm. Inviolable traditions get bludgeoned to submission, if not annihilation. Until this stops, our institutions of higher learning will remain absent from world rankings.

Our universities have become deeply sclerotic. Spouses of civil servants find easy entrée to university positions. I once mentioned the name of F.R. Leavis, one of the most prominent critics of the last century, during a discussion. A colleague asked who he was. As a joke, I told her that I was speaking of the captain of the English cricket team. She believed it and still remains blissfully ignorant. Most universities abound with such poverty of knowledge.

The free fall of universities in the hands of such teachers results from the infraction of the basic structure of the university constitution. There are procedural irregularities. The indifference of the establishment resonates with the political leadership, which is oblivious of the requirements of building an empowering milieu and an affirmative academic outlook. Instead, we have a disposition that internalises sluggishness, lack of work ethic and ineptitude. Selection committees constituted by university heads find the same faculty members repeated as experts or vice chancellor's nominees, thereby ignoring far more qualified and much senior teachers. Systems that suggest less-than-honourable intent are permitted to flourish with the patronage of the powers that be.

It is disenchanting to note that the teaching fraternity chooses to remain silent on significant issues on which depend the stature of academic excellence. The university's adversarial approach to principles of seniority and merit threatens the stability and academic reputation of not only the university, but also the furtherance of ethical practices. Reform is always welcome and necessary, but destroying age-old and tested institutional practices deeply wedded to democratic traditions is retrogressive.

Ubiquitous discrimination strikes a blow at the very core of academic culture where the teaching community is directed to submit to governing bodies, which in turn are answerable to an overbearing patron seemingly lacking a broad progressive policy that encourages debate and disagreement. The conflict apparently is between viewing a university as a seat of diversity and learning and a seat of conformity and indoctrination.

Such a regressive milieu deepens the sense of distrust. In the present quandary there are few signs of initiating a level playing field or even a public debate on the decline of the university. In such a state of affairs, conscious academics can at least highlight the depth of the rot.

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