

## **The Devaluation of the Academia\***

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We are about to witness a major change. Academics are going to be marginalized in the process of decision-making relating to academic matters. An implicit marginalization has been going on for some time, but now it will get the imprimatur of a parliamentary legislation. A legislation drafted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development seeks to abolish the University Grants Commission altogether. Its fund-distributing role will be taken over by the Ministry itself, while its supervisory role will be implemented by a newly created Higher Education Commission of India.

The composition of this proposed Higher Education Commission will be as follows: a Chairperson, a Deputy Chairperson, and twelve members of whom two will be Professors, two Vice-Chancellors, one industrialist, and the rest officials from “stakeholder ministries”. Even if assuming that the Vice-Chancellors would be academics, which they need not be, this means that eight of the twelve members will be non-academics. Matters relating to higher education in short will now be decided by non-academics.

Of course since higher education draws public funds, it needs to be publicly supervised. But public supervision can only be parliamentary supervision, not Ministry supervision. And above all, it must be supervision, in the sense only of a general oversight. For instance, the Jawaharlal Nehru University has had a University Court with outside members, including members of Parliament from different political Parties, of which the Chancellor is the Presiding Officer and which meets regularly to discuss how the university has been doing. Its jurisdiction is a bounded one, so much so that at one of the Court meetings long ago, when Prime Minister Morarji Desai, presiding over the meeting as the University’s Chancellor at the time, had talked about there being too many Communists in the institution, a senior academic, Professor Sivatosh Mukherji, had actually pulled him up, saying that he had no business to start a witch-hunt.

The proposed Higher Education Commission’s jurisdiction however is not restricted to general supervision alone. It even has to give approval for the courses to be taught in the universities, a prerogative which only the universities’ own academic bodies have had till now. Ironically therefore whether there should be a course on Ludwig Wittgenstein or on Franz Fanon in, say, Jawaharlal Nehru University, will now be decided by a group of people who might never have heard of either of them.

The proposed legislation has drawn much flak from academics for instituting political control over the academia, since control by government officials would basically mean control by the political bosses whose biddings the officials are supposed to carry out. But the obverse of greater political control is a devaluation of the academia. This began a long time ago when aspirants for Vice-Chancellorships began to lobby ministers for getting appointed in the first place, and, once appointed, to curry favour with them for remaining in office.

This was a new phenomenon. Earlier, Vice Chancellors like Nirmal Kumar Siddhanta or Birendra Nath Ganguli (both of Delhi University when I was a student there)

would not be seen dead in the corridors of power. The first Vice-Chancellor of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Gopaldaswamy Parthasarathy, was of such great seniority and stature that he towered above most ministers of the time; in fact he was India's de facto External Affairs Minister for a while, but, given his low-key nature, insisted on never taking that formal title. By contrast it is not unusual these days to have University Vice-Chancellors waiting in queue to have an audience with the minister. And I have even heard stories of some Vice-Chancellors of State universities habitually prostrating themselves before the Chief Minister as a form of greeting.

Almost all political formations alas have been guilty of encouraging this trend, including even the Left. This is surprising in the Left's case because it has traditionally respected the academia. It used to be said after the Bolshevik Revolution that if one saw a car on a street in revolutionary Moscow then it was likely to be ferrying either a Commissar or a Professor. And Indian Communist leaders of yore like E.M.S.Namboodiripad and B.T.Ranadive took pains to keep themselves abreast of the thinking and research going on in subjects of their interest in major universities. The Left in power however has not treated universities space with the same respect as these older leaders of the Left.

For a while it appeared that having Vice Chancellors acquainted with ministers would work to the advantage of the academic community. After all, several scholars keen on their research work were not interested in taking up administrative duties and becoming Vice Chancellors. If some persons did, and could work their way through the corridors of power, then so much the better; they would act as a buffer between the wielders of political power and the community of scholars, shielding the latter from any interference from the former. But this sort of precarious equilibrium is always difficult to maintain for long, and certainly not if the political authority is keen on interference.

The current central government is keen on interfering in university affairs, not just to fill universities with loyalists irrespective of their qualifications, but above all to keep out academics with a different world-view; and it has taken advantage of the devaluation of the academia, which has been going on for some time, in order to try to marginalize it altogether. Now we shall have the absurd spectacle of academics queuing up outside the Ministry of Human Resource Development for accessing their research grants, and of academics queuing up outside the Higher Education Commission to have their courses passed.

Or, may be, they would not even bother. Why bother with research at all if the price to pay is umpteen visits to the corridors of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, where one is made to feel an unwanted supplicant? And why bother with devising new courses when you run the risk being labelled "anti-national" or an "urban Naxalite" because of the course content you have suggested? Wittgenstein and Fanon be damned; you just keep your nose out of trouble.

Narendra Modi apparently wants Indian universities to figure in the list of the world's top 100 universities, which is the ostensible reason for these proposed changes. This is an absurd objective anyway, which already smacks of commoditization ("our products must rank better than their products"). But in addition if the quality of institutions of higher education is to improve then the academic community must be free to express itself, for which it must be self-governing, as far as possible, with only

general parliamentary oversight. The joy of being an academic lies in one's ability to share one's thoughts with one's students; the university structure, and the structure of higher education administration, must be such that this becomes possible. Controlling the academia is the surest way of condemning our universities to becoming nondescript.

Whether or not the Jawaharlal Nehru University figures in some list of the world's top 100, it is known all over the world. The reason for that is the space for free discussion it has provided. Anything that destroys that freedom contributes to the creation of a non-thinking society; the country can ill afford it.

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