

October 30, 2019

The Closed Nature of Indian Universities

By: M. A. Kalam

Inbreeding and nepotism have for long been features of universities. The favoured students go from being postgraduates to doctorates and then become lecturers, all within the same university. This has naturally had a negative impact on academic culture.

This was the conclusion of Andre Beteille's article "Universities as Institutions" (1995: 568). The operative and significant features of this quotation happen to be the leeway that seems to exist for the accommodation of "some corruption and some injustice" in institutions.

Now, the question is of the nature of corruption and injustice, and the degree to which these can occur. How one can measure the kind and amount inherent in what Beteille refers to as "some". Of course, all institutions and systems, irrespective of what they cater to, cannot be either solidly monolithic or wooden. They have to make allowance for deviations from even the strictest of norms and frameworks. That is indeed understandable. But what is worrying is how by accepting that such a leeway exists, recourse is taken to various kinds of conduct under which the institutions are made to bypass standard operating procedures and deviate from expected norms.

Universities in India

Are the universities and higher academic bodies in India comparable as institutions to those in other countries, particularly in the developed world? Is the higher education scene different in India? The structure, organisation and functions of the institutions of higher education may have a modicum of commonality with that elsewhere in the world. But the personnel, the administrative machinery and the academic faculty are completely different due to the diversity and plurality of India's complex societal makeup. This sort of diversity in ethnicity, religion, language, region and, above all, the caste system, is something that is unique to India. No other country in the world exhibits this kind of range in terms of variety and complexity.

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Does this sort of diversity and complexity in India have an impact on our educational system? If yes, then how? This is the thrust of this article on the (sometimes hidden) facets of higher education institutions in India.

One can safely say that in most academic institutions in India education is not something that can be taken for granted as existing. Almost always, what comes across is not education but literacy of different kinds and at different levels. Even doctorates, one can emphasise without much disagreement, are often bereft of education; at best the PhDs can claim to have acquired a high level of literacy. The figurative value and symbolism that go with education is something that has a high worth in India, while the practical or functional worth is quite low, or at times hardly existent.

What Ails Higher Education?

Religion, caste and communalism have historically been the bane of our higher educational institutions. This has been partly due to the dictates of the varna system of old, when if a group was not placed at a particular stratum then it was mandated that it be kept away from literacy. Reading, writing and overall learning was denied to such groups. Only the upper castes, that too at different relative ages were allowed to enter the portals of places of learning. For instance, Brahmin children could start at an early age and the Kshatriya children somewhat later, and so on. Those who were not dwija, the "twice born", that is, the lower castes, were prohibited altogether from pursuing education.

The consequence of what prevails in a system that has historically accepted and even encourages certain ills, is an undesirable practice wherein supporting one's own clan members is not considered conflict of interest.

Against this historical context, what happens in institutions of higher learning or in the tertiary realm is what leads to the systemic weaknesses of the overall educational scene in the country at all levels. Besides, those who teach in schools and colleges are products rolled out by the assembly lines at the universities and are not bereft of the negative outcomes of being embedded in particular ritual slots. The consequence of what prevails in a system that has historically accepted and even encourages certain ills, is an undesirable practice wherein supporting one's own clan members is not considered conflict of interest. This gives rise to exclusion of certain sections of society and gets perpetuated over generations.

We are left with a system that creates islands of favouritism that keep many out of the orbit of higher education. Due to such partiality and bias, most educational institutions in India, including schools and colleges, are afflicted with inbreeding, nepotism and everything else that goes with inbreeding and nepotism.

Inbreeding and Nepotism

Inbreeding of the kind where an MA graduate in a university department does his MPhil/PhD in the same university and subsequently gets appointed as lecturer/assistant professor in the same department is the story in a majority of Indian universities.

Right from the time the student is doing the MA course we have highly subservient postgraduate students. The research supervisor allots/chooses a topic of research for the scholar in the MPhil/PhD stream. The research scholar, in alliance with the supervisor, produces an MPhil/PhD dissertation and gets it “approved” via a network of connections. So the dissertation gets through the viva-voce then the candidate gets her/his first job in the same department from where the PhD was obtained. (In between, the candidate foots the bill for a lavish lunch/dinner and sumptuous treat organised by the supervisor and his clique.)

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The track is well laid out; “path dependence” is the name of the game. Will such an academic who has come through this route ever express an independent view in a seminar or conference in the department in the presence of the supervisor and other teachers? Why create problems for oneself and the others by offering another point of view or criticise a teacher? The culture of silence is writ large and prevails all through.

What does such an academic/scholar do when it comes to teaching? Most of those in the class are potential future scholars or teachers and will surely be following the path of the prevailing culture of silence. Why topple the apple cart? And such a system is perpetuated for generations to come.

The more perceptive scholars have recognized this. For instance Srikanth says, “most professors aspire to get their students into their departments as lecturers, not because they think their students are bright, but because they feel that it is safe to have their own yes-men or yes-women in the department” (2001: 3485).

Using just an overarching term like corruption may not be appropriate while we deal with the higher educational scenario in Indian universities. However, if the term corruption is indeed used, it signifies many other tribulations and not just the money kind.

Hiring Practices Abroad

Let us try to comprehend how faculty is hired in universities in the West. Recruitment to faculty positions in overseas universities, particularly in the United States and in many a European university is in general quite open. If not as a policy then at least as a convention, an attempt is made to encourage graduates/doctorates to leave the parent university and obtain her first job at a university other than from where she has qualified for the Master's or PhD degree. In exceptional cases, the most brilliant ones are indeed recruited locally, but the convention is for the graduating students/scholars to shift to other universities and for the department to recruit faculty from outside the home institution.

C.J. Fuller, Professor Emeritus at the London School of Economics and Political Science, says, “PhD students are always encouraged to apply everywhere and told their own department will not favour them” (personal communication).

Absence of Studies

We do not have ethnographic accounts, narratives or studies or even general write-ups as to how things function and work, in general, in the various departments and centres of Indian universities. Academics have generally shied away from writing on the functioning of universities in India. Hence, we are not much aware of facets like inbreeding, nepotism or corruption, as also of conflict of interest situations in Indian universities. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to talk or write about something if one has been a part of, or has been complicit in some biased selection of a faculty or may be in the administration, which includes the Controller of Examinations, Registrar, or even the Vice Chancellor.

Academics who have been complicit in aiding inbreeding in departments of universities would be reluctant to take a position and make a strong argument against these unhealthy practices. Even 150 years after the first three universities in India (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras) were established in 1857, we have not followed the simplest of practices to prevent inbreeding, which in one of its avatars has led to a high degree of nepotism.

Close to a quarter of a century has passed since Andre Beteille observed that

The academic selection process is central to the life of an academic institution which is threatened whenever that process is called into question or loses its credibility. It is a fact that there is today in the University of Delhi, as in most Indian universities, pervasive mistrust of the integrity of academic selection committees. That mistrust, irrespective of the grounds on which it is based, strikes at the very heart of the meaning and legitimacy of the college and the university as academic institutions (1995: 566).

Beteille's reflection came more than twenty years after a study (1973) conducted in Delhi University showed that there was a high degree of inbreeding in the University. The following data is quite revealing:

Thus, 441 out of a total of 524 teachers in the Delhi University faculties in 1973, constituting 84 per cent, had qualified from Delhi University. The proportion from outside was larger at the senior levels, but locally qualified persons exceeded 90 per cent at the level of lecturers. Persons who had obtained their highest qualifications abroad constituted 16 per cent among the professors, 5.5 per cent among the readers and less than 1 per cent among the lecturers. The entire complement of staff in the faculty of Library Science was locally qualified; and nearly 95 per cent of the members of the faculty of Commerce, 90 per cent of the members of the faculty of Social Sciences and 85 per cent of the members of the faculty of Science had obtained their highest qualifications from Delhi University. It was only in the faculties of Law, Humanities and Languages that as least 20 per cent of the faculty members had qualified from Indian universities. It should be noted that these figures refer only to the highest qualifications; some of those who had taken their doctorate degrees from other Indian universities had taken their master's degrees at Delhi (Nayar and Mata Deen 1976: 98).

Surprisingly, not much had changed over a period of years as pointed out by Ramachandra Guha:

There is, in almost every Indian university, a marked tendency to employ one's own graduates to teaching positions. This inbreeding has infected even the best departments in the best universities. Thus the history department in the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the sociology department in the Delhi University are largely staffed by those who have, at some stage or another, passed through the same portals as students (2007: 564).

Guha gives a specific example:

When six new appointments were made to Delhi University's department of sociology in 1993, five of those selected had previously been students at the department. The sixth, the present writer, was not really an "outsider" either, for he had a degree from the sister department of economics (2007:564).

The data from Delhi University is quite educative as well as disturbing because it is a central university and one expects things to be different to a large extent at least, if not radically so, compared to state and regional universities.

It is not that unhealthy practices based on favouritism and corrupt ways are confined to the selection of faculty alone. The story as regards the appointment/selection of vice chancellors too has its downsides. Close to two decades ago Srikanth wrote:

To secure the coveted position of VC, the aspirants attempt to influence governments by utilising resources, by mobilising groups within the universities and by managing political and media support outside. It would not be just possible for such persons who have become VCs through backdoor methods to say 'no' to candidates recommended by those who have been instrumental in making them VCs. As rare exceptions, here and there we come across one or two VCs who acquired their positions only because of their qualifications. Even such persons find it difficult to appoint the right kind of persons on the faculty due to several internal compulsions (2001: 3485).

We do have specific instances of Vice Chancellors being arrested for corruption in Tamil Nadu as elsewhere too. Set price tags for various posts at different levels are by now well known in academic circles.

Attempts at Reducing Inbreeding

The introduction of the National Eligibility Test (NET) for the post of an assistant professor could have, at least in theory, reduced inbreeding to an extent, but vested interests successfully beat the system. They turned NET on its head by introducing the State Eligibility Test (SET) /State Level Eligibility Test (SLET) that brought in through the backdoor inbreeding and along with it the policy of protecting the sons/daughters of the soil in the respective states.

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When universities realised that their students were not making much of headway through the NET, they contrived to bring in the SET/SLET. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is complicit in this exercise because it acquiesced in permitting the various states to devise their respective SETs/SLETs. Also, this ensured that instead of bringing in at least an iota of quality into the faculty recruitment process, what we have ended up with is something that is diluted. The expected outcomes of less inbreeding and higher quality have both not been realised. Indian universities have been very good and really marvellous in beating any system. They in fact have ingenious methods to do so.

Culture of Silence

What has been amazing and simultaneously troubling is that there is complete silence from academics about what they have gone through in their lives and careers. There is almost no protest by those who have been denied legitimate positions in academics. Even those who have been at the receiving end have not come out in the open.

Silence among those who perpetrated havoc on others is understandable. One does not of course expect them to talk. But the others? The apparent oath of silence is akin to what we come across among cricketers who refrain from letting out what happens in the dressing room. The match-fixing and betting that is undoubtedly prevalent in cricketing circles and involves some of the players.

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The various kinds of fixing that happen in the Indian academic realm will put a cricketer to shame in terms of the sheer ingenuity and cussedness that is employed in academics. The cricketers may have strong and compelling reasons to guard their turf and maintain a convention by constantly increasing the size of the carpet under which their shenanigans get swept. But does it behove academics, whose coffers are almost always funded by public funds to keep a tight lid on how misuse, manipulation, and corruption prevail in this so-called noble profession. Not to mention sexual exploitation of women colleagues, research scholars and postgraduate students.

Concluding Remarks

There are countless instances of external interference, political and otherwise, including from the state itself, in the functioning of the universities wherein various sorts of underhand dealings and corrupt practices occur. But the thrust here has been to look at the kind of

things that occur within universities, which are related to the academic/administrative personnel at different levels in an institution.

Though the studies cited here go back to those published between 1976 and 2007 things have hardly changed since then. Given the circumstances prevailing in our educational institutions, they are unlikely to change soon and lead to a healthy situation.

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Educational institutions -- those that are administered by the state governments as also the central universities -- are being subjected to political interference that is steadily increasing.

Also, while we have dealt with an issue that is eating away at chunks of our higher educational system, there are other areas of concern too. There is the way the public universities are being weakened by parties holding government office. This is something that is unprecedented. Educational institutions -- those that are administered by the state governments as also the central universities -- are being subjected to political interference that is steadily increasing.

Selection of Vice Chancellors as well of faculty is no longer controlled by academic bodies but by forces that are dominated by political outfits. It is disconcerting that not many voices are being raised about this control by political outfits. Speaking truth to power does not seem to be a conviction anymore.

The views expressed here are personal.

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