

# **The Third Foundation Day Lecture**

of the

**National University of Educational Planning and Administration  
(NUEPA)**

on

**UNIVERSITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

by

**André Béteille**

National Research Professor and  
Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Delhi

Delivered on August 11, 2009 at IIC, New Delhi

---

---

**UNIVERSITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST  
CENTURY**

**André Béteille**

*National Research Professor and  
Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Delhi*

The Third Foundation Day Lecture of the NUEPA  
August 11, 2009

---

---

---

---

Lecture delivered on the occasion of the Third Foundation Day of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration at IIC, New Delhi on August 11, 2009.

Published by the Registrar, National University of Educational Planning and Administration, 17-B, Sri Aurobindo Marg, New Delhi and printed at M/s. Anil Offset & Packaging Pvt. Ltd. Delhi.

---

---

---

## **UNIVERSITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

As an institution, the university has a longer span of life than that of any of its individual members. It was there before most of its present members entered it, and will continue to be there after they leave it. This appearance of continuity masks the many changes taking place both in the internal structure of the university and in its relationship with its environment.

My focus here will be on the changes taking place in the university both as a centre of learning and as a social institution. We understand what these changes portend for the future only if we take a longer-term view of them than is usually done in such discussions. I will not discuss about any university in particular but about universities in general, and will not confine to universities in India but also refer to universities in other parts of the world, which have influenced our own universities in the past and will probably continue to influence them even more in the future.

When I entered the service of the University of Delhi in 1959 there were far fewer universities in the country than there are now. They were smaller in size and there was less variety among them. There was, of course, the distinction between the central and the state universities,

---

---

---

but that did not seem to be such an important difference then. So far as I can recall, the category of 'deemed university' or 'deemed to be university' did not exist at that time. When I came from the University of Calcutta, where I had been a student to become a lecturer in the University of Delhi, I was often reminded of what I had heard about Calcutta University as it was twenty or thirty years earlier. I had a certain idea or image of the university as a centre of science and scholarship. Not all the three hundred or so university institutions listed today by the Association of Indian Universities correspond very closely to that conception of the university, and I believe that the reality will diverge more and more from it as we move further into the twenty-first century.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the universities were not only few in number, they were also small in size. Where the university comprised only a few thousand persons, it could and in some cases did function as a community of scientists and scholars among whom there was close and fruitful interaction across the disciplines from physics to philosophy, and between senior and junior members such as professors, lecturers, research scholars, and graduate and undergraduate students. Such close and fruitful interaction did not take place always or everywhere, but it could at least be visualized as a realizable objective.

---

---

The universities grew in size throughout the twentieth century but this growth was much more dramatic in some countries than in others. The larger universities in India, such as the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi number their students in hundreds of thousands. It is very difficult for the different parts of such a large organization to remain connected with each other effectively and meaningfully, and to act with a sense of common purpose. When an institution undergoes a large change of scale, its mode of functioning changes and its initial objective becomes displaced.

The change in scale of our universities has come about as a result of pressures of various kinds. The two that I will consider in some detail are the pressure from the growth and expansion of specialized knowledge, and the pressure on the universities to become socially more inclusive. The number of disciplines that a university has to accommodate today is far larger than it was a hundred years ago; and the number of students and, correspondingly of academic and non-academic staff, has also increased enormously. These are the two issues with which I will deal sequentially, but before that I would like to set down the ideals of the modern university as they came to be established in the course of the nineteenth century.

\* \* \*

---

---

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence and growth of the modern university, beginning with the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810. There were universities before that time – at Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cairo and elsewhere – but they were very different from the modern universities that came to be established gradually in the nineteenth century and to flourish in the twentieth. We have only to look back from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the nineteenth to appreciate the significance of the changes that came about in the course of a hundred years. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Harvard, Yale and Princeton were universities only in name; they were basically colleges for undergraduate education, and very different from the great centres of science and scholarship that they became in the course of the twentieth century. Oxford and Cambridge had gone into a long period of hibernation from which they gradually shook themselves up in the course of the nineteenth century. The universities had sunk to such low levels in France that Napoleon turned his attention away from them to the newly established *grandes écoles* or great schools for producing a new breed of administrators, engineers and teachers to serve the nation.

As it happened, a new beginning in the life of the university was just then being made in Germany. Germany was by no means the most advanced country in

---

---

Europe economically or culturally, but it had better universities at Jena, Heidelberg, Göttingen and elsewhere than its more advanced western neighbours. The architect of the new university was the philologist and philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, then minister for education in Prussia. The university he helped to establish in Berlin in 1810 became a model for universities in many parts of the world. It was named at first after the Prussian ruler, but later renamed after its real founder as the Humboldt University of Berlin. Its creation helped to revive the universities and provided a new institutional framework for the organization of science and scholarship in many countries.

Not many believed at that time that the universities were worth reviving. 'In France, neither Tocqueville nor Constant thought seriously about the universities, and they had no great expectations that they would contribute much to the effective operation of free institutions. In Scotland, Adam Smith had a rather low opinion of universities and university teachers, although he was a university teacher for a good part of his life. He certainly did not regard universities as the intellectual engines of liberal society. John Stuart Mill did not expect any great help for liberalism or democracy from universities' (Shils 1997: 252).

Humboldt's ideas for the regeneration of the university met with opposition in his own country. 'He was also



---

---

writing against a strong current of opinion in Germany which favoured the abolition of universities and their replacement for teaching and training purposes by specialized professional schools – as Napoleon had done in France – and by concentrating research in academies or learned societies’ (Ibid.: 235). Those who value the modern university as a centre of advanced study and research should be thankful that Humboldt held his ground and had his way.

The new type of university, first set up in Berlin, is referred to by some as the Humboldtian university. New universities were set up and existing ones reorganized under its influence. The first university of the new type to be set up in the United States was the Johns Hopkins University established in 1876. Thereafter Stanford University was set up in 1885 and the University of Chicago in 1891. Harvard, Yale, Princeton and other institutions were reorganized under its influence. Its influence reached India later, and that too in a vague and attenuated form.

\* \* \*

---

---

The new type of university retained the aspirations of the old one to accommodate all the principal branches of study within its scope. When the first universities were set up in India in the nineteenth century, that was the implicit understanding although they themselves did not undertake much research or even teaching in their early phase of existence. New branches of science and scholarship began to emerge throughout the nineteenth century, and this tendency became accentuated in the twentieth. In the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly difficult for a university to cover every branch of knowledge and yet retain its coherence and unity as an institution unless the conditions are exceptionally favourable. As a consequence, either the universities are bursting at the seams, as at Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi, or new universities with a more limited scope and a sharper focus are coming up, as for example, agricultural universities, universities of juridical sciences, and of course, the National University of Educational Planning and Administration.

The new type of university, which followed the model of Humboldt, adopted three fundamental principles. These may be described as (i) the unity of teaching and research, (ii) the freedom to teach and to learn, and (iii) the principle of self-governance. These three principles served to inspire modern universities in many parts of the world, including India. They were the ideals of the

---

---

university in the 19th and 20th centuries, although the ideals were not fully realized in any university, including the University of Berlin.

Wilhelm von Humboldt set great store by the unity of teaching and research. He was himself an outstanding scholar of the humanities, and his younger brother, Alexander von Humboldt an outstanding naturalist. They both participated directly and actively in exploring new fields of science and scholarship.

Until Humboldt's time, research was done only occasionally and sporadically in the universities and colleges. They were engaged principally in the transmission and, at best, the criticism of existing knowledge, rather than the creation of new knowledge. The advance of knowledge had in the past been slow and uneven. Things began to change from the end of the 18th century when knowledge began to advance on many fronts. Humboldt, unlike Napoleon, felt that the university should be in the forefront of this advance. There was nothing inevitable about his move, but it had momentous consequences for the development of science and scholarship.

In a world in which knowledge accumulates slowly and intellectual horizons are constrained by geographical boundaries, the college or university teacher may not be expected to do much more than to master the existing

---

---

body of knowledge in his field and to transmit a part of it to his students. This is still what we expect from the conscientious teacher in a good secondary school, and probably not much more was expected from teachers in most colleges and universities before the nineteenth century.

In the course of the twentieth century, some of the leading universities such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford and Chicago came to be known as 'research universities'. Their growth was accompanied by the growth of the 'mass universities'. This distinction is acknowledged in the United States and possibly also in China, but not in India. Edward Shils (1997: 14) has described the mass university 'as a university with more than twenty thousand students' and has observed 'The mass university has brought into the university many young persons whose foremost and perhaps exclusive aim is to obtain a degree and to enter a remunerative occupation' (Ibid.: 45). Although he was speaking of universities in the United States, his remarks apply with particular force to the situation in India. Shils, it may be pointed out, was a member of the Indian Education Commission of 1964-66, known widely as the Kothari Commission.

Having become established by the end of the nineteenth century, the research universities acquired their own momentum in the United States, and moved in directions

---

---

that could hardly have been foreseen by Humboldt in 1810. As the results of research came to be widely disseminated, distinction in research began to attract public attention as against success in teaching. Particularly after World War II, the pressure to be productive in research began to be increasingly felt in the better universities.

The research universities began to compete with each other in terms of the quality and quantity of the output of their professors. Rating agencies undertook to rank the different universities according to their general standing and according to their standing in particular disciplines. Presidents and deans undertook to attract stars to their universities with offers of generous terms and conditions. The talent search was not confined to universities in the United States but was extended to countries throughout the world, including India. This kind of open and undisguised competition to attract scientists and scholars of national and even international renown undermined the unity of teaching and research because today a star is a star by virtue of his research and not his teaching.

The freedom to teach and to learn is recognized as an essential feature in the operation of the modern university. Where the university is expected to explore and examine new fields of knowledge instead of merely transmitting the conventional wisdom, the freedom to

---

---

teach and to learn becomes indispensable. The creation of new knowledge cannot be fruitfully undertaken without the continuous criticism of existing knowledge. The active encouragement of critical enquiry has come to be viewed as integral to the institutions of science and scholarship.

In many countries the exercise of academic freedom is now taken for granted in the universities. This was not always the case in the past, and it is not the case in all countries even today. The exercise of academic freedom was a relatively new phenomenon in the early part of the nineteenth century. Most of the older universities such as those at Paris, Oxford and Cambridge were in some sense handmaidens of the church, which often maintained close scrutiny over what was said or written in them. This was true of medieval centres of learning in most parts of the world. The universities took time to free themselves from religious control whereas such freedom could be more easily exercised in the learned societies and associations that began to emerge outside the universities in the wake of the European Enlightenment.

The principle of academic freedom or the freedom of enquiry in science and scholarship gathered strength in the universities throughout the nineteenth century. Once the dam of religious opposition to free enquiry was breached, the universities transformed themselves as

---

---

both centres of learning and social institutions. By the middle of the twentieth century, the universities in the west had effectively become secular institutions. We have in that respect had the advantage that our first universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were secular institutions and free from regulation by religious authorities from their very inception. Religious education was excluded from the university's curriculum: at Calcutta, 'the Senate reiterated the principle that no question should be asked in the examination that required an expression of religious belief on the part of the candidate' (Chattopadhyay 2007: 21).

Academic freedom may be compromised even in a secular environment, for the threat to it can come not only from the church but also from the state. In the last century, the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn were severely restricted by the Soviet state. Under Stalin the universities were not handmaidens of the church, they became handmaidens of the party. Whether in teaching or in research, the universities had to stay within the limits prescribed by the state and its watchdogs in a whole range of disciplines from plant genetics to the philosophy of language.

In democratic countries such as Britain, France and India, the state does not interfere openly or directly with teaching and research in the universities. But to the

---

---

extent that it controls the purse strings on which the flow of funds depends, it does influence priorities in teaching and research indirectly and in the long run.

Restraints on the freedom to teach in the classroom or to publish in accordance with one's considered judgement may be created by popular pressure or the anticipation of a public outcry. One cannot today express oneself freely and frankly about the lives and deeds of such iconic figures as Chhatrapati Shivaji, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose or Dr B R Ambedkar. A lecture or publication which seeks to do so may cause an outcry and even lead to a violent protest. Similar consequences may follow if offence is caused, albeit inadvertently, to the sentiments of a religious minority or a backward community. This kind of situation is most likely to prevail in the mass universities which have become ascendant since the middle of the 20th century.

By and large, the universities promoted a spirit of critical enquiry about man and the natural and social world that he inhabited in the course of the nineteenth century, and carried that spirit forward into the twentieth century and beyond. They also provided increasing room for political debate and discussion. With the great expansion of universities after World War II, and, in particular, with the emergence of the mass universities, they became leading centres of political dissent. Increasingly, they came to enjoy a kind of freedom that



---

---

Opposition parties did not always have. While critical enquiry in science and scholarship and political dissent may be related to each other, they are not one and the same thing. Pervasive political dissent, unrelated or remotely related to the ends of science and scholarship, has increasingly led to severe dislocation in the regularity and routine of academic work. Where the institutions of science and scholarship are weak, this kind of dislocation becomes endemic.

The freedom to express dissenting views has led students in the larger metropolitan universities, sometimes with the encouragement of their teachers, to espouse radical political causes. Strikes, rallies and demonstrations are regularly organized, and an antinomian and emancipationist atmosphere is created. It may well be the case that only a small and determined minority of persons, among both students and teachers, seriously espouse these causes, but they are allowed to prevail because of the indifference and apathy of the majority who simply stay away. This is a far cry from the nineteenth century ideal of the university as a community of scholars and scientists who would be free to study and teach and publish the fruits of their research without fear or favour.

The university was designed to be a community of scholars and scientists responsible for the regulation of their own affairs. The principle of self-governance goes

---

---

back to the tradition of the medieval corporation in Europe whose right to regulate its own affairs was generally confirmed by the grant of charters. In medieval Europe the universities were among the early examples of corporations in the legal sense of the term, and it is commonly believed that Harvard University was the first corporation in that sense in the United States. Self-governance was accompanied in the case of the universities by a degree of seclusion from the outside world.

In India, the first modern universities were established, not so much by communities of scholars and scientists as by the government of the day. It is no accident that the first three universities were set up in the three presidency capitals of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras by the colonial government just before the country came formally under the British crown. Just as Oxford and Cambridge still carry the vestiges of their monastic past, our universities bear many of the marks of their origin in the colonial rule.

The colonial civil servants, who took responsibility for the establishment of our universities, included many who had had experience of the best universities in England. Sir Henry Maine, who was one of the early vice-chancellors of the University of Calcutta, had been a professor at Cambridge. No doubt the colonial rulers of India meant well by the universities they were setting up,

---

---

but it is not clear to what extent they believed that self-government was a realizable objective in India; rightly or wrongly, they never tired of pointing out the absence of such a tradition in the country that they had brought under their rule.

Such self-governance as the universities were allowed was exercised under the watchful eyes of the government. The early vice-chancellors of the Indian universities were British although they were replaced by Indian vice-chancellors before very long. The heads of Indian universities acquired the habit of accommodation to the existing powers in the early decades of their existence, an accommodation that became strengthened rather than weakened after the transfer of power. It was only the exceptional vice-chancellor, such as Sir Ashutosh Mukherji in the University of Calcutta before Independence, or Dr M S Gore at the University of Bombay after it, who stood his ground against the government.

In recent decades, the great expansion in the size of the university and in its scale of operation has made academic self-government increasingly difficult. The administrative component of many universities has become as important as their academic component, and in some respects more important. In the larger universities the administrative staff number in their thousands. They tend to spend more time in the

---

---

university and to know more about its daily operation than the professors. The academic and the administrative staff have both become unionized, and when the unions act in concert, they might count for more than the constituted authorities of the universities such as the academic council, the board of research studies and the faculty.

The bureaucratization of the universities is not an altogether new phenomenon. Writing nearly a hundred years ago, Max Weber (1948: 131) had noted its beginnings in the German universities at that time the objects of admiration among academics in many parts of the world. Closer to our times, Edward Shils (1997: 34) noted, 'As a result the administrative staffs proliferate and academics find themselves surrounded on all sides by administrators, who want forms filled out, who wish to have their permission sought to do things for which older academics do not recall having had to seek permission. Rules, forms and "channels" become more prominent; informal understandings and conventions become less prominent in the administration of universities'. Shils was writing with the American university mainly in mind; the problem is of course much more acute in India.

The authorities of the universities have now not only larger numbers of students and teachers to take care of, they have to secure and manage increasingly larger

---

---

budgets. They have to supplement the traditional administrative skills with those of effective and successful fund management. It is said that the wealthier private universities in the United States are becoming organized like business firms. Enthusiasts for private universities in India are perhaps not all aware of the problems that are now being faced by some of the most renowned universities in the United States such as Chicago, Princeton and Stanford (Shapiro 1992).

\* \* \*

---

---

The traditional idea of the university was that it would provide a home, within the confines of a single institution, for the cultivation of all significant branches of knowledge. It was this idea that Humboldt sought to carry forward at the most advanced levels of teaching and research when he established the University of Berlin in 1810. The institutions that Napoleon was promoting in France at about the same time were different in both principle and practice from the university in its medieval or its reconstituted form. The *grandes écoles* emerged as great institutions, but they did not seek to accommodate every significant branch of knowledge in any one single institution.

In an important work on the American university, Talcott Parsons and Gerald Platt gave expression to a view of the university that was still close to the model of Humboldt that had been carried over from Berlin to Harvard in the course of the nineteenth century. They wrote, 'Concern with knowledge and its advancement is analytically independent of its practical uses' (Parsons and Platt 1973: 33), emphasizing that the main concern of the university was with the former and not the latter. Napoleon, on the other hand, had the practical uses of knowledge very much in mind when he decided to put his weight behind the *grandes écoles*.

---

---

Parsons and Platt believed that the university as an institution for the advancement of knowledge had a distinctive intellectual core. That core, according to them, consisted of the arts and sciences, meaning academic disciplines such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, languages, history and sociology. They knew of course that subjects such as law, medicine and engineering had also been accommodated by the American university. These they believed to belong to its periphery rather than its core. The *école polytechnique*, perhaps the most renowned among the *grandes écoles*, was, on the other hand set up with the specific objective of training engineers for service in the civil and military branches of the government. With the advantage of hindsight, we may view it as a great precursor of our IITs.

If the university is to function as an intellectual community, or a community of scientists and scholars, is it possible for it in the twenty-first century to accommodate all branches of learning, theoretical and practical, and to deal with them even-handedly and meaningfully? The universities of the twenty-first century are very different places from what the University of Berlin was in the 1820s or even what Harvard University was in the 1920s when Parsons began his career there.

---

---

Even though Harvard maintains its pre-eminent position as a research university, it has changed a very great deal. With close to 20,000 students, it is no longer either very small or very cohesive. Its various constituent units, such as the faculty of arts and sciences, the faculty of medicine, the law school, the business school and the school of public health largely operate separately although they all bear the Harvard label. Some of them have huge budgets whose management and control are exercised to a large extent independently of each other. Whatever may have been the past significance of the faculty of arts and sciences, it no longer overshadows all the other components of the university.

At the symposium on Universities of the Twenty-first Century held at Chicago in 1991, dean Rosovsky of Harvard lamented the decline of academic citizenship in his time. 'When it concerns our more important obligations – academic citizenship – neither rule nor custom is any longer compelling' (Rosovsky 1992: 187). In the mass universities that are growing rapidly today, not only are the obligations of academic citizenship treated lightly, but to many incoming members the very idea of it might appear strange and unfamiliar.

The idea of the university as a community of scientists and scholars of whom many, if not most, feel bound by the obligations of academic citizenship has become remote from the reality, certainly in India, but not in



---

---

India alone. Yet the idea of the university as a community continues to have a hold on the minds of many academics, if only as a form of nostalgia. This nostalgia is sustained in part by an oral tradition regarding the exciting and unconstrained intellectual interchanges among scholars and scientists in the senior common rooms of Oxford and Cambridge which a few of our own more privileged academics had witnessed or experienced in the past. It is doubtful that that kind of intellectual life can be recreated in the twenty-first century even in Oxford and Cambridge, leave alone the universities in India.

The pressure on the universities to accommodate new branches of study has increased enormously in the last few decades. The expansion of knowledge has been accompanied by differentiation between and within academic disciplines. The universities themselves played no small part in the expansion and the differentiation. The universities have today found accommodation for many new subjects that had hardly any existence in Humboldt's time or even a hundred years later. The proliferation of disciplines now threatens the viability of the university as a single institution for advanced study and research in all subjects.

'The growth of knowledge', it has been said, 'is a disorderly movement' (Shils 1975: 125; see also Parsons

---

---

and Platt 1973: vi-vii). New ideas come up and fade away; only a few of them bear fruit. The ones that fructify do not remain active for long. It is in the long-term interest of society to encourage new ideas, new methods of enquiry and new areas of investigation to grow even when they appear unpromising to begin with. But is it necessary or desirable to turn every new field of study into an academic discipline in order to find a place for it in the university? Today, at least in India, but not only in India, universities seem to be in competition with each other to attract and accommodate every new field of study. It is now becoming a common practice in our universities to attract and accommodate what are called 'self-financing courses' in order to augment their revenues. Promoters of these self-financing courses have often shown great ingenuity in devising new subjects for inclusion in the university curriculum.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century the universities were not very eager to accommodate new or emerging branches of study. Disciplines such as anthropology, demography, psychology, sociology and statistics first grew outside the universities before they found places within them. It is not that new disciplines were kept out of the universities for ever, but the universities took their time to allow them in. In the nineteenth century the learned societies and associations took a more active part in the growth of new fields of enquiry.

---

---

All through the nineteenth century the balance among disciplines underwent change in the universities. This change was in part the outcome of the growth of secular science and scholarship. The older European universities, at Paris, Oxford and Cambridge gave pride of place to theology, philosophy, and classical languages and literature. Those subjects are still taught, but even in the older universities they have now lost their pride of place. Theology is not taught in many of the newer universities which might instead provide for teaching and research in comparative religion, or the history or sociology of religion.

In the English-speaking universities the social sciences grew out of moral philosophy, and the natural sciences out of natural philosophy. There was some continuity but there was also a great deal of change. Issues relating to society, economy and polity were no doubt discussed and debated in the older universities, but they became subjects of systematic enquiry only in the nineteenth century. Systematic empirical investigations into social life were first undertaken outside the universities, by such persons as Frédéric Le Play in France and Charles Booth in England. It was only in the twentieth century that such studies became incorporated into programmes of teaching and research in the universities. Survey research has now become an integral part of the social sciences. Today, it is undertaken both within and outside the universities, and it is not easy to argue that

---

---

the universities enjoy any unique advantage in conducting such studies.

The transformation of 'natural philosophy' into the natural sciences began a little earlier, but here again many of the initial steps, particularly in England and France, were taken outside the universities. In the eighteenth century, both Henry Cavendish in England and Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier in France conducted their pioneering studies outside the universities. This was largely true even of Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the universities had reclaimed the major branches of science and scholarship. That century, and particularly its first half, witnessed the highest ascendancy of the universities as centres of science and scholarship. Between the two World Wars for someone with a vocation for science and scholarship almost anywhere in the world, a university would be the place of first choice. It provided a modest but secure livelihood, a relatively tranquil atmosphere for study and reflection, well-endowed libraries and laboratories, the companionship of colleagues and students, and the occasional excitement of working at or even beyond the frontiers of existing knowledge. There were not many such places outside the universities then.

---

---

As I have indicated, a new balance of disciplines began to take shape in the universities from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. It became gradually established in Europe and America, and then extended its influence over the new universities that were coming into being all over the world. It appeared in many variations, but by the middle of the twentieth century, the new balance, with the arts and sciences at the core and the professional subjects at the periphery, had acquired a certain stability. There is no reason to expect that this balance will remain unchanged for the rest of time. University institutions have grown and diversified to such an extent throughout the world since the middle of the twentieth century that it may be unrealistic to expect that any single model – whether the ‘Oxbridge’ or the ‘Harvard’ model – will be the predominant model everywhere.

New universities are coming up at a rapid rate in countries with very diverse intellectual traditions and socio-political orientations. The Chinese have built a very large number of new universities in the last two or three decades with objectives that are different from those with which universities were established in the nineteenth century or even the first half of the twentieth, and it is unlikely that their intellectual foundations will be the same as those of the earlier universities.

---

---

The emphasis in many countries that are now creating new universities is on engineering and management, conceived in a broad way rather than on the arts and sciences in the traditional sense. China, which had only a few universities until 1976, is now producing more PhDs in engineering than the United States (Li, Nalley, Zhang and Zhao 2008). Perhaps the new type of university that will acquire ascendancy there will have science, technology and management at its core and the humanities and social sciences at the periphery. Such a model will have a natural appeal for those who believe that the main purpose of tertiary education is to produce the trained manpower needed for rapid economic growth.

\* \* \*

---

---

Today, the creation and expansion of universities is driven not only by pressures to accommodate new subjects, or new branches or variants of existing subjects. It is driven also by the pressure on the universities to become socially more inclusive by accommodating students as well as teachers from all classes and communities, and women as well as men.

When the universities were given a new lease of life, starting with the creation of the University of Berlin, it was not the intention of the reformers and innovators to make university education available to all members of society. Even school education was far from being within everyone's reach. The nineteenth century university was an 'aristocratic' rather than a 'popular' institution, if not always in principle, at least generally in practice. Here Napoleon was clearly in advance of Humboldt. It was the *grandes écoles* that instituted the practice of recruiting students through open national competition or the *concours général*. However, those institutions were, and have remained, elitist in their own way. They replaced an aristocracy of birth by a meritocracy of talent; and of course they remained closed to women throughout the nineteenth century.

All through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, restrictions on entry into universities on social grounds, i.e. on grounds of religion, race, caste or gender

---

---

came to be eased. By the middle of the twentieth century such restrictions had lost much of their force in most countries. This of course does not mean that all castes and communities, or that even both women and men are to be found in all universities in proportion to their strength in the population. Even though women have not achieved complete parity with men, they have in most countries fared better than disadvantaged castes and communities. The reasons for this difference are fascinating, but I am unable to enter into a discussion of those reasons on the present occasion.

In the nineteenth century, university education was for only a few and not the majority or even a numerically significant minority of the population. So long as the universities were few in number and small in size, only a few members of society could realistically form expectations of entering a university even where no formal restrictions on their entry existed. Education in a university was viewed as a privilege rather than a right. Today, it is increasingly regarded as a right, at least by many of those who meet the minimum requirements of eligibility for admission, and the requirements themselves tend to be relaxed under political pressure.

Social and economic changes in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century led to changes in the expectations of people. More and more of them became aware of the entitlements of citizenship. As elementary



---

---

education became universal and secondary education more extensive and widespread, increasing numbers of persons turned their thoughts to tertiary education. For members of the growing middle class, a college or university degree appeared indispensable both for its practical utility and its symbolic value. The demand for a university education, or at least a university degree, grew with the growth of the middle class.

The conclusion of World War II and the termination of colonial rule dramatically altered the prospects for tertiary education throughout the world. The proximate causes for the expansion of tertiary education differed from one country to another, but the outcome was similar everywhere. The universities opened their doors, if not to everyone, then to increasing numbers of persons. Just as the middle of the nineteenth century ushered in the secularization of the universities, so the middle of the twentieth century saw their democratization.

In the United States, the end of World War II created unprecedented opportunities for returning soldiers to enter a university and receive a university degree. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the G I Bill of Rights was designed to serve more than one objective. It was designed as a token of gratitude to those who had risked death and endured hardship in the service of the nation. It was designed

---

---

also to meet the need for qualified manpower, particularly graduates in the sciences in the post-war economy. Until its enactment, university funding in the United States had come mainly from private sources or from the states. After it, the federal government became increasingly involved in university funding, and expansion of the tertiary sector in education became more consciously linked with manpower planning.

The colonial government, which set up the first universities in modern India, did so with limited aims and objectives. It did not expect the universities to bring about either a revolution in learning or a social revolution. The funding it provided was on a modest scale, and it had to be supplemented by private philanthropy. The universities did contribute to the making of a new middle class with new attitudes and aspirations, but their influence did not spread very far or go very deep.

This began to change with the coming of Independence. The makers of modern India had benefited from university education, whether in India or abroad, and wanted its benefits to be made widely available. Almost immediately after being set up, the first government of Independent India constituted a University Education Commission under Dr S Radhakrishnan, who had served as a professor at both Calcutta and Oxford. Its attitude towards the universities was different from that of the

---

---

colonial government. It expected more from them and it was prepared to fund them more generously. Soon bonds became established between a well-disposed and munificent government and those in the universities who were hungry for their expansion. They acquired the habit of turning to the government for meeting their every need. The government has encouraged the hunger for expansion that has grown in the universities, but it has satisfied that hunger only to some extent and on its own terms. Governments rarely view the pursuit of science and scholarship as an end in itself, but mainly as a means to other ends.

In Independent India the programme for building universities became consciously aligned with the needs of development and democracy. The objectives of the university had changed between Humboldt's time and the middle of the twentieth century; or, rather, the university had acquired new objectives without fully renouncing the old ones. This was inevitable in view of the fact that different universities in different parts of the world had to adapt themselves to different kinds of social and political environment.

In the newly-independent countries, determined to catch up economically and educationally with the advanced countries, the idea of the university as an 'ivory tower', detached from the practical concerns of the outside world, did not have much appeal. Prominent scientists

---

---

and scholars came forward to show what the universities could do to eliminate poverty, reduce inequality and establish a scientific temper. Far from wanting to insulate the universities from the outside world, they wanted them to reach forward to it and to make their contribution to economic development and social change.

Today in India, the universities are expected to contribute directly to the pursuit and promotion of equality. This is perhaps natural in a country which at the time of Independence had inherited a remarkably hierarchical social system. The relationship between a country's system of higher education and its system of inequality is a complex one which is often misunderstood and misrepresented. The universities have contributed something to individual mobility and can contribute more. But they have also contributed to the reproduction of inequality, and this often appears to offset their contribution to individual mobility.

More than sixty years after Independence, India is still not an inclusive society in any meaningful sense. Hundreds of millions of persons not only have no access to a university, they do not even know what it means to have a university education. The pressures on the universities to become socially more inclusive and to contribute, directly and indirectly, to the making of an inclusive society have grown stronger. There are no

---

---

shortcuts to that end, but the temptation to turn to universities for providing such shortcuts have increased steadily. Where their adoption threatens the academic integrity of the university, vice-chancellors, deans and professors look the other way.

In a society where deep and pervasive inequalities continue to exist, the universities find it far more difficult to admit and appoint persons from all occupational strata – the offspring of agricultural labourers and stone breakers as well as of judges and businessmen – than to provide representation to all castes and communities in proportion to their strength in the population. Managing quotas based on caste and community has become a major preoccupation of the universities today. In 2006-7, the central universities were required to increase the numbers of their students and teachers suddenly and dramatically in order to make up for shortfalls in the quotas set for them.

In order to meet their quotas, the universities have not only had to increase the numbers of students and teachers, they have also had to relax their standards for admissions and appointments. The relaxation of academic standards in response to social and political pressures has become a standard practice in the universities since Independence and increasingly so in the last couple of decades. It is an open secret which the authorities of the universities do not like to be aired in

---

---

public. To even hint at the possibility that there might be some contradiction between the demands of social inclusion and the advancement of learning would be to invite the charge of 'elitism' which in India no self-regarding academic would like to bring upon himself.

As the universities have grown in size, the larger ones among them have become more and more disorganized and difficult to manage; and the smaller ones follow the examples set by the larger. For those at the helm of affairs, the problems of administration and management take precedence over academic problems. The regularity and routine of academic life is frequently interrupted; admissions cannot be completed on time; and vacant posts remain unfilled for months and even years. The authorities of the university are frequently locked in combat with unions of students, teachers and non-academic staff.

The idea of a research university never really acquired roots in the Indian soil. Today, very few persons in any Indian university are seriously engaged in the creation of new knowledge. Even the transmission of existing knowledge is seriously hampered by the poor quality of libraries and laboratories, and the indifference and apathy of all around. Absenteeism among teachers as well as students has become an acknowledged and established feature of many universities in the country. The unions are often so powerful that the authorities of

---

---

the university have no choice but to condone absenteeism and other forms of dereliction.

At the same time, the number of universities as well as of university students and teachers is increasing. All the indications are that this increase will continue into the foreseeable future. Planners and policy makers are worried that we are not producing enough graduates or enough PhDs, and that other countries are ahead of us. The twenty-first century university in India will have to meet many different demands. The demands of science and scholarship or of advanced study and research are by no means the only ones with which they have to contend. They have to meet the demand to provide more young men and women with university degrees and diplomas. University graduates are still unevenly distributed among various castes and communities in Indian society. This disparity is considered unfair and unjust, and the universities are, therefore, expected to not only produce more graduates but also to ensure that those graduates are more evenly distributed in society.

The declining minority of university teachers, who are seriously committed to teaching and research, are dismayed by the preoccupation, not to say obsession, with examination and certification in our universities. But the preoccupation is not new. The first universities in modern India were set up in the presidency capitals of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras not so much to undertake

---

---

research, or even teaching, as to conduct examinations and confer degrees. Writing on the occasion of the sesquicentennial of the University of Calcutta, Basudeb Chatopadhyay (2007:22) observed, ‘Thus the University was set up in 1857 primarily with the task of holding examinations and conferring degrees on successful candidates’, and the same observation may have been made about the two other universities set up in that year. The teaching was done mainly in the colleges, and some research was undertaken by the learned societies and associations such as the Asiatic Society and the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science. The first, and so far only, Indian Nobel laureate in science, Sir C V Raman entered the services of the University of Calcutta after establishing his credentials as a scientist through his research in the Association for the Cultivation of Science (Venkataraman 1994: 29-42).

One of the first things that had to be determined for the new universities in their early years was their jurisdiction. The territorial jurisdictions of the first three universities were wide to begin with, but they became progressively reduced with the opening of new universities whose jurisdictions were carved out of those of the existing ones. These jurisdictions were essentially jurisdictions for conducting examinations and conferring degrees on students who were taught in various colleges in a widely dispersed geographical area.



---

---

Between their beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and roughly the period of World War I, the Indian universities were too small and their jurisdiction too scattered for them to conduct advanced study and research in a purposeful way. The beginnings of serious study and research were made in a few universities such as Calcutta, Allahabad and Bombay between the two World Wars. But the promise that many saw in those universities began to fade soon after Independence when one after another they became converted into mass universities. Before they could establish a proper programme that would embody the unity of teaching and research, they had to contend with a new kind of institution dedicated to research rather than teaching, such as the laboratories under the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the institutes and centres under the Indian Council of Social Science Research.

With the twenty-first century we have entered the era of the mass university. But the nostalgia for a different kind of university, in which teaching and research are combined at the most advanced level in all significant branches of knowledge, survives in the minds of many who have been exposed to the experience of universities in Europe and America or to legends about the University of Calcutta in the 1920s and '30s or the University of Delhi in the 1950s and '60s. We must see that this nostalgia does not become an impediment to the creation of more purposeful though perhaps less

---

---

ambitious institutions of teaching and research in the  
twenty-first century.

**André Béteille**

---

---

## References

Chattopadhyay, Basudeb. 2007. 'The University of Calcutta: an Overview', *University News*, 45(4) (Special Issue), pp. 15-49.

Li, Yao, John Nalley, Shunming Zhang and Xiliang Zhao. 2008. *The Higher Educational Transformation of China and Its Global Implication*. Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 13849.

Parsons, Talcott and Gerald M. Platt. 1973. *The American University*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Rosovsky, Henry. 1992. 'Comments', *Minerva*, XXXII (2), pp. 183-7.

Schapiro, Harold T. 1992. *The Functions and Resources of the American University of the Twenty-First Century*, *Minerva*, XXXII (2): 163-74.

Shils, Edward. 1975. *Center and Periphery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shils, Edward. 1997. *The Calling of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Venkataraman, G. 1994. *Journey In to Light*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

Weber, Max. 1948. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (edited by H H Gerth and C W Mills). New York: Oxford University Press.