

# *Why all universities should be teaching the Constitution*

Lectures on the Indian Constitution are limited to elite law schools, while knowledge of one's own Constitution ought to be part of every person's core learning



Police sits at the entrance of the Chaitya Bhumi ahead the 64th death anniversary commemorations of B.R. Ambedkar, chief architect of the Constitution of India, in Mumbai December 5, 2020. (Photo by Sujit Jaiswal / AFP) (AFP)

**By Deepanshu Mohan**  
26.01.2021

A few centuries ago, Wilhelm von Humboldt, a great liberal reformer and a humanist, defined the university as “nothing other than the spiritual life of those human beings who are moved by external leisure or internal pressures toward learning and research.”

Even if a university didn't exist, Humboldt felt that a human being would otherwise “privately reflect and collect, another might join with men of his own age, a third might find a circle of disciples. Such is the picture to which the state must remain faithful if it wishes to give an institutional form to such indefinite and rather accidental human operations.”

This classic Humboldtian assertion on what a 'university' may symbolize-actualize for people of any given generation, was later revisited in an essay by Noam Chomsky in 1969, a time of great uncertainty and crisis in America's own educational milieu, when student-led activism across campuses pushed most universities, and the intellectual elite to reflect on their role, reimagine their own existence in society, even in processes of institutional propriety. Not much changed since.

It seems today, once again, universities and colleges across the globe, including India, are positioned at a critical juncture, an impasse, a crisis, that goes well beyond the economic, technical, and administrative churning imposed by a pandemic. Far worse, what we face in India is a constitutional learning crisis, where the foundation of our own "constitutional values" and "constitutional morality" find little or no presence in institutional learning.

B.R. Ambedkar greatly emphasized the need for making people believe in values enshrined in the Preamble for the Constitution to remain a living, breathing document. There is tremendous value in making "constitutional morality" a yardstick for judging social, political developments, for a democracy like India to first survive, and then thrive. The role of universities and other educational institutions is vital in this regard.

Lectures and classes on the Indian Constitution and its history have increasingly become limited to a cohort of students, pursuing legal studies in elite law schools, whereas knowledge of one's own Constitution, the history of its formation and basic structure ought to be part of a person's core learning as one becomes a more integral part of a society's functioning.

Last year, around this time, it was heartwarming to see how young women and men across the nation led the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, holding the Preamble in their hands and reading "We the People..." out loud to the powers that be.

Universities, not just social science colleges, must do more to democratise the learning, meaning, and practice of constitutionalism. Still, it is pointless to discuss what function a university may serve in a "constitutional learning crisis" at a time when educational learning and qualifications are linked to the requirements of "certification", a product to be achieved for a social demonstration effect from a discriminating, elitist system.

Whether one is being trained as a corporate executive, a shoemaker, an engineer, an economist, or an architect, knowledge in "constitutionalism" must be part of all learning. This might not just help us understand the elements of constitutional propriety, for the legal (and moral) value it may provide, but the knowledge of which may also help us become more aware of our own social, cultural, political and economic state of being, where the basis of all our woes can be found rooted in.

*Deepanshu Mohan is Associate Professor of Economics and Director, Centre for New Economics Studies at Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities.*