

Almost 75 years after Constitution was adopted, what does education mean for nation-building?

indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/constitution-india-education-9635710

October 24, 2024



India commemorates the 75th anniversary of the adoption of its Constitution this year. (Illustration by C R Sasikumar)

The Constitution of India was adopted on November 26, 1949. While the vision and imagination of the framers of the Constitution was far-sighted, the reality of India at that moment was very different. At Independence, India's population was around 370 million, and women, on average, had six children. The age structure was very young, and over 80 per cent of the population was illiterate.

India had barely 20 universities and approximately 500 affiliated colleges in 1947. Student enrolment was around 2.5 lakh, and faculty members across all universities and colleges were about 20,000. Higher education was an absolute privilege, available only to the elite. Today, India has over 40 million students enrolled in higher education institutions and more than 1.5 million faculty members.

India has the largest population in the world. Forty-seven per cent of Indians are below the age of 25. Two-thirds have been born after liberalisation. In this stage of India's demographic transition, universities are influential institutions that must contribute to the transformation of society. A single-minded focus on subjects and courses comprising science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) and medicine cannot produce the desired transformation in the value system of our society.

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Education must not be limited to linking all learning only to job opportunities and instrumentally applying knowledge for monetary gains without appreciating its intrinsic value in shaping the kind of citizens that our republic requires. Schools and universities must provide substantial knowledge about the Constitution in all Indian languages. Achieving this goal must be a top policy priority.

India commemorates the 75th anniversary of the adoption of its Constitution this year. Our higher education ecosystem, comprising more than 1,100 universities and nearly 50,000 colleges, must prioritise the study of the Constitution. The Viksit Bharat Vision for 2047 should focus on educating young India to appreciate the values inherent in the Constitution and why the document is the lodestar for development and social transformation.



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I can adduce five compelling reasons why our universities should educate their students about the Constitution’s history, philosophy, and evolution and its importance in recognising and enforcing people’s fundamental rights and freedoms.

One, the Constitution as a site for creating collective consciousness. India is not a classic federation. Some continuing struggles and synergies inform the evolution of the idea of deliberative democracy in the country. Social and economic diversity has contributed to differing economic and human development levels across the states. As we commemorate the 75th anniversary, we must build a more vital collective consciousness of our Constitution that binds us as people.

This consciousness will have a direct and substantive bearing on promoting progressive nation-building ideas while shielding us from the consequences of sectarian perspectives. The framers of our Constitution were conscious of the imperative of creating a collective consciousness of the people of India. They did that by providing flexibility and freedom to pursue a pluralistic idea of nation-building.

Two, the Constitution as a framework for identity creation. The Constitution has helped us to create, nurture and expand an Indian identity. Many of its provisions focus on protecting rights and freedoms and illustrating their inherent purpose for establishing a nation. The pluralistic identity of the people of India is reflected in the values that permeate the Constitution, especially its Preamble.

In an influential article titled *The rise of state-nations*, Alfred Stepan, Juan J Linz, and Yogendra Yadav observed, "...‘State-nation’ policies involve creating a sense of belonging (or ‘we-feeling’) with respect to the statewide political community, while simultaneously creating institutional safeguards for respecting and protecting politically salient socio cultural diversities. The ‘we-feeling’ may take the form of defining a tradition, history, and shared culture in an inclusive manner, with all citizens encouraged to feel a sense of attachment to common symbols of the state and some form of ‘constitutional patriotism’."

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An Indian identity that promotes values of "constitutional patriotism" should define our aspiration to develop ideas for nation-building. Universities must shape that Indian identity through education and the process of learning.

Three, the Constitution as a reason for celebrating diversity. The Constitution, particularly its provisions on equality and non-discrimination, recognises the value of diversity. Universities are the appropriate institutions for promoting diversity. However, the diversity promoted in universities must be about lived and shared experiences. It is about understanding and appreciating that India is a land of diverse interests and multiple persuasions. The opportunity to study the Constitution and the lived experience of meeting and interacting with diverse people can help build an informed and enlightened citizenry.

Four, the Constitution as an instrument of social and political empowerment. By abolishing untouchability in Article 17, the Constitution shook the foundations of the practice of historically evolved caste-based discrimination. But it did not stop there. It also made it an offence to cause any disability arising because of "untouchability". The vision of the makers of the Constitution was far-sighted enough to recognise that the evil of untouchability cannot be quelled by merely proscribing it. The Constitution sends a powerful message to our nation that its foundations are the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Universities are places where values are formed, shaped and changed. There is no better place where the study of constitutional values can have a powerful impact.

Five, the Constitution as the basis for social justice. The theme of social justice runs throughout the Constitution. As India celebrates the 75th anniversary of adopting the Constitution, the aspiration to advance the cause of social justice has never been more critical. Universities are institutions where through transformative education, the societal structure can be challenged and a new generation can become participants in an effort to achieve social justice.

The constitutional project of promoting social justice can be realised only when higher education institutions institutionalise these ideas among the youth. India's young people must embrace the vision of building an egalitarian society.

The 75th anniversary of the Constitution should help us reimagine our universities to focus on education and research relating to its ideals and aspirations. It should educate and empower the youth to understand and appreciate the historical struggles that resulted in our freedom and the vision of the framers of the Constitution leading to the building of the Republic of India.

The writer is founding Vice Chancellor of OP Jindal Global University and Dean of Jindal Global Law School. JGU is establishing India's First Constitution Museum at its University Campus in Sonipat, Haryana. Views are personal.

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First uploaded on: 24-10-2024 at 07:22 IST