

The function of a university in times of a learning crisis



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Constitutional values should be vital to all education if the Humboldtian ideal is to be achieved

A few centuries ago, Wilhelm von Humboldt, a liberal reformer and 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 would not exist, Humboldt felt that a free (wo)man would otherwise “privately reflect and collect, another might join with (wo)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 the (wo)men of any given generation was later (re)visited in an essay by Noam Chomsky in 1969, a time of ferment in America’s educational milieu, when student-led activism pushed its varsities and intellectual elite to reflect on their role and re-imagine their own existence in society. But not much changed.

Today, once again, universities-colleges across the globe (including India) seem to be at a critical juncture, even in a crisis that goes beyond the economic, technical and administrative churn imposed by the covid pandemic. Far worse, what we face in India is a constitutional learning crisis, where the foundation of our own ‘constitutional values’ find little or no presence in the means (and ways) of institutional learning.

B.R. Ambedkar emphasized the need for making people believe in values enshrined in the Constitution’s Preamble, for it to remain a living-breathing document. Yet, contrarily, as Prof. Upendra Baxi argued, “[The] issue of the rights of sweepers and scavengers has never entered the mainstream legal (and civic) consciousness in the country.”

There is great value in making ‘constitutional morality’ a yardstick to judge social and political developments in India, and the role in this of our educational institutions is vital. Lectures and classes on the Constitution, or on its morality and history, have been reduced to a cohort of students pursuing legal studies in elite law schools, whereas such knowledge ought to be part of a person’s core learning so as to function in society.

Last year, around this time, it was heartwarming to see young Indians across the nation reading aloud the Preamble (“We the People..”) as part of their protests against India’s new citizenship law. Universities must do more to ‘democratize’ this learning, so that constitutionalism can be put into practice.

Still, it’s pointless to discuss what ‘function’ a university may serve in a constitutional learning crisis at a time when education and qualifications are linked so consequentially to demand for ‘certification’ as a ‘product’ for a social demonstration effect to be achieved in an elitist system that thrives on competitive pursuits among students.

Teaching and research, too, are becoming more and more industrialized to suit the state’s own needs and keep an intellectual elite safe in ivory castles, as against letting academics focus organically on their inner-callings of academia, guided by ‘internal pressures’, or ‘external leisure’, as Humboldt envisaged.

As Chomsky argued in 1969: “It is never an easy matter to determine to what extent deficiencies of a particular institution (a university) can actually be overcome through internal-reform, and to what extent they reflect characteristics of society at large, or matters of individual psychology that are relatively independent of social forms... Even at the most advanced level of graduate education, the student is discouraged by university regulation from working as any reasonable man would certainly choose to do: individually, where his interests lead him; collectively, where he can learn from and give aid to his fellows. Course projects and examinations are individual and competitive... The student is obliged to set himself a limited goal and to avoid adventuresome, speculative investigation that may challenge the conventional framework of scholarship and correspondingly, runs a high risk of failure. In this respect, the institutional forms of the university encourage mediocrity...”

An institutional encouragement of mediocrity characterizes the state of India’s education system today. Students, scholars and young research enthusiasts are perfectly okay devoting their entire learning cycles or careers to trivial modifications of what’s already known. In classical Marxian typology, this would be called a ‘social reproduction thesis’: doing the same thing over and over again with minor tweaks. The publication industry also encourages this.

Any hope for widespread reform may seem delusionary in the current political climate. Still, to achieve the Humboldtian ideal, a ‘university’ should be open to any (wo)man, at any stage of life, who wishes to avail of this institutional form of learning to enhance his or her “spiritual life”. For a

path that could help actualize that ideal, we must allow for deep educative processes of learning about constitutional values, including its silences and voids, across different stages of education.

Whether one is being trained as a corporate executive, a shoemaker, an engineer, an economist or an architect, knowledge of ‘constitutionalism’ should be a must. This might not just help individuals understand all the elements of constitutional propriety for the legal (and moral) value it may provide them, but such knowledge would also enhance their awareness of our social, cultural, political and economic state of being, in which a substantial portion of our woes can be found to be rooted.

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