

Ranking Universities*

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The proposal to eliminate the University Grants Commission and to tighten political control over the higher education system in India, has been mooted at the behest of Narendra Modi who is apparently concerned about the dearth of Indian names among the top-ranked universities in the world. This concern is not confined to Modi alone; it is shared by large numbers of persons in the country's political establishment, and by many in the general public. This concern is, to an extent, understandable: it is akin to the concern over the lack of medals for India at the Olympic games; but at the same time this concern is naive and dangerous. It betrays a complete lack of understanding about the role of higher education in the life of a country.

Higher education has a crucial social role, a role in "nation-building", because of which treating it on a par with winning a sprinting race or a hockey match, is wrong. This is not to say that winning a race or a match is without any social significance; it can have an impact on the morale of many people in the country. But the rules by which a race or a match are governed do not have to be necessarily any different for social reasons for one country as compared to another, the way these rules for judging universities necessarily have to be. Ranking universities across countries according to a common set of criteria, as all these rankings, such as by The Times Higher Educational Supplement, do amount to detaching them from their respective social contexts, and hence denying the social role of education. This denial is not just an oversight. It has an ideological function; and the Modis of the world further this ideology.

Take a simple example. An Indian student must know about the impact of British colonialism on the Indian economy. A student of economics at least therefore must know of the work of Dadabhai Naoroji. But no student of economics at Cambridge or Oxford or Harvard ever gets to hear of a person called Dadabhai Naoroji. Hence the trajectory of research and teaching in an Indian university must never be identical with that of a British or American university. Any common criteria for ranking universities, such as the number of publications in certain recognized journals, or the number of citations received by articles and books written by the faculty, in a world dominated by the Western academia, would necessarily therefore underestimate the value of work done in Indian universities. To be worried about it is in fact to succumb to Western academic hegemony, and it amounts to giving up the idea that what is taught and researched in Indian universities must be rooted in the Indian social reality.

When Gandhi had urged Indian students to give up studies in colleges and universities and join the Civil Disobedience Movement, Tagore had asked him how he could do so in a country where the extent of higher education was so limited. Gandhi's answer had been that the higher education being imparted to students under the Raj was meant only to produce official servants of the Raj, and that Indian students would do well to come out of that system. If one can rephrase Gandhi's reply by using a concept advanced by Antonio Gramsci, the colonial higher education system was meant to produce "organic intellectuals" for British imperialism and not the "organic intellectuals" for the people of India. Gandhi was rejecting the idea of higher education as a homogeneous activity irrespective of its social context, and

underscoring the social role of higher education. That rejection still remains valid today. And if higher education is not a homogeneous activity, then judging institutions of higher education across different countries by one standard yardstick is illegitimate.

Two points must be made here immediately. Even if we accepted the logic of these rankings and felt the need for improving the ranks of Indian universities, we would never succeed in doing so under the BJP dispensation, for two reasons, one very obvious and the other less so. The obvious reason is that no university in the world can possibly aspire to any kind of excellence, no matter by what criteria, if students and teachers within it are regimented, are not allowed to think and talk freely or to raise questions, for fear of being branded “anti-national”, and “seditious”. The tendency of all potentially good-quality academics would be to run away from such a system, than be drawn towards it. It is only ignorant minds that think of greater political control as a means of improving the quality of higher education, when precisely the opposite is true.

The more subtle reason is that the very acceptance of a ranking devised by a metropolitan body, no matter how well-meaning, in a world marked by metropolitan intellectual hegemony, dooms all imitative third world institutions to mediocrity. They live out the parody with which the arch-imperialist Rudyard Kipling had pilloried the colonized middle class, through his creation of the banderlog in *The Jungle Book*, whose main desire, expressed to the man-child Mowgli, was: “we want to be like you”; they obviously could never be. The reason why institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University acquired world renown, which is a fact irrespective of whether they figure in any list compiled by *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, is precisely because they never tried to imitate institutions of the West. And that is a necessary condition for excellence.

The second point is that not bothering about the rankings prepared by bodies like *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* where Indian universities do not figure in the top so many, must not be taken to mean that everything is right with Indian higher education. Everybody knows their abysmal state, which has been produced by a whole lot of factors. These include political control which brings sycophants to the top in university administration; utter niggardliness in allocating resources to them, because of which teaching positions are deliberately kept vacant and institutions forced to make do with ad hoc faculty as a means of saving money; and an agenda of commoditization of education which entails that private universities run on commercial lines are actually favoured by the government compared to public universities. To reject the rankings of metropolitan bodies therefore is not to be smug about the state of higher education in India; it is simply to suggest that the criteria by which we judge them must be sui generis not those devised by metropolitan bodies.

The reason why they produce such lists based on a set of common criteria irrespective of the social context of the universities, is not just ideological, not just to trap these institutions within the metropolitan conceptual discourse. There is an additional, more directly economic, reason as well. And that has to do with the fact that in the era of globalization, globalized capital cannot simply carry personnel from its home country to serve its needs internationally. It must recruit local personnel, which, for capital originating in the metropolis, works out to be cheaper as well. Globalized capital therefore wants institutions of higher education everywhere to produce students who

are more or less identical across the globe. Whom it recruits would then depend upon how “good” the institution in a particular country producing such students is supposed to be. It requires therefore a ranking of such institutions across the globe. Globalized capital in other words, precisely because it is globalized, requires a ranking of institutions of higher education across the world, the same way it requires a ranking of countries’ “credit-rating” by specialized credit-rating agencies.

Putting Indian universities among the top so many in such rankings therefore is part of the agenda of making them produce “organic intellectuals for international finance capital”. It is to convert them from institutions charged with producing “organic intellectuals for the Indian people” to those required to produce “organic intellectuals for international finance capital”. They may not be doing very well in discharging the former task, but that is an argument for improving their functioning for this task, not to change their task to one of producing fodder for international finance capital, while turning their backs to the people.

It may of course be thought that not producing fodder for international finance capital would decrease the employability of the students in a neo-liberal world dominated by such capital. But that is essentially an argument for changing the economic regime of the country rather than for changing the education system. Besides, it is not even clear that the products of an education system that does not just kow-tow to international finance capital, would remain unemployed. Students coming out of Jawaharlal Nehru University or Jadavpur University after all do not remain unemployed at present. On the contrary their employment prospects even within the current economic regime are far better than those from other universities that go all out to produce students in the form of well-packaged commodities for the market.

We thus appear to be coming full circle. The colonial education system had been geared to producing servants for the Raj which Gandhi had objected to. Seven decades after independence we are now once again in the process of making our educational system produce servants for international finance capital. This must be opposed. The education system in India must be geared to producing the organic intellectuals for the Indian working people.

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