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THE CONCEPT OF A UNIVERSITY

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The following story is narrated in one of the many versions of the epic *Ramayana*.

After Rama had returned from Lanka and began ruling in Ayodhya, a dog appeared in his court, asking for justice. In Ramarajya, even animals, let alone humans, were entitled to justice. So the dog was duly scheduled for a hearing, the accused being a *Sanyasi*.*

"Sire, I was merely following this Sanyasi when he suddenly beat me with a stick for no rhyme or reason," said the dog. "I demand justice."

"What is your side of the story?" Rama asked the *Sanyasi*.

"O Rama! This dog did follow me everywhere as I went from house to house begging for alms. But everywhere, the householder took a look at the dog and shut the door in fear or disgust."

The courtiers nodded in agreement. The dog did look ugly, dirty and ferocious. The *Sanyasi* continued.

"Sire, at the end of the morning my bowl was still empty, thanks to this animal. I was hungry and angry and took it out on him."

The dog replied "O Rama, I was following him so that I may also get some food. Is it my fault that he should beat me? I was born this way and cannot be responsible for my looks."

"Do you have anything to say, O *Sanyasi*?" Rama asked.

"No Sire! The dog is right. Whatever the provocation, I, a *Sanyasi* should not have lost my temper, certainly not on a dog who was blameless. I am ready for whatever punishment that is my due," the *Sanyasi* replied.

"Well, let the plaintiff recommend the punishment," Rama passed on the responsibility to the dog. The dog pondered a bit and then replied :

"Sire, seeing the *Sanyasi* is a scholar, I suggest that you start a new Vidyapeeth (university) and make him its Kulapati (Vice-chancellor)."

"But that is an honour, not a punishment," Rama exclaimed.

"Honour, yes; put punishment as well," replied the dog. "For, managing a Vidyapeeth is a very onerous task. He will certainly suffer enough anguish."

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Whatever the authenticity of the tale, the Vice-Chancellor of any Indian university today will agree

*A person who has renounced the world and who lives on alms collected from house to house.

with the bottom line. The V-C's lot in the country of ours is not a happy one. He is faced with sit-ins and *gheraos* by angry students, has to mediate between internecine quarrels among the faculty, he is under attack from members of the university bodies, held responsible for any breach of law or etiquette and on top of it he is subject to subtle and not so subtle pressures from the government and influential politicians. He has to worry about the academic time table of lectures and examinations not getting derailed, he is threatened with strikes by employees of various categories and even has to cope with crime, drug addiction and goondaism on the campus. No wonder, a V-C, either compromises integrity in order to survive or quits in disgust. In rare cases the V-C successfully combats all these problems and even surmounts them but at the expenses of his good health!

I know cases of all three kinds and therefore feel that the way our universities are made to function the V-C's post is a punishment post for any scholar of distinction and integrity. The question is: Is this the only way a University can function? Is it not possible to think of a model which works better?

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The Pocket Oxford Dictionary defines a university as an "Educational institution designed for instruction or examination of students in all or many of the more important branches of learning, conferring degrees in various faculties and often embodying colleges and similar institutions." As I will argue, there is more to a university than these activities, but even with this definition a university normally deals with a large body of educated people and as such, the management of such a body is not going to be easy even at the best of times. With a large number of intellectuals (with different view and tendency to argue for them) thrown together, controversies are bound to arise. Comparisons between individuals, jealousies in career advancement, etc. are characteristic of human nature and they cannot be avoided even in a body of scholars and intellectuals. Students on the other hand, considering themselves grown-ups and no longer subject to school level discipline, will resent too much of authority. . . . In short, it is unrealistic to assume even in the most idealistic case that there will be no human relations problems.

The question is, knowing these problems and granting their existence, can a well run university be possible?

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The answer to this question is "Yes, provided. . ."; the dotted portion stipulating certain conditions which need to be enforced. To understand what these conditions might be, let us look at a few well-run universities abroad.

There are very few universities that can match the unbroken traditions of Oxford and Cambridge, spanning seven centuries. It is a historical fact that Cambridge was established by a group of dissatisfied scholars who migrated from Oxford. This episode underscores the problems that were stated earlier, the problems that arise when a large number of intellectuals are brought to one place. There were internal feuds as well as feuds with the townspeople. Nevertheless, there was a positive side to it. The monopoly of Oxford was broken with a rival emerging in the Eastern countries. Cambridge and Oxford have always maintained a healthy competition not only in sports (where, for example, it appears in the rugby and cricket matches or in the annual boat race) but also in academics,

religion and politics. This competition has helped raise their standards in all these fields. There are traditional differences also. Oxford has produced more scholars in the liberal arts and more politicians while Cambridge has excelled in mathematics and the sciences.

So one wonders whether competition is a feature that might not raise the overall standard. If there is no competition complacency sets in which is but one step from the downhill slide. In the United States, the market economy extends to the academic sphere as well with universities vying for excellent faculty members and bright students.

In the Indian setting this spirit of competition is lacking since its motivator; the desire for excellence itself is missing. In fact very often we suspect the reverse, that our academic institutions are uncomfortable with excellence. They are happy with mediocrity since then not much is expected from anybody and everyone can bask in masterly inactivity.

The remedy is of course clear but unpalatable if not impractical to implement. Reward excellence, honour merit and distinguish it from mediocrity. These criteria must be applied as uncompromisingly at the intake of students and their periodic examinations but also to the academic faculty at recruitment and periodic reviews.

That the remedy is unpalatable is evident from the resistance that is immediately put up by pressure groups (representing mediocrity) to any merit-based selection or review. Strong political will is needed to counter or face up to the strikes and *dharnas* and *gheraos* that will erupt if such a policy is implemented.

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The dictionary definition I quoted does not do justice to all the functions a university should perform, and the good ones are indeed performing. The definition lays emphasis only on teaching, suggesting that a university is a glorified extension of a school to higher education with the sole aim of turning out human products stamped with degrees.

Teaching is indeed an important part of a university's range of activities. But no less important is research. Unless the teaching faculty is involved with research as well, the system will become stale. Research brings in fresh air from outside and it revitalizes the teaching. As an undergraduate in Cambridge, I recall encountering new questions in the Mathematical Tripos papers, questions (I later discovered) arose out of research work of the examiners. The heights to which research can take the examination system is illustrated by this anecdote of Lord Kelvin, the famous physicist of the nineteenth century.

When he was a student for the Tripos at Cambridge, Thomson (as Lord Kelvin was called before he received peerage) was known to be a bright student. In the final examination, however, he stood second; the first rank going to his rival named Parkinson. The examiner noted that both Parkinson and Thomson had solved one very difficult problem which had baffled all others; but their solutions were very similar. Suspecting copying of one by the other, he interviewed both the students one after the other to discover how they knew the answer to that problem.

Parkinson replied: "Sir, I read research publications, and I saw a paper by an anonymous author wherein this problem was solved. So I knew the solution." The examiner was impressed and he complimented Parkinson for reading research papers and not limiting his attention to the prescribed

texts. Suspecting more strongly now that Thomson may have copied Parkinson, he asked Thomson for an explanation. Thomson replied, "Sir, I wrote that anonymous paper."

In fact teaching and research go hand in hand, each providing fresh incentives to the other. Just as a teacher who does not add to his knowledge and originality through research becomes stale, so does research devoid of teaching experience become sterile. A teacher is constantly having to explain new ideas to students and to reply to their queries. The freshness introduced by questions raised by students may suggest new aspects hitherto ignored by the researcher.

In India, sadly, the research element is greatly underemphasized in our universities while teaching is neglected in our research institutes. The result is that students in the universities miss the excitement of witnessing new discoveries in their fields while the research staff in the institutes find very few students motivated to work in their fields. In successful universities abroad a judicious mixture of teaching and research has shown how effective it can be both for the teacher and the student. Distinguished scholars, scientists, authors or university faculties routinely give lectures to students who find the experience inspiring. Promotion criteria in our universities should include such a mixture as an essential component for judging the faculty member. Students can provide a feedback on teaching while the peer reviews can be used to assess research.

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An ideal university recognizes that the student population on the campus is an adult one and wishes to be treated as such. Thus while discipline has to be maintained at all costs, it should not be regimented but achieved through voluntary and responsible adult responses. In particular, it is fruitless to achieve or expect responsible behaviour from students if the faculty itself behaves irresponsibly. Irresponsible faculty behaviour is of several types, e.g. bunking lecturing duties, producing inferior research or no research, internal politicing through groupism, submitting to external political pressure, indulging in corrupt practices, etc. Why should students, intelligent observers as they are of what goes on, remain immune from what they see?

The other aspect of student indiscipline may arise from the dictum: "An idle man's life is a Devil's workshop." Even if the student devotes a considerable time to sincere students, he or she has the problem of filling in the 'free time'. This filling in can be profitably turned towards artistic hobbies, games, social work and nurturing extracurricular reading. A university like Cambridge has more than a hundred clubs to fulfill different urges. There are clubs for mathematicians, physicists, etc. which highlight the recreational, historical, anecdotal and challenging developments in these fields. There are societies for cyclists, hikers, roof climbers, etc. that cater to outdoor hobbies. There are debating societies: the Oxford and Cambridge Unions have produced hundreds of parliamentarians over several generations. Can we not open similar outlets for our students whose energies otherwise erupt in *morchas*; sit-ins and *gheraos*?

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Going back to our ancient traditions in education, we find that in the Gurukul system the pupils went and stayed with the teacher becoming part of his household. Usually these Gurus were sages living in forests, away from the pressures of urban life. The present notion of a university campus attempts,

in a way to emulate that pattern. The campus is supposed to provide sheltered life both to the teacher and the taught.

But the comparison ends there. In the olden if the *rishis* found unsavoury elements (demons or wild beasts) disturbing the pastoral calm of the *ashramas* they would go to the ruler to demand protection as a right. The king would honour their commitment and ensure that peace was restored and maintained. Apart from this the sages did not go to the king with any request. Rather, the king would approach them if he needed advice or assistance. Otherwise the king did not interfere in the management of the *ashramas*.

Can the rulers today claim that they also do not interfere in the life of a university campus? Likewise, can the university intellectuals claim that they remain aloof from aspirations of power to be obtained from the rulers? The answer, sadly for India, is 'no' to both these questions. Today's Sandipani, Vyasa or Valmiki would like to be on various power wielding committees for which they would need political patronage. Similarly, instead of removing unsavoury elements from the campus, our political parties would add to them.

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In the last analysis, the success of a university depends not so much on funds, living conditions, cost of living, etc. but on the attitude of the mind—of the teachers, students, the government and the society at large. Even in the pre-Independence days of austerity, with a hostile government, Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviyaji could make the Banaras Hindu University a truly national institution with dedicated teachers and motivated students. Where does the B.H.U. stand today? It is a prestigious central university, financially much better off than in Mahamana's time. But can it claim to be at the same high academic level today as it was sixty years ago? A study of this transformation should provide clues to the question: "What does a good university need to have and what does it need to avoid?"