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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2018

THE IDEAS PAGE

Dismantling the public university

The debate on privatising higher education must be founded on the role of such institutions in developing a democratic and inclusive society



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MOTIHARI UNIVERSITY, MANIPUR University, Hyderabad Central University, Jawaharlal Nehru University — these names have become shorthand for a set of problems that get framed differently depending on who does the analysis. The list of campuses of public-funded higher education institutions where anger is simmering or has flared up is too long to be recounted here. But we would err if we failed to mention Allahabad University, Banaras Hindu University, Aligarh Muslim University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and the Film and Television Institute of India. The latest entrant to this list is Hidayatullah National Law University.

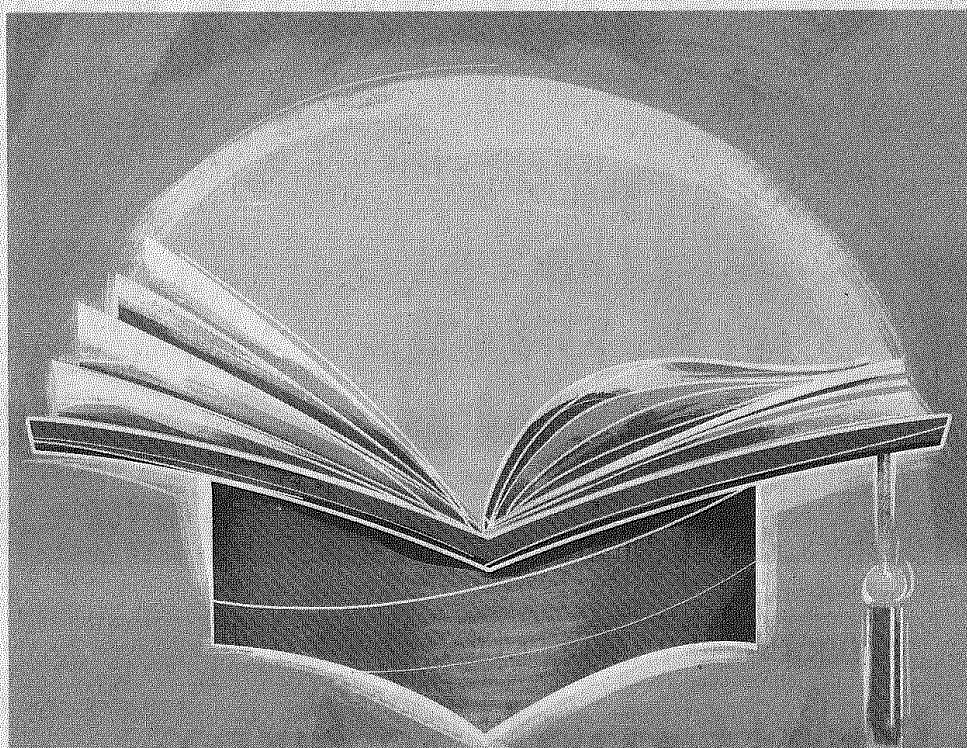
No matter which side of the debate one is on, it would be hard to deny that this is a list of the best public higher education institutions of India. The recent story of each of these institutions has some common tropes — hostile vice-chancellors who also tend to be underqualified, narratives of sexism and sexual harassment, labelling of students from minorities and vulnerable sections as seditious, violence against dissenting students and teachers, subverting of statutory bodies and processes, and victimising teachers and bringing in expensive technocratic fixes for non-existent problems. Throw into this mix two prominent TV news channels beating their chests about tax payers' money and lazy/dangerous teachers and students, the situation becomes a flashpoint. Enter a student-wing of a cultural organisation as the source of ignition and you get the picture.

This is a picture of problems public university campuses in India are fraught with. They arise from an attempt to reformulate education as a marketable service that people should have to buy, and from the idea of students pursuing higher education are a drain on public funds ("tax payers money"). It also helps that, in the same breath, any criticism of the government and its policies is dubbed anti-national.

The need then is to place the debate on public-funded universities in India in the context of the role of higher education in developing a democratic and inclusive society.

Through a concerted and violent suppression of dissent on various university campuses, the stage is being set to knock down two well-established principles. One, that public funding of higher education is the only way to ensure that students from all kinds of socio-economic background can access it. And second, that if higher education is to be seen as a means of fostering a democratic, equitable society it must be governed through democratic decision-making with the inclusion of all stakeholders in universities.

Since it is difficult for any government or university administration to clearly say that they will be undermining public funded institutions in ways that private players have a field day, terms such as "autonomy" and "institutions of eminence" are being used as a façade behind which the commercialisation of higher education can take place. A bevy of pliant and willing vice-chancellors in central universities have been functioning along these lines, aided and abetted by well-timed and precisely aimed salvos from the UGC and the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development. The way these were misread and wrongly interpreted was breathtaking but more shocking are the ends that are achieved by a string of illegalities committed



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by the VCs and their administrations — subverting the law of the land on reservations for SC/ST/OBC/PH persons in institution of higher education, scuttling decades of progress on gender justice, and undermining the academic freedom and autonomy.

The process has already been set in motion when, recently, the MHRD Ministry granted "graded autonomy" to universities across India. Each university in India is formed through an act of the Parliament and is meant to be an autonomous entity. To grant autonomy, then, to institutions that are inherently autonomous is a strange move and must be scrutinised. What does this autonomy entail?

In the universities anointed "autonomous" the VCs are essentially getting a free hand to run the university. Lack of public funding would not only deal a death blow to the research, writing and publication by the faculty — which ironically is what drives rankings of universities, among other things. It will also reduce access for students from the marginalised sections of society to higher education. It would also mean that nearly no students from SC/ST/OBC/PH categories will be able to enter the institutions. Nearly all students who do get to pursue higher education will either be from rich families or will have to incur debilitating education loans.

The Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) proposes to fund civil and laboratory infrastructure projects in universities through 10-year loans. Access to loans will be regulated by asking universities to escrow their existing funds to HEFA. The universities will have to raise their own funds through fees and research earnings to pay the loans back. Universities will be turned into corporate entities, entangled in a web of real-estate and finance dealings.

While many have rightly argued that the building blocks of this fatal aspiration for grandiosity were put into place by the previous UPA governments, it is important to pay attention to how this NDA government has chosen to lay these bricks — or rather bring the house down. The Sam Pitroda-led Knowledge Commission argued unambiguously for increasing government spending, going so far as to peg an actual figure — 1.5 per cent of the GDP exclusively for higher education out of the 6 per cent of the GDP that the

Commission wanted spent on education. Although the Commission did argue that since even this will not suffice for a "massive expansion of higher education", sources of financing higher education may be "diversified" to "complement the increase in public expenditure". The argument for enhanced funding from both public and private sources came with carefully-crafted caveats related to the protection of students from deprived sections and arguments urging caution against cutting back UGC funding for universities that might manage to raise funds from other sources such as corporate philanthropy.

Higher education in India is already privatised to a great extent with the number of private colleges and universities growing by leaps and bounds every year. Most of this "growth" is in the so-called marketable courses. These are failing spectacularly in meeting the needs for knowledge creation. Those who advance the "privatise for efficiency" argument could perhaps ignore this reasoning. But it is amazing how they can turn a blind eye to the reports of thousands of seats in these institutions for which there are no takers. These issues have been flagged by the Yashpal Committee Report also.

The UGC was created through an act of the Parliament. While nobody can defend many of its past ills, it has to be underlined that the UGC's grant-making function must not be put at the direct mercy of the party/politicians in power.

The humiliation of teachers and threat of physical attacks must be seen as attempts to break the spirit of those who are resisting and critiquing this cannibalisation of public institutions of higher education. Citizens — teachers, students and parents — must not fail to resist these sweeping changes that will transform the very character of public universities, one that fosters the spirit of academic excellence and upholds the principles of diversity and social justice.

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