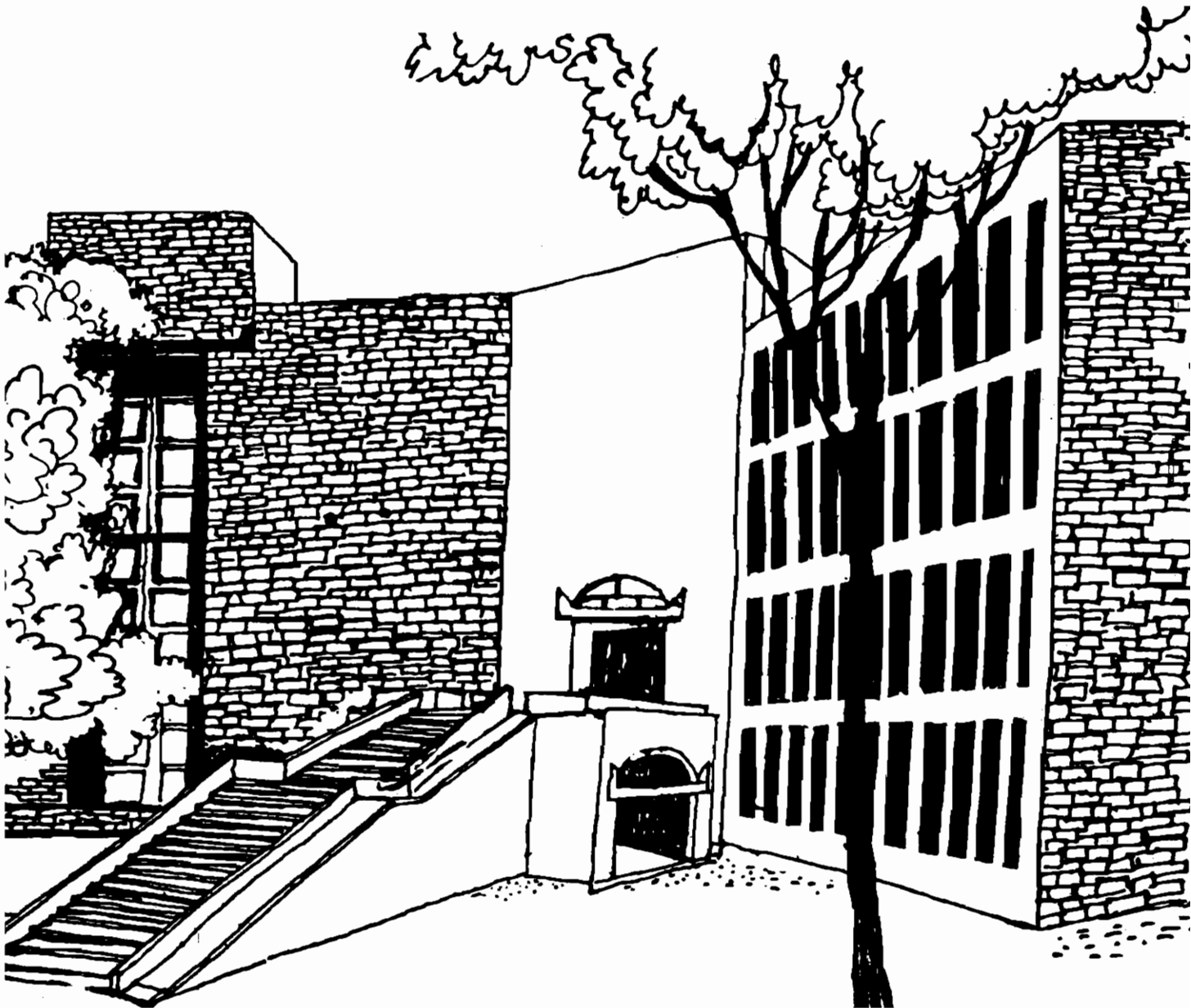




# Working Paper




# **Universities and The Horizons of The Future**

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## **Universities and The Horizons of The Future\***

### **The Problem**

Ours is a time of fundamental changes. Changes in our economy and politics, revolutionary manifestation of new technologies and the whole host of contemporary forces are shattering our taken for granted assumptions about self and society. In this contemporary context of epochal change and challenge, reflection is also taking place on the nature and the purpose of our apprenticeship and our universities. In the advanced postindustrial societies, considering the crucial significance of specialized knowledge and new skill in the production process, universities are being looked at as holding the key to the economic revitalization of a society. Here we can take contemporary American society as a case in point. Despite its mood of self-congratulation especially after the collapse of the Soviet system, American society and economy is not in a very good shape now. Restructuring of American economy from an industrial to a postindustrial society and the deindustrialization of cities and communities that this has led to has posed new challenges for reindustrialization, revitalization and the modernization of American society. In this context, both the scholars and the politicians are looking towards universities with a great deal of hope.

### **The American Case**

Many American commentators now look at the whole question of universities and the horizons of the future from the vantage point of production facilitated by the competitive specialized knowledge of the university. They believe that universities can retrain the workforce, create a skilled and a new worker and generate new knowledge and technology which would accelerate the production process especially in an era of intense local and global competition. The significance of Stanford University in the origin and achievement of the Silicon Valley in California and the role that the Harvard-MIT complex have played in the economic revitalization of Boston are much cited examples in this regard. Here some American commentators present us the idea of a "postindustrial university" (Osborne 1988). For instance, Harvard business professor David Osborne provides us the example of Legish University in Pennsylvania which continues to play a vital role in the economic revitalization of its region through a creative partnership between university and industries.

Some leaders of American higher education take this idea of a postindustrial university far when they do not simply remain content with a partnership between universities and industries and strive to turn universities into industries. Here we can look at Stanford Vice-President William Massey as a case in point (discussed in Bellah et al. 1991: 169). For Massey, university is one more element in the market system. Massey argues: "It is hard to deny when students come for a particular service, some

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one will supply it. Tastes have changed: people used to be interested in the classics; now they are interested in making money...We need to provide interesting menu at the university-a menu of where we think the world is going-but we can't dictate what people are going to want" (ibid). But such an ambition of turning education into an industry loses sight of the important question of the relationship between knowledge and power and the whole question of morality and society. That is why Derek Bok, who served Harvard University for two decades, challenges us in his *Universities and the Future of America*: "If we mean to improve our economic competitiveness-and, more important, increase our rate of productivity growth-we must come to grips with other problems in our society" (Bok 1990: 30). Bok also links this with the question of values: "...the revitalization of our corporations, our government agencies, our schools and our urban areas is ultimately dependent on values of individual citizens. Since values are so decisive, are our universities doing enough to build in our society- especially among its most influential members and leaders- a stronger sense of civic responsibility, ethical awareness, and concern for the interests of others?" (ibid: 7).

Bok tells us that notwithstanding the spectacular success of American universities in the last decades American public "has finally come to believe quite strongly" that universities are not making the education of students a top priority (Bok 1992: 15). They criticize that university professors are more interested in carrying out research projects, which advance their career and enhance the prestige of their universities, rather than genuinely attend to the needs of the undergraduates "within the arts and the sciences" (ibid). American parents wonder whether institutions of higher learning are interested in some basic things, such as helping their children "think more clearly, be a more moral human being, find some compelling vocation in life, or embrace values that will help them make intelligent choices" (ibid: 16). Such public criticism is not unfounded. Bok says quite clearly that in modern American universities

"incentives are not weighted in favour of teaching and education indeed, quite the contrary is true...And it is not just the professors' incentives that are out of whack, but also those of administrators. What presidents and deans are held accountable for is improving the prestige of their institutions, and the prestige of their institutions comes from the research reputation of their faculties. If you are going to do your best to attract the ablest scientists and scholars to your faculty-you don't want to provoke them with talk about spending more time on their teaching. And so administrators, too, often relegate the interests of undergraduates into the background" (ibid).

But while universities are very eager to do research on every institution in society they are least interested in doing research on themselves. For instance, as Bok tells us, "we learn a lot about how smart our students are when they arrive, but we know very little about how much they have learned by the time they leave" (ibid). But research on American universities by those who are not part of the system show us that now university professors are not only disinterested to devote their best of time and energy to training the undergraduates but also they care little to engage themselves in a dialogue with the public issues that bother them the most. The concerns of American professors have now become quite narrow, confined only to the university campus and the professional cocoons they belong. For Russell Jacoby, they are no longer public intellectuals but professionals (Jacoby 1987).

It is difficult for common people to understand their "professional and arcane languages" which symbolize their refuse as well as flight (Jacoby 1987: 236). Indeed professionalization of American intellectuals spells of both "privatization" as well as "a withdrawal from a larger public discourse" (ibid: 118). The radicals among them suddenly turn to new fields like semiotics "as if the really interesting thing about the homeless were the variety of coded messages of protest that cardboard boxes could convey" (Harvey 1991: 69). In this context, Bok argues:

"Today, universities need new ways to serve the public, and they don't have them. They don't embrace goals around which a new alliance can be forged...If we would have it differently, we must associate ourselves prominently once again with efforts to solve problems that really concern the people of this country" (Bok 1992: 18).

### **Professionalism and a New Morality**

Universities provide us training in skills and expert knowledge that value a lot in society. But specialized knowledge is also a source of power and privilege and universities ought to create a sense of responsibility and morality in the members of the university community so that knowledge gained from the university becomes a positive force in the enhancement of life in society rather than a source of invidious distinction, oppression and inequality. The necessity for grounding professionalism in a moral consciousness of sharing and love is crucial in our contemporary times. Our societies are increasingly becoming more and more complex where reflection on resolution of societal issues require greater and greater inputs from the professionals of various kinds--the high priests of modernity such as the engineers and economists as well as from the emerging professionals of today and tomorrow--the psychologists and the sociologists. But professionals have a tendency to behave as members of a secret society without having or cultivating a moral consciousness to share their knowledge with ordinary men, women and children. In fact this is now the greatest danger to democracy. This is perhaps the reason why Robert Dahl, one of our most thoughtful political commentators, writes: "...the long-run prospects for democracy are more seriously endangered by inequalities in resources, strategic positions, and bargaining strength that are derived not from wealth or economic position but from special knowledge" (Dahl 1991: 333). Here we must realize that no society can save us from this danger of the new knowledge-based aristocracy through rules and legislation aimed at the sharing of the professional knowledge. Domestication of professional knowledge and the transformation of knowledge into "Bhakti" requires a serious programme in moral education and universities have to initiate this deep reflection on life. Apart from transmitting professional knowledge and innovating new technologies for economic growth, universities have also to create a context for a dialogue on Man, Nature, God and Society among the members of its community. Universities have also to generate a deep dialogue on ethics and morality which can provide us a "moralizing gaze," as philosopher Habermas would argue, and transform our familiar institutions "into many instances of problematic justice" (Habermas 1990: 108).

It is perhaps for this reason that American sociologists Robert Bellah and his colleagues challenge us to understand the distinction between looking at "education as industry" and the plea to establish a fruitful partnership between universities and the productive enterprises of society (See Bellah et al.

1991: 170). There is no denying the fact that universities must prepare us for modern occupations and accelerate our capacity for production. But the ultimate value of education lies in the search for ultimate meanings, not in helplessly reproducing the dominant language of power and money. "Money and power are necessary as means, but they are not the proper measures of a good society and a good world. We need to talk about our future with a richer vocabulary than the indices that measure markets and defense systems alone" (Bellah et al. 1991: 272). But to go beyond the dominant language of money and power and to begin to cultivate what Habermas calls "technology of the self" is a global challenge now (See Habermas 1987). As Jonathan Sacks tells us in his provocative book, *The Persistence of Faith*: "Something quite revolutionary has happened to our ways of thinking: what I would call the demoralisation of discourse. We now no longer know what it is to identify a moral issue, as something distinct from personal preference on the one hand or technique on the other" (Sacks 1991: 42). The evolution of social system--its differentiation and fragmentation--and the ascendancy of professional knowledge within it without the parallel development of an ethics of shared responsibility makes the need for moral education especially urgent.

### Moral Education and Curricular Reform

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To think about moral education in the context of our contemporary predicaments it is essential to realize that "Moral education is not simply learning to make choices. It is becoming part of a community with a particular tradition, history and way of life" (Sacks 1991: 44). In order to take seriously the challenge of moral education modern universities have to learn to rethink modernity and appreciate the virtues of traditions. A present-day-university, whether located in Harvard or Allahabad, is a modern one and it is an uncritical champion of the modern style of life as it condemns the traditional views of good life almost categorically. In another context philosopher Thomas McCarthy has argued: "We have things to learn from traditional cultures as well as they from us, not only what we have forgotten and repressed, but something about how we might put our fragmented world back again. This is not a matter of regression, but of dialogue-dialogue that is critical to be sure but not only on one side" (McCarthy quoted in Bellah et al. 1991: 173). There is a challenge for the synthesis between tradition and modernity in our art of living and becoming what literary critic U.R. Anatha Murthy calls "critical insiders" (See Giri 1991). This is no where more challenging than in the vision and practice of a modern university. In the words of Bellah and his colleagues: "Today, in an academic and social context that continues to be dominated by instrumental reason, the paradigm of communicative reason needs actively to be reappropriated-as a model for research and teaching in the university and as a support for nonutilitarian tendencies in the culture at large" (Bellah et al. 1991: 165).

Universities can help us appreciate the virtues of traditions as they prepare us to live in a modern world. It is in this context that the question of an appropriate curriculum that prejudices neither against tradition or modernity is important. In the words of Bellah and his colleagues: "It is precisely the way that Plato is different from Weber, Confucius from Freud that can teach students about the particularities of our own situation as well as about other cultures. And if we want to understand traditional cultures, we shall have to take seriously that religious concerns are central to most of them" (Bellah et al. 1991: 173). (Taking seriously religious concerns is a challenge for modernity which is

least reflexive about its secular assumptions. However it must be noted that religious concerns simply do not refer to religions as social systems but religions as the search for ultimate meaning). The present debate about curriculum owes a lot to Chicago Professor Alan Bloom's savage criticism of the relativist bias in the current curriculums in American universities and the accompanying disregard for the classics of the Western tradition (Bloom 1987). Bloom makes much of the disrespect that feminism and other relativist movements have done to the understanding of the significance of Western classics even in the modern context. Bloom's plea has brought to the centre the idea of a core curriculum that would embed American students in classics which have had a formative influence in the origin and growth of Western civilization. But for Bellah et. al., Bloom's is a "misguided concern" since "it identifies modern culture with a particular racial or ethnic tradition" (ibid: 174). But "the notion that European classics are the special heritage of white American students is as fallacious as the notion that Asian American students are familiar with Confucianism [or that Indian students are familiar with The Bhagabat Gita or Gandhi]" (ibid). The operative culture of most American undergraduates is the culture of television--"the monoculture of the tube" (ibid). In this context, the challenge of curricular reform lies in helping us to come out of this monoculture of media and money rather than either to valorize Western culture or to destroy it. In the words of Bellah and his colleagues: "Educational reform consisting largely in search-and destroy missions to prove that previously canonical works promote racism, sexism, and class domination will not be of much help to students for whom these canonical works had no meaning in the first place" (ibid).

It is no denying the fact the curricular content in any modern university can not but instill in us a critical consciousness to look at our received traditions. But our university curricular must also help us to be critical of modernity and appreciative of the dynamics of living traditions since it is these which constitute the fundamental fabric of our life worlds. To put it in the words of Bellah and his colleagues, modern universities must teach us both the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and "hermeneutics of recovery." What Bellah et al. write deserve our attention especially when all societies are now confronted with the challenge of a new synthesis:

"We are not likely to give up what some philosophers call hermeneutics of suspicion--the tendency of the West since the Enlightenment to call all received traditions into question. But without a hermeneutics of recovery, through which we can understand what a living tradition is in the first place, a hermeneutics of suspicion is apt to be an exercise in nihilism, which, far from liberating students, merely disorients them....Only a much deeper awareness of the uniqueness of modernity and of the profoundly different worlds of nonmodern cultures will give us a model of curricular reform that combines intellectual seriousness with a greater respect for human diversity" (ibid).

### The Indian Scene

My purpose of discussing at some what length the debate regarding university reform in America is to bring an anthropological "view from afar" when we are looking at the crisis of higher education in India. The dominant intellectual discourse in contemporary India is characterized by an uncritical Americanism supported by our current economic policy. Recently while discussing the predicament



of culture, communication and social change in contemporary India P.C. Joshi has challenged us to understand that there are "two Americas," not any single monolithic one (See Joshi 1989). My purpose here is even to present multiple Americas as possible frames for debate and discussion in our country when overtly and covertly we are subjected to a monolithic construction of a supposedly redemptive American model--redemptive, we are told, not only for India and America power but also for the whole world.

To make a transition to the Indian scene in the light of our contemporary challenges as we have seen them manifesting in the culture and social structure of an advanced industrial society how do we critically look at our institutions of higher learning? Here what strikes us immediately is the lack of creativity of our universities. The problems with Indian universities are far too many. But on the whole, universities in India have failed to be either an accelerator of production or a critical interpreter of life. Our universities have all along lacked any meaningful relationship with industries and vice versa. But as our Indian society is restructuring and our economy is being reintegrated with the global economy, we can no more let our universities survive as "white elephants" of our society without being required to produce and innovate new knowledge and technologies. In this context, we can enrich ourselves from the contemporary American experiment in establishing a more fruitful relationship between university and industry and in creating a "postindustrial university." But along with this emphasis on production, the leaders of our universities and society have also to pay equal emphasis on interpretation. Here lies the challenge for meaningful rootedness and grounding in the problems of our own society and in the ethos of our own culture. In other words, this is a challenge for proper indigenization that our universities have to squarely face.

Our experiment with the life of the mind in modern Indian universities have not been very sanguine in this regard. Our universities, originating in a colonial context, still continues to function in that colonial mind-set and have hardly been able to address the vital issue arising out of the special predicament of our culture and society. One of the leading figures of Indian universities attributes this to the fact that our "concerns are universal rather than indigenous" (Singh 1991: 225). For Amrik Singh, our universities have played more a homogenizing function rather than an indigenizing function because we have given undue emphasis on the sciences and less emphasis on the Arts. For proper indigenization of Indian universities, Singh pleads for "...a relative de-emphasis on the sciences and technology and greater emphasis on the humanities and social sciences" (ibid: 227). But this assessment of our predicament is, if anything, very simplistic. If for proper indigenization, we "de-emphasize" our science and technology, then would we not engage multinational corporations for the "resource mapping" of our villages? What kind of indigenization our universities would create when we only emphasize upon cultural wealth without attending to science, technology and the generation of productive wealth? Moreover, science and technology can certainly be made more indigenous as well since there is as much diversity in Nature as there is in Culture. Moreover social sciences can be as homogenizing as the natural sciences if they are not confronted with the moral challenge of meaningfully relating themselves to our own society. In this regard, the solution to the problems of our universities does not lie in doing more social sciences. The key question is what kind of social sciences? Indian social science, it must be noted, has failed to create a body of literature in our

vernaculars what to speak of enlivening the traditions of our age old wisdom and our ancient scholarship.

### **The Trigonometry of Creativity**

Reading, Writing and Reflection constitute the trigonometry of creativity but present-day Indian universities rarely take seriously any of them. Both our teachers and students valorize speech to the neglect of writing. As sociologist Andre Beteille, one of the most perceptive observers of the scenario of our higher education tells us:

"The average student is not taught to write an essay in either school or college. Indians may be eloquent and voluble in speech, but they lack balance and measure in writing. It is not easy to get a tutorial essay out of a student, but when he submits the essay it is usually three times the specified length....It is not easy to create a habit of writing clear and concise essays in MA students who are already in their twenties, and have their minds on many things besides their tutorials" (Beteille 1990: 7).

But cultivating the habit of writing is enormously significant not only for passing out of the university but also for facing life with all its magnificent beauty but complexity. As James Berlin tells us: "When we teach students to write we are teaching more than an instrumental skill, we are teaching a mode of conduct...in teaching students about the way they ought to use language we are teaching them something about how to conduct their lives" (Berlin quoted in Bellah et al. 1991: 160). But in Indian universities there is very little concern to cultivate these skills. The problem seems incurable when teachers themselves do not practise any such communicative skill and only reproduce notes in the class rooms. What is more many teachers would speak voluminously about the virtue of not writing any thing since what one writes is necessarily flawed, thus not worth publishing. Most of our teachers do not realize the significance of what to speak of practising the habit of regular writing and publication. Instead some of them discourage those who take the habit of writing seriously.

This neglect of writing takes its toll in the relationship of the university with the community where it exists--of course, only as a parasite without any symbiotic relationship with society. Because university teachers do not write much people in the community have no knowledge of what goes on inside these fortresses. It is only that university teachers write very little for the press, they also do not care to disseminate their research and reflection to the community of professionals. Most Indian universities do not publish their research journals and even if they publish some of the best this information is not widely circulated, should I say, deliberately suppressed by the powers that be.

What is more the questions of writing, publication, dissemination of knowledge and creating communities of discourse do not matter much to those who are parts of the system, whether they are at the top or the bottom. We spend more time in getting more grants from the governments and occupying positions of power within the administrative system of the university. In the words of Andre Beteille: "Successful academics in India move easily from teaching and research into university

administration. There they learn quickly to mistrust those who try to do their own work in their own way without proper regard for rank and status" (Beteille 1990: 18).

In Indian universities great dangers to creativity now come from the university administration and university politics. As Beteille helps us to articulate our familiar experience:

"The university administration has become a gigantic machine. When a teacher or a student applies for something-say, student-leave or the extension of his fellowship-he does not know at which end his application will come out. Notations are made on files by clerks, assistants, sections officers and the rest even the most trivial subjects. Everything is entangled in rules which are elaborate, unclear, mutually inconsistent. Nobody who is serious about teaching and research can hope to master those rules...Some way is almost always found of getting around them, but at the cost of an enormous waste of time and energy" (ibid: 10).

In Indian campuses what is time consuming and exhausting is not only academic administration but also academic politics. Academic life now has been enormously politicized. In this context teachers unions on campuses have not been a wholly unmixed blessing. These unions are more eloquent and militant in matters of pay scale and power but have cared little how to make universities a seeking place for creativity. Following Andre Beteille it is easy to see that both "bureaucratization" and "democratisation" have eroded our institutions of higher learning and have created enormous bottle necks in our practice of creativity.

### Beyond the Chains of Illusion

These days it is a fashion to say that we are living in an age of crisis. But one of the services that the articulation of a "crisis discourse" does to the managers and the pundits of the system is that it obfuscates real issues. It is no denying the fact that universities in India are now going through a critical time in so far as their funding is concerned. But what has led to the financial and moral crisis of our universities in the first place? When we look at this issue dispassionately and critically we can realize that we academics have been partly, if not wholly, responsible for the devaluation of our institutions. For Beteille,

"..academics could have done better to protect those institutions from the forces by which they were threatened. Academics have no right to expect that a benevolent providence will place at their disposal a state and a society tailormade for the pursuit of science and scholarship...The processes of bureaucratization and politicisation, by which academic life is being squeezed out from two sides, have been encouraged to grow in the universities by academics themselves" (ibid: 19).

In the domain of higher education we are now facing a resource crunch and have been subject to pressures from outside. It is also true that in order to pursue creativity we need autonomy for ourselves and for our institutions. But the key question is how can we realize autonomy when we

don't feel hesitant to depend upon the government for more and more funds. How can we solve the financial crisis of our universities when we articulate the nature of the crisis only in financial terms? Beteille again challenges us:

"Academic autonomy can be preserved only if academics themselves show the will to preserve it. Neither the government nor the opposition has in India, or perhaps anywhere, much interest in protecting the autonomy of universities. It is not that academics care nothing at all about autonomy, but that so far they have not shown themselves to be sufficiently determined about it. They have wanted it in addition to a good many other things. They will show themselves to be determined and serious only when they are ready to ask for it at the cost of some of the good things in life" (ibid: 20). In order to realize academic autonomy we cannot postpone the questions of authenticity, accountability, and responsibility. Moreover we must be prepared for an alternative living which can set an example to the media steered system world that money and power are not the end all and be all of life. But Indian academics, especially the young emergent ones, are in a process of yuppification as our old guards stick to their own world of feudalism and authority. In this context the challenge is to think of the possibility of less expensive strategies of social reproduction and live them. It is time that we have to take Gandhi seriously who made a distinction between greed and need. When the majority of our country men and women toil tirelessly for two square meals a day what we get for belonging to institutions of higher learning is not at all else. But what we have done with the benefits that society has given us? In the face of the challenges of the future, the question before the Indian universities is not simply the question of money and relative autonomy. Our challenge is a more fundamental challenge of moral consciousness and social commitment. At a deeper level, it involves our own Being. The fundamental question then is whether those of us who are associated with Indian universities in various capacities are really interested in acquiring knowledge and using that knowledge not only for our own self-aggrandizement but also for the good of society, for the whole of Humanity?

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