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REIMAGINING THE INDIAN UNIVERSITIES CONSTRUCTS AND CONSTRAINTS

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CONSTRUCTS AND CONSTRAINTS

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Reinventing or re-envisioning the Indian university system requires a multi-pronged approach the first step to which would be creating a shared sense of direction it should take. This will require a group of dedicated and accomplished practitioners and thinkers to be in dialogue amongst them to keep abreast of all the changes that the education system requires. Taking pride in the achievements of the ancestors, is a matter common sense and realistic wisdom. There seems to be a great need of strengthening cadres of people with expertise in traditional learning to carry out the promotion and pursuit of their objectives in modern idiom. While envisioning the Indian universities' system, what is also required is recognition of the diversity of requirements and standards which help to meet the needs. Change will have to be at many levels. It would be from assumptions at the highest level of governance of this country to the lowliest execution paradigms. Realistic envisioning will need fast paced execution. In nutshell, there is a need to have a balanced assessment of what is needed, in what proportion and at what pace.

Reimagining Universities, amongst other things, involves creation of a value which is as per demand of the times. It is also an attempt to look at the existing values of the university system for a proper weeding of those values which may not be any longer relevant. The alignment of the values retained from the past and the creation of the relevant values must be seamless and smooth. The two streams must be mutually compatible and integrated on the essentials of a given focus. This may not be always easy or simple, because, by definition each set of values gets its own protagonist and champions. People identify with those values that further their identity and are integrated with it.

Consider a debate which wove around the university system in India in the late 1960s and the early 1970s of the last century. The focus was on the relevance and the outcome of the education process. One group held that all education must be 'useable' and relevant to the market. There was another group, equally vocal. It held the view that the University system should pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Viewing it through a utilitarian prism was not necessarily helpful or desirable. Like many debates, this debates withered away without a resolution. Reimagining the Indian University System in 2020 has this baggage, amongst others to carry. This is especially true for new universities which are being planned. In the ongoing COVID 19 experience, June 2020, there is a talk of making a 100 Universities focused on 'online learning'. The processes and content of this effort are yet to be brought into the public domain. It would appear obvious that certain disciplines are more prone to

the online method than others. Similarly within disciplines certain topics are amenable to the online method, others may not be.

As of now there are roughly 1041 universities in India as per the data of University Grants Commission (UGC), of which Central Universities are 54, State Universities 412, Private Universities 356, Deemed Universities 124. Several Universities are in the pipeline. The lay of the land shows that any attempt at designing a policy of higher education has been largely at the central level. There are patches in the 73-year-old history of the republic where successively different types of central education policies were experimented with. Some were motivated and accompanied with due jostling for and against. Allowing for a few of the Universities being a part of the policy planning constructs of the day, their longevity was determined by the longevity of that given line of thought having political dominance. Their longevity was also determined by the primacy of that cult of political thought having a political clout in the national political frame of the day. This kind of analysis cannot be replacement for the chronological analysis and evaluation of the same.

Two things emerge. In the last 10 years several stymied attempts have taken place relating to some key issues of educational operations of this country. The favorite one is whether UGC should exist or not. It says volumes about attempts to reimagining Indian Universities too. UGC exists today firing on 4 cylinders. Doubts have been raised about the efficacy and status of All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), also, not to forget Medical Council of India (MCI) or other related institution focused on a single sector of learning such as Medicine, Agriculture etc. Each attempt at change have successively raised its own storms--sometimes in a teacup. After the first flush of foray, for and against the existence of these institutions have subsided, the system continues with its 'usual pattern' of handling higher education. Occasionally some public opinion leader raises issues of the position of Indian learning institutions in the reputed ranking orders, originating from different parts of the world. The sense of affront at an obvious lack of adequate global status in such rankings is short lived and allowed to patter out. The who's who of the country and the socio-political elite continue to fund their wards' education, abroad in institutions which strengthens their social status and indeed lubricates their ward's entry into enviable employment streams and gallop upwards in it.

This may be an appropriate occasion to add that not only restructuring of university system have been attempted periodically in the past, but also at the college level various attempts have been made to restructure, redesign and reaffirm. All told, not enough has changed. Ultimately resolution among contending options is mostly arrived at that by the relative strengths-political and otherwise, of the contending points of view.

In the meanwhile, many educational institutions have become sinecure of out-of-job politician/ businessmen looking for domains to invest. Indeed in some cases Non Resident Indians (NRIs), who having come to grief in the land of their adoption, are

noticed to have decided to come back to the land of birth and re-discover their 'national fervor'. Many times it comes in the shape of setting up educational institutions.

There seems no way of preventing this or mitigating this, let alone reversing it. Inter connectedness of the different verticals of the decision making theatre in the country, make them fairly unassailable in the decision making domain. Many of such institutions do well for themselves and interestingly some have migrated a few of their branches abroad. This gives them enormous maneuverability.

Reimagining a system under such circumstances becomes a complex process. It would be plausible to argue that reimagining universities can be greatly facilitated through the aggies of a new system or through freshly designed up regulatory systems/institutions. Getting the older one on track may be a complicated business.

In the meanwhile, in the history of university system of nations who acquired independence around the same time as India did, continues to be variegated. There are some which have shoved ahead and the well-heeled amongst Indians also, love to send their wards to such universities. Some university names from the Singapore come easily to mind. There are other countries where the research culture in the university system is relatively weak and the prosperous families there also send their wards to USA, Canada, UK and comparable environments. The research culture or otherwise of the university systems across the world, apart, there are unique defining characteristics of university systems elsewhere.

In Malaysia, universities offer comparative religion classes. This approach breeds inter religious tolerance. In India this is not that common. Indeed, some are of the view that Article 30 of the Constitution, and its sub-clauses give an unusual twist to the matter. This kind of situation requires a fundamental rethink. If religious amity is to be further rooted in the learning psyche, it should get institutionalized, at the level of offering a learning opportunity, in the formative years of one's growing up. In several countries across the globe, at the tertiary levels, universities and institutions are increasingly offering unique degree courses. Students should also be encouraged to interact with members of different religions and visit various houses of worship as part of the course work. Some countries in Asia have done this successfully.

Many nations in the tropical universe, encourage setting of centers for inter-cultural and multi-cultural education. Their lesson plans at curricular material helps to improve, understanding of countries and cultures other than their own. In India such examples need to be far more common than they are today.

At level of comparative studies there is other example. Say, in Peru they have Andean Project on peasant technologies. It is devoted to what can be called affirmation of Andean culture. Their education system is based on a simple conviction. At the primary level of business knowledge, they believe that, whereas external inputs are welcome, they need to be embedded on the substructure of their intellectual heritage

seedbed. They never let themselves forget that they have been self-reliant for centuries. There is a collective ownership of ancestry which is seen by all as a hugely binding factor. India does not seem to have recognized this approach sufficiently to truly realise the strengths of its collective, shared scholastic heritage and excellence to build upon it. Mental blocks of sectarian identity, which some carry as a cultural bag, comes in the way of creating a truly Indian and comprehensive package of knowledge which would serve the cause of Indian developmental processes and managerial excellence. This is a critical step towards reinventing the universities in India.

Somehow, in Indian educational psyche and the educational narrative, the British colonial experience looms large. References to Macaulay are copious but recognition of its true evaluation is both limited and flawed. There is no plausible reason why India should not reverse it, if it is banal and moved beyond it. Many cultures have done so. This is also, what meant by 'creation of a value' (referred to, in the opening sentences of this write up). Peru attempted the contextualization of its agricultural education curriculum; India confined itself to an approach which had no biases for the indigenous learning assumptions. This created unique framework for a learning ambience.

It is not as if attempts were not made in India to revive some of the traditional methods of learning but the focus was predominantly on the 'processes' rather than the 'content'. Amongst the non-Hindu groups 'indigenous perspective' came to be viewed as an entity dominated by the needs and pre-eminence of religious learning. For the Hindus the state patronage was not considered unnecessary. The story does not stop there. Many richly endowed trusts of the Hindus from Mata Vaishno Devi to Sri Venkateshwar Temple Trust were taken over by the Government. Whereas the donation money was to an extent used to improve that temple infrastructure, there was little utilization of the fund received as donation to the temple for furthering the cause of Hindu religious learning or for that matter, even exploration of Hindu philosophy. Such a situation may or may not be commented on, but it cannot be ignored either. A visit to any country with ancient roots one witnesses respect for the past repositories of ideas, learning and analysis. Taking pride in the achievements of the ancestors, is a matter common sense and realistic wisdom. It need not necessarily be colored with denominational affiliation.

Consider the case of China-a so called 'Communist country'. Their respect for indigenous medicine is humongous. It has been given no religious overtones in its exploration, usage or packaging. It has its patrons in the education world, in the governance system and not the least in the business communities. It is today one of the most significant exports of China. In India Ayurveda has been remitted to Hinduism and Unani to Islam!

Take the comparisons further afield to understand the values underpinning the knowledge world in India. In India primacy of the patronage has gone to Allopathy. That is where the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) came and that is

where money was poured in for research and development. Ayurveda, Unani and more remained at the fringes, if even there, with parallel named institutions. The coming in of the alternate governance dispensation, at the Centre, has seen some of this change. 'Ayush' is being increasingly talked of. However, what this has changed on the lay of the land of educational learning and the university system remains to be seen.

There seems to be great need of strengthening cadres of people with expertise in traditional learning to carry out the promotion and pursuit of their objectives in modern idiom. This is a cadre which needs to be nurtured for taking some initial steps in this direction. If this could happen, it would mark a significant beginning. The reinvented university should be equipped to manage such learning and development. Of the myriad ways in which this can be done, one way would be by building and delivering sensitization modules in teachers training programme. The objective would be to strengthen skills to supplement the knowledge of those familiar with heritage learning with the nuances of contemporary ethos.

Reinventing or re-envisioning Indian university system requires a multi-pronged approach, the first step to which would be creating a shared sense of direction it should take. This will require a group of dedicated and accomplished practitioners and thinkers to be in dialogue amongst them to keep abreast of all the changes that the education system requires. This system itself requires a multi-level of the approach. It would need operating in varying manners in different domains of learning, in different parts of the country recalibrating its thrust, focus and purpose as per local requirements. One University Grants System can help creating a bottom line of standards. However, it cannot be the answer to a pluralistic learning environment embedded in the ecosystem from the frozen tips of Himalayas to the gay-abandon of the gusty waves of the Indian Ocean lapping the shores of Kanyakumari. The regional and local bodies have all a role to play.

While en-visioning the Indian Universities what is, also, required is recognition of the diversity of requirements, creation of standards which help to meet the spectrum of needs and are built up on a sub-structure of core standards. The idea and system of Higher Education Forum was a foray in this direction but needed to be developed both strategically and conceptually.

The re-envisioning of the university system in India requires the ability to enable these institutions to serve as the forum of inter-regional dialogues and action. It needs to be appreciated that the distillation of achievements of indigenous arts and crafts is an integral part of the making of a good citizen. So also, recognizing and projecting the ideas, concepts and achievements of Indian collectives and methods, rooted in Indian soil is an important component of proper education. Illustratively, the thoughts and paradigms of, say, Ahom Dynasty, the Chalukyas, and others are examples which cannot be brushed away as something which will take place on its own. It has to be nurtured, sustained, developed systematically and organically.

The debates such as those between utilitarian pursuits of knowledge and pursuit of knowledge, for the sake of knowledge cannot be allowed to come in the way of autonomy of enquiry.

Autonomy of enquiry is central to the envisioning of a university. The struggle which currently one sees in certain quarters, is to seize the intellectual assumptions and paradigm of learning of the University going community, for a given school of thinking. This dimension needs to be fully understood and handled appropriately.

Autonomy of enquiry can only be a surrogate to the un-biased competency of the faculty, the richness of resources and ability to pursue knowledge in all its myriad forms. For this a certain flexibility and interfacing with the larger world would help. India needs to recognize that there will, also, be different modules of learning, teaching and delivery being made compatible with the requirements of the learners who come there. This is where virtual learning will also take its due place.

There was a time when there were a handful of central universities working in an environment of ivory tower and seeking solace in the recognition which the faculty got from prestigious learning centers of the industrial west.

It is about time to move beyond these assumptions and recognize the difference between a central university in Arunachal Pradesh and say a central university in Hyderabad. It's not only the subject matters that will be varied but the nature of the resource material which they would have to be handled. This requires deep thinking in the leadership pattern of the university and the group of scholars who would lead it. The national regulatory system would have to learn to recognize the diversity needed in learning packages to cater to the regional requirements. It may be a worthwhile to remind ourselves that the University Grants Commission did not have panel of experts in modern Indian languages till early 1970s. It took decades to recognize this need. The time constant needed for recognizing even the basic needs of the higher education, is far too large for the fast paced changes taking place all round. Realistic envisioning will need fast paced execution.

Change will have to be at many levels. It would be from assumptions at the highest level of governance of this country to the lowliest execution paradigms. This is not, just an academic issue.

We have no universities in India which have the antiquity or pedigree that one sees in some parts of the world including UK, USA and elsewhere. The Indian scholastic tradition which at one time of history could project with pride institutions such as Takshila, Nalanda and elsewhere unfortunately suffered a major brake in tradition.

The marauding hordes of Central Asia not only, literally, pillaged and looted the knowledge resources, preserved and stored but actively burnt vast acquisitions of libraries. Popular memory has it that some of this fires lasted weeks. The charred

walls of Nalanda, even today, stand testimony to the depredations suffered. This has to be underscored, recognized and grasped as a major brake in intellectual thought the sub-continent has suffered.

Europe may have had their parallel share of military movements in the same period of human history in the form of crusades. The crusades were also known to loot and plunder. But there was nothing in their attack on knowledge and learning, the like of which, say, Nalanda University suffered.

In nutshell, there is a need to have a balanced assessment of what is needed and in what proportion. As has been said above, the education revolution in India goes back to several millennia BC and then underwent abrupt brake. Through various colonial experiences from about 8th century onwards (i.e. time of Harshavardan) whereas scholastic learning tradition existed in small pockets in different parts of the country essentially it boiled down to patronage of arts and literally tradition in royal courts. Outside the royal courts, gradually devotional skills became important and learning in, what as we understand as the University system, went by default.

Concurrently in the west the periods of the crusades were followed up by the period of Renaissance and enlightenment. Great paintings came up in various Centres of Europe and the focus was on individual talent. In India too, there were patches of bright flash and several architectural pieces came up. However, as is obvious architectural master pieces were a result of royal patronage. By definition royal patronage requires wealth and sustained administrative support. That is another matter in altogether.

Further, it needs to be recognized that the University system in Europe created the manpower to administer the system both, internally in Europe and externally in expanding boundaries of the empires in the Americas, Africa, Asia and elsewhere. The theme of the University in Europe became *Universitas Magistrorum*. This Latin expressions means universities were for creating the appropriate cadres of administration. Thus it was that whether it midlands of Europe or Britain, Universities were seen as a place where competent administrators could be bred. It is not as if Universities came into their own in Europe to create the cadre of administrators.

Before this phase these vary universities had gone through a period which could truly be called *Universitas Literarum*. Translated from Latin, it means “Universities were a place to pursue literary activities, strengthen literacy and generally be the seed bed of trained intellectual activity”.

Put simple *Universtas literarum* had graduated into *Universitas magistrorum*. This is the process of the reinvention of university. This reinvented brief of the universities was not going to be eternal. Soon enough a new re-invention would be needed.

Give it a couple of centuries and the empires began fading away. The process of colonies becoming independent began with the American War of the Independence in

the second half of the 18th century. The universities were now going to be reinvented to meet the newer demands that were being made upon them.

The next stage in the growth of Universities was universities becoming *universitas alumnorum*. Put in English, universities were supposed to be for the Alumni. That phase still holds sway. This is notwithstanding the fact that various elements of composition of what mix of learning is best for an alumni-to-be, is still undergoing continuous re-evaluation. As matters stand today, progressively technology has become one of the most powerful variables in the continued relevance of the university system. Never in any time of the history was this the case.

However, times change and with changing times, requirements change. This is also true of the pursuit of knowledge and learning, Pre University learning, dealing largely with basics, cuts through of much this. It is natural therefore, that the thrust and the learning architecture, not to forget the content and the delivery process, undergo a change but at varying paces. It also, has varying contents at different levels of education from the primary to the post-graduate. Change and hence reinvention is a part of this continuum. The universities therefore, have a compulsion to move on.

It would be useful to remind ourselves that with the incoming of the post-world war situation and almost universal presence of technology exchange of knowledge became easier simpler and more universalized. The process of cross border information exchange which began with the incoming of radars in the early 19th century went through a series of developments to emerge as the internet of things. The world had not only got integrated but was needing regulation dealing with the control access, flow, and use of data. Such an effort can only take place in a scholastic environments and it became a part of the university system to look into this also.

The opening of new departments in University was nothing new. What was new was the emergence of a varied architecture of the university system. It was now possible in the university system to set up focus areas of endeavor called schools or more evolved units called centers or indeed units which have sanction as per the conditions laid down in the statutes. It shows the recognition of varying demands on the scholastic domain or the kind of financial support the units have been able to generate.

All told, the reinvented university of the post-world war situation was bound to be a dynamic one. Each stage of reinvention would by itself be marked for pressures for further change. Thus, it is that the university system got cast in a dynamic mould which was almost in a continuous stage of transition. This process in last 60 years has grown more intense and many aspects of the university system are in the stage of continuous review. This covers everything from curriculum to funding to what can be called the 'review of the system'.

In India the state remains the prime mover of initiating and organizing the university system. In some of the other countries the role of the state is found more limited and is confined to, if even that, the design of the regulatory framework. Here too models are many. In some of the countries the state confines itself to initiating the policy frame and the institutions themselves design their regulatory framework which is then sanctified by the state. The present state of evaluation of university system in India, would also require a more graduated and evolved approach.

Education as per Indian constitution is a concurrent subject. The states are expected to enunciate an education policy, carefully tiptoeing around what has been in enunciated in the national educational policy.

Whereas most universities would have faculty driven ambience it would be necessary to recognize that a significant portion of faculty time, in universities which received public funding must be devoted to issues of national, regional or local development. That the present system provides opportunities for this is true. However, endless liberty can convert itself into a license. The funding agency has a right to ask what they are gaining out of the system that they help to run.

The re-invented framework of the university would require a recognition that learning does takes place in the portal of the university. Alongside, that also takes place outside the university portals.

Electronic media based learning which has progressively become more universal would need to be a supplement to what it can be done in the framework of university curriculum requirements. There was a time when Fox-pro or C+ was part in the first year of management education. In the day and age it is expected that the students admitted to the curriculum will come equipped with this skill.

This is true of other domains of knowledge, their structure and dynamics of learning. Today the changing nature of jobs, work and organization are putting much pressure on the learning process. The learner desires and needs an opportunity to exercise choices of selection after a basic framework of competency is reached.

In the re-invented scheme of the university system continuous evaluation will have to be combined with periodic evaluation. This logic would apply not only to the students but also the faculty and staff where the pressure on their growth process today is larger and greater than ever before. The salary structure merits a review as would the opportunities of self-growth and learning.

The time may be right for consciously and collectively, defining 'reinvention', as a process in the context of the universities.

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Dr. Vinayshil Gautam, FRAS (London) is an internationally acclaimed Management Expert. He was the Founder Director of Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode {IIM(K)}. Earlier, he served in many prestigious national and international organizations like Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi (IIT,D) as the first Head of the Management Department; Leader, Consulting Team Indian Institute of Management, Shillong; Programme Director and Senior Advisor, KPMG, India; Sr MD & Principal Economic Adviser, Protiviti (I) Member Pvt Ltd among others.

His expertise has been sought in some of the key policy formulation activities of the Government; Academia and the Corporate sector. He facilitated Management Development activities in Germany, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and some of the finest organisations in India. He sits on the board of various Indian and non-Indian organizations. He has addressed International audiences from Montreal to Melbourne and Caracas to Tokyo. He has been visiting faculty to universities such as Cambridge, Sussex, London, Brunel, Dominican, Duke, Penn State. He is an author/editor of about two dozen books and over a hundred papers.

He is the recipient of various national and International awards, including the Outstanding Individual Contributions Award of ARTDO International; Fellowship of the Royal Asiatic Society, London; Fellowship of the Association of Business Executives, UK; G-51, Mellenium Award; Legendary Contribution to Education Award at the World Education Congress; Bharat Gaurav Award; Shiksha Rattan Puraskar; DMA Achievement Award. He was conferred the completion of 400 years Merida City (Venezuela) medallion in June 2009; and Dewang Mehta Life-time Achievement Award.