Comment

EQUALITY IN THE INDIAN UNIVERSITY

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Most serious discussions on Indian universities today invoke the traditions of Oxford and Cambridge as these were implanted in Indian soil during the period of British rule. In a certain respect, Professor André Béteille’s essay on the “Pursuit of Equality and the Indian University”, which alone among his essays in The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays deals with universities, is no exception to the pattern. He, however, steers skilfully through the dangerous straits of extremely exacting and perhaps impossible ideals on the one side, the bitter, self-exculpating complaints on the other. He sees that there are dangers but does not despair. He is neither a snob nor a populist.

I fully share Professor Béteille’s fear that the steadily rising populist demands on higher education in India menace the intellectual quality of Indian higher education. He is rightly apprehensive that instead of trying to find a compromise between the ideal of equality and certain inevitable facts of the inequality of intellectual achievement, the Indian universities might do justice to neither. It is necessary to see the demand for equality which is being addressed to the universities against the background of their historical development and in the setting of their internal structure and their relationships with each other.

The first three universities of India—the Universities of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta—were established by the British government of India in 1857 in the three presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Bengal. Such a measure was partly in compensation for the previous niggardliness of the East India Company’s educational administration, and partly a conciliatory gesture towards the indigenous Indian mercantile and professional elite, which was demanding the provision of modern higher education on the Western pattern. The universities were named after the cities where they were located. (If the universities were intended to be the universities for their respective presidencies, then why was Calcutta University not called the University of Bengal?) No one thought there was anything invidiously disparaging in giving the universities the names of their cities; after all, the few British universities then in existence bore the names of the cities in which they were located.

Today the issue of the naming and renaming of universities is a source of

1 Béteille, André, The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 122-156.
2 Ibid., pp. 122-123.
disturbance on some campuses. Choices of names—whether those of recent political leaders, figures of the independence movement, social and religious reformers, administrators or princely rulers—are all influenced by local or regional pride, primordial affinities and pressure-group politics in which members of such groups perceive positive advantage or disadvantage if the universities concerned are or are not named the way they want. Universities located in underdeveloped regions tend to be more sensitive to the politics of naming or renaming. The first three Indian universities were indeed very lucky to escape this a century and a quarter ago. The question of names is of no importance in itself but the agitation about it from time to time shows how frivolously some persons regard universities.

During the 90 years from 1857, when the first three universities were created in India, to 1947, just 19 universities were established. The growth was slow, but in general it was carefully and cautiously considered. In fact, up to the turn of the century only two more universities had been established—one in Punjab at Lahore and the other in the United Provinces at Allahabad, the former bearing the name of the Presidency but the latter expressing and reinforcing the domination of Allahabad in the cultural and political life of the United Provinces.

During the British colonial period, the formation of new universities in India coincided with the rise of political awakening and the nationalist consciousness, and not with any parallel economic growth. The relatively rapid rate of growth of university education in India after 1920 was in part a function of the growth of the aspiration of the Indian middle classes to live in a modern, national state and society. This contrasts sharply with the expansion of the university system in Great Britain, or for that matter in all of Europe. There it ran parallel to the development of mercantile and industrial capitalism. This is worthy of note because the industrial revolution in Great Britain was achieved without any significant contribution from the universities as such. The ancient universities fought bitterly against the introduction of technical subjects into universities. In fact the modern or provincial universities which did provide for teaching and research in technical subjects were in part sustained by the belief that Great Britain was losing ground industrially to Germany, and that study and research in scientific and technological subjects would preserve the British position. Local pride, local industrial and commercial interests and local social aspirations also played an important part in the establishment of the modern universities. In so far as equality was sought, it was equality of opportunity for the intellectually qualified and ambitious. This point was made quite

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3 This point has been well made for nineteenth-century India in Seal, Anil, Emergence of Indian Nationalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).