Chapter Six
Between the Public and the Private¹:
Indian Academics in Transition

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Introduction
Higher education (HE) is in the midst of a fundamental shift in its relationship to society as a result of profound economic and political changes. On the one hand, public support of higher education is in question due to the dominance of market ideology; on the other hand, the social demand for higher education is rising. Higher education is being equated to a marketable commodity and as investment for profit. It is no longer viewed as a public good. The private sector is coming to play a critical role in higher education even in countries where it was, until recently, fully subsidized by the state. The question asked is, Is higher education no longer the social responsibility of the government? This is especially true when it is also being argued that higher education is a keystone to development—be it economic, social, or human. Additionally, since higher education is expected to ensure trained and responsible leadership, it can be said to provide the main thrust in development (Thompson et al., 1977). The universities and the academics are also being perceived as critical to knowledge production and to train the human resources for the restructured global economy. This is putting pressure on the universities to change their goals and functions, which impacts on its traditional functions and also on the academics.

The terminology of discourse has changed—financial support has become “subsidy”—a word lifted from the economic discourse and transplanted into the educational arena. “Brain drain” has become “migration of knowledge workers” and knowledge generation/creation is now “knowledge production.” Now higher education is viewed as a nonmerit good that has to be paid for by those who would like to acquire it. The buzz words are self-financing, marketization, privatization, industry higher education interface, and so on. Perceptions about the academic profession have changed from one that prepared professionals to one that produces a “globally competitive workforce” (Kelso and Leggett, 1999).

While the higher education system, as a whole, is in a turmoil this chapter focuses on the impact of the redefinition of the role of the government in higher education...
on the academic profession in India generally, and on the teachers in the colleges and universities specifically. It is based on the understanding that higher education is changing considerably in response to economic reforms of post-1990, which include changes in state policy vis-à-vis higher education, rising social demand for higher education, internationalization of higher education, and also its shift from a largely publicly funded system to the market and private funds.

The changes across higher education in India are very rapid and continuous with very little documentation on it. Academic profession as an area of investigation has not been researched in India. Most importantly the choice of the theme of this case study has been influenced by the author’s own position as a social science teacher in a central university. This chapter will refer mainly to the social sciences in the universities and colleges and occasionally to the specialized institutes of science, technology, etc. In this instance, the public system of higher education includes the private-aided colleges while private institutions, in this chapter, refer to the unaided, self-financing colleges/institutes such as the Deemed universities and private universities.

This chapter

- provides an overview of higher education in India especially in the pre-globalization phase, that is, from 1951 to 1991 and highlights some of the salient features of the academic profession;
- discusses the developments since 1990 when the government of India adopted the policy of economic reform and liberalization;
- highlights the expansion of the private sector, especially the private unaided self-financing institutions that have come up during the last decade or so; and
- looks at some of the issues and problems facing the academics in conditions of marketization and the extent to which the academic profession has undergone transition.

Knowledge, Academic Profession, and the University

The classical organizational structure for universities is that of an institution that is governed by an academic community based on collegiality. Collegiality is based on the concept of the university composed of a community of equal scholars who can manage their own affairs and activities and act as a “clerisy” or a body of scholars giving importance to the collective rather than individual decision-making process (Farnham, 1999).

It is not for the first time that the contribution of state support to the universities has become central to the discourse on higher education. In late eighteenth century, Adam Smith advocated the need for competition and accountability in the universities. He supported the idea of paying the salaries out of the tuition fees paid by the students, rather than out of endowments, so that they could demand and get the kind of education that they had paid for. This would generate competition and encourage the faculty to improve its performance (quoted in Bhushan, 2004). Buchanan and Devletoglu (1970) argue that competition is essential, even if there are no tuition fees, especially competition among universities for faculty appointments to reduce mediocrity.