

Reflections on the Higher Education in India¹

Sudhir Kumar Sopory

My congratulations to all the members of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) for having played an important national responsibility in giving access to education and in increasing the overall gross enrolment ratio (GER) in the country. I was associated with IGNOU in its early days. I was part of the team that designed and prepared the reading material related to plant biology and was a member of some of the committees. Today, of course, I am coming to this campus after a very long time.

IGNOU and the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) have something in common; both are named after great statespersons, visionaries and the former Prime Ministers of this country. Both supported education and science as a means for the transformation of our society. Mrs. Indira Gandhi once said, "Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratizing force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smothering our inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances". To quote Jawaharlal Nehru "A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of ideas and for the search of truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well within the nation and the people". In this context, IGNOU has made a mark in the field of distance education and definitely made a change in educating a large section of society.

The question that we face today is: have we come upto the expectations of our leaders. Being a scientist by profession, I have not done any serious analysis on this topic. I only speak as a general educationist and one who is concerned with various issues related to higher education.

Currently, higher education is imparted to the students of this country through around 550 degree awarding Institutes, 42 central Universities and about 240 state and other universities. In addition, we have a number

of IITs and other such Institutes. Despite a massive expansion that has taken place in education in the last plan period, access to higher education is still an unfulfilled aspiration of Indian youth, whose percentage in the total Indian population is ever increasing. Over 5.4 million graduates and 1million post-graduates have the desire to study further. How do we then meet the expectations of our young generation? To meet this demand, private sector has come up to set up new Universities and education institutes; some of these are well established. However, many of these are in the business of teaching, may be good teaching, but most of these are not involved in generating knowledge. Also, these private Universities are not easily accessible to the economically weaker sections of the society.

Accessibility to higher studies is an issue that we have taken seriously at JNU. Our admission policy, right from its inception, had factored in a mechanisms to give access to socially and economically weaker sections. We have also adopted the OBC (other backward class) policy. Our gender policy has also helped us to achieve an equal ratio between girls and boys. We have also developed courses to empower the weaker students with language, communication and IT related skills.

While expansion and accessibility are the issues that have to be dealt with even in the future years, a major concern has been to foster excellence in teaching and research. More than anyone else, this rests with teachers. To create students with the ability to think and innovate, we need to change our course architecture, which is still very rigid. Students have less flexibility to select and choose the courses of their choice. We bind them to a specific stream at a very early age without giving them an opportunity to change at a later stage. We make them choose "Career for life and not life for career".

Even though we have a large number of Central and State Universities, the knowledge generation and research output in sciences, social sciences and humanities is not adequate. Although some of our Universities have shown better results, yet these have

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also not been able to make it up to the World ranking Universities. This demands analysis, and some measures from within and without need to be taken towards improvement of our productivity, both quantitatively and also qualitatively. Even in the technology sector, I feel that we have just been trained to adapt to new tools, gadgets and technologies but have failed measurably to innovate except in some of the low-end technology sector. Of course, in the area of space research and agriculture we have made good strides.

To me, excellence and performance will remain a major concern for most of the universities and to overcome this we need to relook at our recruitment and appointment policies at all levels of entry in the teaching and administration. The carrying capacity of each unit should be planned; too thin and too obese organization will always show "disease symptoms". Every component of the university i.e., teachers, staff, administrators and students must be responsible and accountable.

I understand that in the 12th Plan, a major emphasis will be on the teacher who, I feel, is the central figure and cornerstone of education system. Rabindranath Tagore also once remarked "A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself, just as a lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn itself".

Universities are a dynamic system where students come and go. This dynamism brings in new culture and new ideas which, most of the time, we are unable to tap or let them bloom due to rigid ideas and compartmentalized course and research structure. There is more emphasis on transmitting knowledge and less emphasis on analyzing the gained knowledge and coupling it with one's own experience, which may result in the generation of new knowledge. Learning and teaching has been emphasized in our culture as essential for healthy physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual upbringing. Shri Aurobindo, a great Indian philosopher, has said "Each human being is a self develop soul. The educational curriculum should be designed in such a way that it should enable and help the learner to educate himself, develop his own intellectual, moral, aesthetic capabilities and grow as a better human being. It should enlighten the darken areas and awaken the dormant

centers of the brain". The objective of education thus, is self development and development of others and the society. To build a system of education, worthy of its commitment to society, one has to have the moral and ethical standards in place. The knowledge must spread beyond self. For this, like a tree, we must keep our roots in our traditions and culture, spread our branches in the air of modern education, set flowers that will attract others on our side and set seeds which will spread and germinate in and outside the borders of parameters and boundaries. In this century, where we have to attend to many global issues like climate change, water, energy, peaceful coexistence and development based on new knowledge, it is important that higher education and knowledge must transcend the national boundaries. It is in this context that one is emphasizing on the global education programs, and on developing linkages with institutions within and outside India.

Last I must admit that I have many questions in mind for which I do not have any simple answers: For example:

1. Before partition and after the independence, the performance of many of our Universities was very good; the contributions of many scientists were well recognized world over; the standard of teaching and research was high. I do not want to name any one in particular, but why these Universities could not improve or even sustain their excellence?
2. Why we have not been able to create new frontiers of knowledge or even catch up with them? Why is it that when our own students / teachers go abroad they innovate and generate novel ideas?
3. How to bring value to education?

Thus, in addition to expanding our education institutions, creating good opportunities for education to all the sections of society, improving methodologies and facilities to create excellence in teaching and research, there is a need to create "greater education temper & culture", together with generating financial and material support and sensitizing the central and state organizations to the needs of colleges and universities, teachers and students and above all, of the Nation. Mr. M.C. Chagla once said, "I wish I were both the Education Minister and the Finance Minister, and

then I could write cheques for education. But I am not....I have to beg....Please give me some money for education because I think this is the greatest national activity that we can have".

I end with a quote from Rabindranath Tagore, whose 150th birth anniversary we all are celebrating this year "For some time past, education has lacked idealism in its mere exercise of an intellect which has no depth of sentiment. The one desire produced in the heart of the students has been an ambition to win success in the world, not to reach some inner standard of perfection, not to obtain self-emancipation".

Sudhir Kumar Sopory is the vice-chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He is a distinguished scientist of the country and an eminent Plant Molecular Biologist of International repute. He has been awarded various National and International Awards for his pioneering contributions to Scientific Research and Teaching. Notable among them are: prestigious Bhatnagar Award of CSIR; Chakravorty Award; Birbal Sahni Medal of the Botanical Society; Birbal Sahni Birth Centenary Award of Indian Science Congress; Godnev Award Lecture of Belarus Academy of Sciences and Padma Shri, Government of India. He is an elected Fellow of the Indian National Science Academy (New Delhi); Indian Academy of Sciences (Bangalore); National Academy of Sciences (Allahabad); National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (New Delhi) and The World Academy of Sciences (Trieste, Italy). He has also been awarded the Corresponding Membership Award of American Society for Plant Biology in the year 2010, the first time to an Indian.