

The Destruction of Universities*

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When BJP rule in the country is dead and gone, a good deal of the damage it has caused to the Indian society, polity and economy will no doubt be reversed. But there are at least two areas where such reversal will be difficult: one is the architectural vandalism it has perpetrated. This vandalism began with the destruction of the Babri Masjid, which, quite apart from stoking communal animosity, was an instance of barbarism: no civilized and sensitive group would wantonly destroy a 400-year old structure; and this vandalism has continued with the insertion of a structure next to the parliament building that destroys the carefully planned old layout. (The fact that it was a colonial regime that had conceived it is not a justification for such vandalism).

The other area where the damage inflicted by the BJP government has been massive and whose reversal will be as difficult is the destruction of universities; and it is this which concerns us here. A university is not just a set of buildings where teaching takes place; any coaching centre can have these. A university above all is a space which values thought, and creating an ethos where thought is valued, takes time. Such spaces are especially difficult to create in a third world society; and it is to India's credit that it had managed to create a few such spaces. A contributory factor no doubt was the size of the country: academics from neighbouring countries often lament that their countries simply lack the scale to build a proper academic atmosphere; but an even more important factor in India was a generally shared respect for serious thought in society, whether or not one agrees with a particular school of thought.

Fascistic outfits which are themselves devoid of any serious thought, also lack respect for serious thought. It is little wonder then that the BJP government is hell-bent on systematically destroying the few spaces that exist in the country for serious thought. Its assault on universities will do incalculable damage to the country.

This assault which had begun with public universities has now extended even to private universities. Central universities like the University of Delhi which arguably had among the best undergraduate teaching programmes in the world, the Jawaharlal Nehru University which pioneered an academic discourse in the social sciences in India that challenged the hegemony of the metropolis, and Viswa Bharati which was infused with the vision of Rabindranath Tagore, are now reduced to mere shadows of their former selves. By appointing as vice chancellors persons whose primary qualification is loyalty to the RSS, by making sub-standard appointments to faculty positions in the desire to "take-over" universities by filling them with their loyalists, by doing exactly the same with respect to student intake, by ensuring that the various academic bodies are filled with "yes-men" by making out-of-turn appointments as deans and chairpersons and giving numerous extensions to them in these positions, the BJP establishment has not only destroyed the vibrant democratic ethos that prevailed in these universities earlier. It has not only let its favoured goons terrorise opponents with impunity, but has inevitably lowered the academic standards in these once-prestigious centres of learning. And to cap it all these universities are also being starved of funds.

Now its reach has even extended to private universities, which had come up during the decline of public universities. What Ashoka University has reportedly done must be quite unparalleled anywhere. A member of its economics faculty had written an academic paper suggesting on the basis of a careful analysis of data that there might have been manipulation of election results in some constituencies in the 2019 parliament election. Universities are precisely the places where papers like this get written; but not only did the BJP army of trolls come down like a ton of bricks on the faculty member, but the university quite gratuitously put out a statement dissociating itself from the paper. Further, it turns out that the university's governing body, where its donors are represented, sat in judgement over this purely academic paper and even suggested some modifications in it. The faculty member has submitted his resignation, and his department has objected to the university's behaviour and threatened protest action if the faculty member is not reinstated.

A bunch of businessmen, which is what the donors of private universities typically tend to be, sitting in judgement over an academic paper is completely unheard of. And it is not as if the authorities of Ashoka University, and even the donors themselves, are unaware of it. But they chose to intervene in academic matters because of their fear of the government. It is the central government's hostility to any criticism, even in the form of an academic paper, that is being relayed through the governing body and the university authorities, to the academic faculty.

It is patently obvious that no university worth its name can function under these conditions. At this rate if an academic paper for instance argues that poverty in India, instead of declining as claimed has actually increased during a certain period that overlaps with BJP rule, then its author will be censured and asked to revise its conclusions. If a paper argues on the basis of data that because of the agrarian crisis the per capita real income in rural India has gone down during a certain period that overlaps with BJP rule, then that too will have to be "revised" in conformity with the government's wishes. Research under these conditions will become synonymous with simply publicising the BJP government's hand-outs about its own achievements; and since teaching in a university is invariably nourished by research, the death of research will also mean the atrophy of teaching, and hence the death of the university.

Some may feel that this is an over-statement, that in all private universities, donors and university authorities (it is often difficult to allocate exact responsibility) exercise immense influence on the university's academic life. They certainly influence appointments. In North American universities in the old days scholars of Jewish origin were often discriminated against; nowadays anyone sympathetic to the Palestinian cause is at a disadvantage. Marxists of course are always victims of discrimination, so much so that Paul Sweezy had even stopped accepting invitations from several universities to become a visiting professor because he had heard that his visiting stints were being used as an excuse to deny tenure to young Marxist scholars who had earlier been temporarily recruited to teach.

There are however two basic differences between such instances of donor-driven or authorities-driven discrimination or victimisation that occur in many private universities abroad and what we have just witnessed in India. First, in all such instances of discrimination or victimisation it is rare to find any evidence of government intervention or threat behind the actions of university authorities; these actions may express donors' prejudices, including prejudices in favour of the ruling

establishment, but not political arm-twisting. Second, the instances of discrimination and victimisation in private universities abroad rarely take the form of its donors or authorities “investigating” an academic research paper and asking its author to make changes in it. Research papers are peer-reviewed and follow an entirely independent trajectory towards publication, where there may of course be explicit or implicit interference to change their content; but this has nothing to do with the university authorities or donors. What is unfolding in Ashoka University is thus extremely unusual; it reflects the ascendancy of a fascistic state that simply cannot tolerate any criticism, however implicit and however academic, of its actions or of the process that brought it to power, and puts pressure to have such criticism withdrawn.

But this virtually rules out all research in the social sciences. These disciplines are concerned with society and hence, crucially, with the formation of governments and the outcome of government action; if scholars cannot study them to arrive at conclusions they consider truthful (and the academic world has its own mechanisms for assessing the truthfulness of such conclusions) then research in the social sciences becomes impossible. Eventually this will also extend to the natural sciences, where any research throwing doubts on the pet superstitions of the Hindutva elements will invite demands for recantation. This will destroy the *raison d’être* of universities in the country, reducing them at best to mere coaching centres.

The Modi government is given to much drum-beating about its vision for India as an *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) country; but no country can be self-reliant if its universities have been effectively destroyed.

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