

Are public universities under threat?

PARLEY

Political interference and intolerance for critical debate have left universities without vitality

Recently, Romila Thapar and 11 others were asked to submit their CVs so that a committee appointed by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) could evaluate their body of work and decide on their continuation as Professors Emeriti. In a conversation moderated by Anuradha Ramman, Satish Deshpande and Y.K. Alagh speak of the pressures Indian universities face today and the process by which professors are honoured with the Emeritus/ Emerita title. Edited excerpts:

Professor Deshpande, every university is facing two kinds of enemies: one from within and one from outside. What do you have to say to that?

Satish Deshpande: I would say that today the very idea of a university seems to be in danger in India. In particular, the public university is an important institution for a country like India. We have a lot of poverty and inequality. We are not in a position to redistribute any resources other than access to higher education. We can't distribute land and wealth. So, the only resource that provides hope for social mobility for the have-nots is access to higher education. For that reason, public universities are important.

The other function of universities, especially public universities, is, to put it very grandly, to think critically on behalf of society. But we seem to be in the presence of a mindset, particularly amongst those who are wielding power, that universities are meant to amplify feel-good feelings. If this idea of a university is pursued, it will kill the idea of a university. Universities are meant to be distinct from society so that space can be used to experiment with ideas, to be critical knowing that you are in a protected space. What is not possible in mainstream society should be possible in a university. Both of these ideas – the university as a source of access to social mobility and the older liberal idea of the university as an oasis in society where critical thinking is deliberately promoted in the larger interest of the society – are in danger in different ways.

There are two main planks to this. One is in the proliferation of

contradictory policies, and this started when Kapil Sibal was HRD Minister. There has been a lot of activity on the part of the government to frame policies without a coherent roadmap. There has been a proliferation of such initiatives. That is one dimension. There is slow strangulation which is happening – policy confusion and a lack of a larger vision. The other plank is the openly anti-intellectual stance. Intellectuals of all varieties are being vilified and the university as an institution is under attack. Universities like JNU, Hyderabad University, Allahabad University, Delhi University and Tata Institute of Social Sciences have been under attack. This is a very difficult time for universities in India.

Professor Alagh, is the very idea of a university in danger?

Y.K. Alagh: Universities are meant to be both autonomous and accountable. They have to perform. In that sense, they are accountable [to the public]. The best universities create skills in the cultural and economic context of society. That is why this notion we have that we can create global universities is not right.

Professor Deshpande, wasn't distrust between the political dispensation and public universities always the case? What is different now?

SD: While all political parties dislike their political enemies, they have tended to distinguish between their enemies and the institutions to which their enemies belong. I am not saying that individual academics were not targeted in the past. But the previous regimes [including the earlier NDA regime under Atal Bihari Vajpayee] stopped short of damaging institutions. But this regime does not mind destroying institutions, as it nurses a grudge that the Right has been treated shabbily.

How legitimate is that grudge?

SD: It is true that they were sidelined. The question is, how do you respond to it? Ideally, in an academic context, you respond with rigorous research to prove your point



and produce your own intellectuals who can argue the same. That is not happening.

Professor Alagh, what do you have to say about political interference in universities in administrative affairs?

YKA: This incident concerning Romila Thapar that you mentioned in the beginning of our conversation... I appointed Professors Emeriti and they are clearly for a lifetime. The whole thing is done after due process. The JNU Vice-Chancellor is a powerful man because there is a separate Act for JNU [Jawaharlal Nehru University Act, 1966]. It is a very special university. Why is this whole business being flogged now? I think you should ask the administration. I do find it not in the spirit of the JNU I knew. The late G. Parthasarathy, who was the first Vice-Chancellor, had framed the guidelines for the Vice-Chancellor of the university. We could pick anyone and make him or her a professor. A very famous editor of a national daily was sacked; we appointed him. In all such cases, our guidelines said, you must get the best letters of references from the best people in the world. So, we don't appoint professors without reference, without following due process. Whenever I travelled abroad, people were curious to know who would succeed such and such professor in the history department of JNU. The university had that reputation. That's what makes JNU special.

Tell us about how Professors Emeriti were honoured during your tenure as Vice-Chancellor of JNU. What was the goal?

YKA: The objective of honouring academics for life was actually an

objective in the charter of JNU. For some reason the process had been discontinued and it was in my tenure that we chose to revive it. The process, often long-drawn-out, involved consulting people within the university and in universities abroad on the eminence of the people chosen for the honour. Once approved, I took it to the academic council and the executive council. These honours, I repeat, are for life. I don't understand why the university has chosen to belittle them.

You had mentioned that the JNU Vice-Chancellor is a very powerful man. A committee appointed two years ago by the HRD Ministry had observed that an important reason for poor outcomes was increasing political interference. There was a suggestion that the office of the Vice-Chancellor should be depoliticised.

YKA: It is obvious that there is a process by which a Vice-Chancellor is appointed. You cannot tamper with the process. I was in Spain when I was informed that a search committee had chosen me as the Vice-Chancellor of JNU. Obviously, if you bring in reasons other than a person's abilities, that would be extremely unfortunate for the university. Politicisation means you put in politicians in the search committee rather than experts. That would be unfortunate. But mind you, given the nature of our society, there are

some distinguished academics who are in some sense closer to a viewpoint. I wouldn't be upset if an Arun Shourie or an Arun Jaitley was part of a search process of the director of a national institute. But you have to get people who have the capability, the educational qualifications and experience. It should be depoliticised in the narrow sense of the term. But whether you can do so in the larger liberal sense of the term, I am not so sure. Vice-Chancellors, after all, are also thinking people. They should be people of high capability and distinction.

Professor Deshpande, how important is it to insulate the appointment of the Vice-Chancellor from the political structure of the day?

SD: It is also important to nurture democratic structures of decision-making and opinion-making within the university. Sometimes, you have a situation where the Vice-Chancellor becomes an unquestioned centre of power and democratic structure within the university. That can be counterproductive. As Professor Alagh said, autonomy and accountability have to be multi-level things. There has to be a structure of accountability within the university among different stakeholders: teachers, students, the administration, and so on. Similarly, for autonomy. Different kinds of autonomy at different levels have to be protected. So, yes, a certain amount of insulation is desirable, but it has to be within the framework of transparency and accountability. But the overall framework within which all this operates is trust. That trust has been eroded. I think the ruling class today no longer trusts institutions that don't overtly and constantly support them. I think all kinds of institutions have to be insulated from centres of power in different ways.

YKA: Let me just elaborate on the point made by Professor Deshpande with an example. JNU has an academic council which is at the heart of the game. That tends to be an institution where there is a lot of contestations. Academic council meetings would go on for hours until a decision was arrived at. A university is a place for ideas which have to be contested. The Vice-Chancellor has to implement the decision. If the Vice-Chancellor doesn't understand

this, he will destroy the university.

Do you agree that no political party has had any vision of higher education? Has that brought down the idea of what a university should be?

SD: You are partly right in saying that parties don't have the kind of vision we have of universities. On the other hand, if you look at their attitude towards universities as exemplifying their ideals, today there is a terrifying vision at work. What really concerns me is that we in the social sciences are particularly affected by the recent developments with this government in particular. The very idea of social sciences is imperiled now. The very function of a university – nurturing debate in the interest of improving things by constructive criticism is endangered. Social sciences are being particularly targeted. Today we are being told that the university has to be an echo board for the government. Regardless of the ideology of the government, we are headed towards disaster if that is what a government demands of universities.

Both Delhi University and JNU have seen a lot of activism. What should a researcher's primary responsibility be in a public-funded university?

YKA: Universities have to be tolerant of activism. If a student does not ask for change, who will? Progress comes when people say, 'this is wrong, we want change'. This whole idea that universities are supposed to impart only skills is rubbish. It's about understanding how and what skills matter. A university builds students for the future. What is the idea of progress all about? Are we supposed to be talking only about what the government wants to be done? Is that progress?

SD: It is impossible to impart skills without a point of view. As long as skills are going to be deployed in society, it is not possible to divorce skills from political views in a broad sense. The university is a union of young people and ideas, and when you bring the two together, there is an effervescence which is bound to be good for society. That's why even as the university has to be accountable to society, it has to be at once removed from society.



Satish Deshpande is Professor of Sociology, Delhi University



Y.K. Alagh is an economist, former member of the Planning Commission, former Minister of State and former Vice-Chancellor of JNU



Scan the QR code to watch the full interview online

A belligerent border policy

Trump is strongly pushing back against migrants and the U.S. courts are yielding in regard

NARAYAN LAKSHMAN

This week the U.S. Supreme Court green-lighted the Trump administration's most far-reaching effort yet to make it more arduous for migrants from Central and Latin America, and indeed other parts of the world, to obtain asylum at the U.S.'s border with Mexico. Now the U.S. government can deny asylum requests from migrants at the southern border who have travelled through Mexico or another country, yet failed to seek asylum there. This will impact tens of thousands of migrants who follow this route through Mexico.

In a strongly worded dissent on the court's opinion on this case, Justice Sonia Sotomayor said, "Once again the Executive Branch has issued a rule that seeks to upend longstanding practices regarding refugees who seek shelter from persecution... Although this Nation has long kept its doors open to refugees – and although the stakes for asylum seekers could not be higher – the Government implemented its rule without first providing the public notice and inviting the public input generally required by law."

The courts are yielding

The latest salvo from the White House comes in the wake of years of a spiralling migrant crisis on the U.S.-Mexico border. While tensions have been rising along that vector since the early days of the Trump administration, matters seemed to be escalating when, in February, Mr. Trump declared a national emergency in the context of what he described as "an invasion of drugs and criminals coming into our country" from across the border with Mexico.

In July this year, the Supreme Court authorised a move by the White House to redirect \$2.5 billion approved by the U.S. Congress for the Pentagon towards fulfilling Mr. Trump's campaign promise of building a wall along the country's southern border. It would appear that in the face of Mr. Trump's persistent efforts towards pushing back on the inflow of immigrants, the courts are finally yielding in regard.

meland Security announced a new regulation to indefinitely detain migrant families, including children, in an ostensible bid to end the controversial "family separations" of recent years, which have seen children removed from their parents and sometimes held in mass detention facilities. This regulation seeks to do away with the 'Flores Settlement Agreement', which requires the release of migrant children after a maximum of 20 days of detention.

The harsh message from Washington seems to have reached the migrant communities too. According to data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the number of migrants arrested at the southern border, a proxy for overall unauthorised immigration flows, dipped by 30% in August 2019, a greater fall than for the same period during prior years.

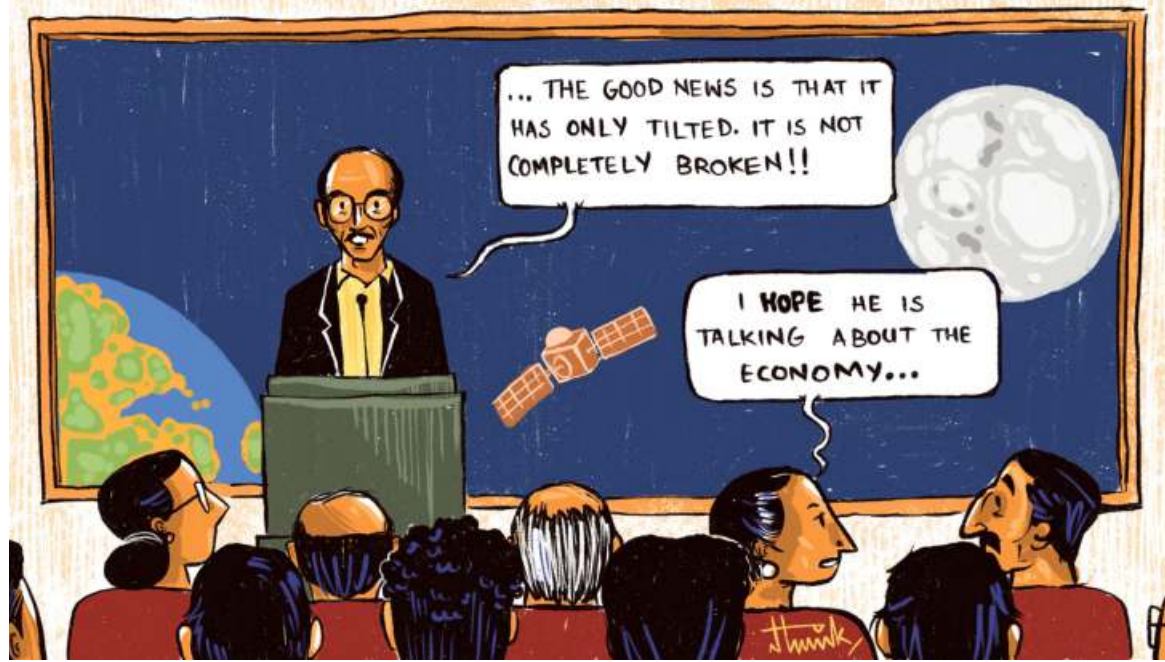
Back to Mexico

While Mr. Trump regularly claims that his immigration policies are yielding results, in this case it may simply be that his administration's policies are shifting the costs of tackling with the migrant crisis to Mexico, which many consider to be under-equipped to offer humanitarian aid on the required scale.

More than 37,500 migrants turned away to Mexico are now contending with the U.S.'s Migrant Protection Protocols, which require them to await a decision on their asylum applications abroad, not on U.S. soil. Aid agencies have documented these migrants facing threats by criminal gangs and risks of kidnapping and assault in the squalid conditions under which they have been forced to take up temporary accommodation in Mexico. These migrants also lack livelihood opportunities.

Every nation has a right to protect its borders from undocumented migration of considerable volume. However, the severity of the response of the Trump administration to the current migrant crisis begs the question of whether it is truly the will of the American people that their government treat their southern neighbours in an inhuman manner.

narayan@thehindu.co.in



NOTEBOOK

The art of managing 'LTTE'

Letter-writers deepen the bond between a newspaper and its readers

MURALI N. KRISHNASWAMY

A few years ago, while at one of the smaller airports in south India, I was in conversation with a colleague in the office on some of the "musts" that had to appear that day in the 'LTTE'. There was a tap on the shoulder and a sharp question: "What LTTE?" It took the security personnel a while to be convinced that the abbreviation was not for the proscribed organisation and that we were chatting about the forum for *patra* – the Letters to the Editor column. The "musts" were an envoy's letter and a rejoinder to an Editorial page article.

Every day, the editorial and opinion pages desk faces not simple questions about letters, but a barrage of queries and comments about how we manage this space. The tough ones that we handle, over phone and by e-mail, are from those

letter-writers who are determined in their quest to be featured first and foremost in print. Even the assurance that their full-length letter will appear in the online edition is spurned instantly. The common questions they ask are: Why haven't you published my letter? I have written so many letters but you ignore them! I came in the hot sun to the office and addressed it to you, but you ignored it; what happiness do you derive out of this? I sent an email, a postcard and a letter by speed post, so please publish the letter. Why are all the letter-writers only from Kerala? Why are you now focusing only on writers from north India? I know it; the moment you hear my voice you decide not to print my letter.

And there are also those that are unprintable and unreasonably question the editorial line, with threats

to play it out on social media. One writer decided to share with us his "intellectual property". He claimed that a German institution had evinced interest in his paper. When it didn't quite cut the mustard, he demanded that we return the letter to him at once along with a signed declaration that we had rescinded our rights over the "IP", or else face legal action. There was also a writer from Pakistan who hoped that by publishing in India a letter about festering civic issues in Lahore, there would be results.

Over the years we have fine-tuned our responses to be professional and polite. But despite our keen efforts to be just a voice on the phone, some readers have managed to breach this line and find out more about us. One frequent caller even figured out our weekly off days and demanded to know why two of us had ex-

changed our day off one week!

The letters section covers an area of anything between 600 and 1,200 words. Hawk-eyed readers audit this too. But much more is invested in this space; the 'LTTE' helps deepen the newspaper's bond with its valued readers. Among them is a 90-year-old gentleman who telephones us from every destination he travels to. His narration of the day's events ends with a simple request: "Please publish my letter".

Another anecdote: Once, a first-generation reader from a village in north India wanted his letter published in print. We could only tell him to take a chance and look out for it the next morning. The grateful young man called the next evening; his stock had gone up in his place. And the paper, he said, had got a few more subscribers.

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 13, 1969

Taking the name of Gandhiji

"Gandhi-raga", displaying a new notational pattern in Indian music, has been evolved by the noted maestro, Kumar Gandharva of Devas, to mark the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation. Initiated jointly by Mr. Balkavi Bairagi, Madhya Pradesh Minister of State for Information, who is himself a well-known composer, and Mr. Subba Rao, Secretary of the Mass Contact Committee of the Gandhi Jayanti celebrations, the move has also received the approval of Mr. R.R. Diwaker, Secretary of the National Celebrations Committee. Mr. Bairagi told the Press yesterday [September 11] that recordings of the new raga, named after Mahatma Gandhi would now be released for public listening on October 2, the Gandhi Jayanti Day. A star - Deneb on the Northern Cross – was formally named in Ahmedabad on Thursday as "Gandhi Tarak" at a meeting of Gandhian thinkers, educationists and prominent public men who had assembled at the Gujarat Vidyapith. Kaka Kalelkar, an eminent Gandhian who presided, said the proposal symbolised the people's reverence for the Mahatma. Mr. Umashankar Joshi, Vice-Chancellor of Gujarat University, who moved the resolution on the naming of the star, described the gesture as poetic.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 13, 1919.

Restoration of Persia.

A White Paper [Cmd. 300] has been issued containing the text of agreements signed by Great Britain and Persia at Teheran on August 9, 1919, and of two letters from Sir P. Cox, the British Minister at Teheran to the Persian Prime Minister. The agreements now concluded are the result of negotiations which have been proceeding for nine months. Of the two agreements one is political and aims at binding more closely Anglo-Persian relations and promoting the progress and prosperity of Persia. To these ends Great Britain agrees: To respect Persian integrity; To supply exports for Persian administration; To supply officers and equipment for a Persian force for the maintenance of order; To provide a loan for these purposes; To co-operate with Persian Government in railway construction and other forms of transport. Both Governments agree to the appointment of a joint committee to examine and revise the Customs tariff. The second agreement defines the terms and conditions on which the loan is to be made to Persia.