

Derailment of academia

I shall begin this missive with an account of my personal experience in Terminal 3 of Delhi airport. The experience is worth-narrating to demonstrate how those who are not associated institutionally with the academia behave since they are authorized to nearly dictate how academic activities should be conducted. Let me focus on the experience that I had in the airport when I was there to take a Trivandrum-bound flight in the afternoon. While I was waiting to meet a friend of mine. I heard that somebody was looking at me saying that Dada (elder brother in Bangla) you failed to recognise me. I apologized by saying that it was due to my old age. While we were exchanging pleasantries, he introduced me to the Director of the academic institution where he works. He is a retired IAS officer and is given this post-retirement responsibility for which some of the privileged officers are picked up by the political executive of the country. One may categorize the IAS officers in the following manner: There are many who, by being in service, developed an excellent understanding of human behaviour. There are some who also remain in touch with the academia with a view to enriching themselves by searching for sources of knowledge and wisdom. They do not feel ashamed to admit that their duty does not allow them to have time and also inclination to pursue their specific scholarly interests. They also don't feel hesitant to admit that "to get into this universally sought after service, you have to be lucky once and the benefits shall follow so long as you are in brackets of those privileged officers of the government". There are still another group of this group of "steel frame" service retired by becoming excellent record keepers.

During my trip to Trivandrum in November, 2022, I bumped into a retired IAS officer. An acquaintance of mine introduced me to him. His companion very proudly introduced him as the top boss (who is a retired IAS officer) of the organisation to which he belonged. To be frank, I don't remember whether I met him ever. Still, he supplied me with details to prove that he was acquainted with me. That's the story line here. As soon as I came to know that the retired IAS officer was heading the organization which published an academic journal with which I was also associated as a member of the editorial committee at the outset of its journey as a peer-reviewed journal published by a globally renowned publisher. Later on, I had to leave because of the rigidity of the editor in not considering the opinion of the members of editorial team. The editor felt that since he was the editor of journal, his words were final and was not ready to listen to his other colleagues. The journal was, in other words, his felfdom and he behaved accordingly. I had no contact with the organization and hadn't had the opportunity to regularly see the contents of the journal. It was evident that the essays were chosen to be published not on the basis of their merit but on other considerations which cannot be stated in the public domain although many of those associated with academic institutions and are academically updating themselves regularly by reading essays in peer-reviewed journals have already raised this issue in the appropriate forums of the organization. Out of my academic concern and rather a little stupidly I conveyed this feeling to the boss of the organisation who was flying to the south of India like me. It was perhaps utter stupidity that I did not think that IAS officers, especially those who retired, never took criticism in the right spirit. It happened so. As soon as I expressed my candid opinion about the steady decline of the quality of the essays which were published, he expressed his dismay by saying that he

wouldn't allow anybody to denigrate the journal despite not being academically respected because one should feel proud of one's product regardless of the quality. It was a perverted nationalist argument. I immediately understood that he was not the right person to listen to constructive criticism. I finished the conversation before it became really hot by saying that I respected your point of view so "let's agree to disagree". We left each other pretending that nothing had happened. His companion, who claimed to have known me, remained quiet during my exchange with his boss presumably because he wanted to play safe.

The above narrative has a very specific object. As an academic who also serves Visva-Bharati as an administrator, I strongly feel that unless we introspect why India fails to go up in the academic ladder globally, our future is bleak. We must keep in mind the meteoric rise of China or a small city-cum-country, Singapore as academic hubs with the capacity to produce essays with high impact factor despite the fact that they became politically free after India's independence in 1947. How it was possible and why did India decline so much academically. Why do our good and meritorious students leave the country to go to the West? They are also not inclined to return. What is also striking is that many Indian scholars working in the Western countries produce works of high academic standard. This is apparently a paradoxical situation since an in-depth and dispassionate analysis will perhaps take us to the root of this academic decay.

The problem seems to begin with the choice of streams in the school. Generally, those who score well in the tenth standard opt for science stream; the rest choose other streams not always out of their inclination but under compulsion as they are not qualified to join those who are admitted to the science stream. We must add a caveat here. There are some bright students who also get admitted in streams other than science presumably because they would like to study the non-science disciplines as a matter of their deliberate choice. The second problem emanates with the quality of teaching transmitted in the classrooms starting from school to higher education. If today's students do not seem to possess the quality which is expected of them, how can tomorrow's teachers (who are students today) be better. If we simply blame both the students and teachers we are escaping from our responsibility. Instead of hiding like a Ostrich (shutting eyes in the face of a danger), let's hold the bull by its horn.

As an academic administrator, I shall dwell on the query from my personal experience of being a teacher in many universities abroad and also many India's premier universities for more than three decades. One of the reasons is probably the relatively easy way of getting into teaching as a profession. Over time, we have witnessed how teachers are recruited in many schools, colleges and universities. Merit is a discount in the selection of teachers in India's many provinces. What becomes decisive in selection is not merit but considerations other than this. If I am candid in stating how the selection processes get derailed I am likely to be ostracized if not lynched. I am ready to accept the fate since I am at the fagend of my career and life. So, the bitter truth needs to be told regardless of consequences.

What derails the academia most is regular intervention of the politicians who may not always be even inclined to gauge it's adverse impact on future of the country. Even in the selection of principal of schools and colleges and Vice Chancellor of universities, the process was not free

from the instructions of the politicians. I was told though I don't have clinching evidence that even these posts were sold with a high premium. So, once one is given the important position in the academia as favours from the political bosses, the incumbent has to keep them in good humour or they are busy in collecting the amount they paid for the post. Either way, it augments the difficulties confronting the institutions of learning. This is one of main causes of academic decay in India. With no respect to the teachers, the atmosphere in schools, colleges and universities gets immediately vitiated. One of the manifestation is the frequent misbehaviour of students with their teachers. I am personally a victim of such situations several times during my tenure as Vice Chancellor. I don't want to waste my time on my defence; history will assess this. The overall decay is visible in most of the Indian campuses. It will not only be an innovative work but also socially useful if a researcher focuses on the sources of the decline and possible solutions. The task is not an easy one but not so difficult.

Let me comment on the institutions created by the government of India to halt the decay. India is ill-fated because academic institutions are governed, if not controlled by the bureaucrats in alliance with the democratically elected minister who may not always have the expertise to handle academia. As a result, the relationship between the academic-administrator and the bureaucrats and minister do not seem to be completely hassle-free presumably because their approach to the academic issues does not always match. Those who were recruited to the highest posts in schools, colleges and universities out of favour, they unconditionally surrender presumably because they were indebted to the politicians, ministers or the political bosses of the governing political party. Those who accidentally became the top bosses of these institutions engaged in dissemination of knowledge faced the brunt. They were tortured by them along with those teachers who happily abdicated their primary job of teaching and guiding student to plunge into untrodden academic path. For these academic-administrator, life does not seem to be as enjoyable as their counterparts who decide to swim with the flow.

One or two technical points are pertinent here. Our centres for learning fail to transmit the values which are integral to students. It is true that family is the nursery of civic virtues; if it does not effectively play that role, the academic institutions have the responsibility to discharge this responsibility. I am sure that we all agree that the bonhomie that existed in the past between teachers and taught appears to have nearly disappeared. As a result, teachers no longer played the role that they had played in the past for preparing their students for discharging their responsibility as good citizens. So, how can we expect our students to be sensitive to their duties as citizens?

The second point relate to those policies adopted by the funding agencies, the University Grants Commission, which are populist in character. Reasons are not difficult to locate. But I shall remain silent. The Non-Net fellowship was introduced with good intentions although it was misused as data reveal that the success rate was not as impressive as was expected. The non-Net fellowship holders enjoy four year fellowship and the UGC compiled-inputs also show the number of drop outs after four years which is a source of great concern for the policy makers and the academics. We must qualify the statement since there are some non-Net fellowship holders who are not only serious but also complete good pieces of work as well.

The introduction of API (Academic Points Index) has its pitfalls. Since the teachers need to score adequate API points for their promotion, a rat race begins among the teachers. The UGC prepared a list of journals which gave the teachers points if they publish their essays. I don't know whether it will be wrong to surmise that the UGC list contains many journals which can be recognised as academically non-challenging. Still the system is worth praising since it forces the non-productive academics to at least publish what they produce. The system is

not however a full-proof one because (a) the standard of the journals in the UGC list is not uniform since selection did not appear to have undergone stringent method of selection; as a result, the charge that number of journals should not have been included has substance, and (b) not only have many online journals emerged to entrap the teachers to publish there in exchange of a hefty fee, many ghost writers have also emerged to write for the teachers seeking promotion. Examples abound.

The third point is linked with the recent changes in regard to submission of PhD dissertation for evaluation. Nowadays, plagiarism is thoroughly checked although it can't be confirmed that the method of checking plagiarism is stringently followed everywhere. As per the new UGC stipulation, the condition of publishing of at least three essays in peer-reviewed journals is withdrawn. I don't know the exact reason; but, it is clear that withdrawal of such a condition does not seem to be of any help to the raising of academic standing of the universities as the 2020 National Education Policy insisted.

Finally, what is most worrisome is the emergence of self-proclaimed custodians of academia who, by being reluctant to address the deficiencies of academics and the essays they publish in specific journals which appear to follow less rigorous review processes, cause maximum damage to the prospective researchers since they are told that the academic merit of the essay is not as critical as other non-academic factors. I am still hopeful because my concern which I conveyed in the Delhi airport to the IAS officer will surely provoke him to ponder over those points based on my analysis of how the essays gradually lost their academic appeal. If I succeed in persuading a veteran IAS officer, I shall have accomplished my role as a teacher and a researcher. We must not forget that we will serve the Goddess of learning, Saraswati provided we sincerely pursue what we are supposed to as teachers and researchers. We must not forget that teaching is the only profession where those who are associated with this are given a hefty sum as their salary to study. It is we who should understand that academic activities need to be seriously pursued since on them depend the future of the country and Indians. What it means is that Saraswati showers blessings to those who, instead of being deviant and lazy, devote wholeheartedly to the academics, and, only then, our mission of becoming Biswa/Jagat Guru cannot be far away; otherwise, it will remain a vacuous slogan.

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