

Universities are better off with greater autonomy

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We started the Azim Premji University in 2011. We were very clear about the purpose of the university, its liberal education, and the focus of its teaching and research programmes. This kind of clarity is a nice intellectual state, till it is brought to life with actual operating practices. It is then that the complex and messy reality bursts forth.

Early on, we decided that there would be no rules for class attendance for students. We deliberately assumed that the students would act responsibly and attend classes. Most of us who took the decision were not unaware of how students behave in higher education institutions.

My friend and colleague Giri had held his ground. His argument was simple. Students join the university to study. Classes are the primary mechanism for study. Why should they not be mandated to attend classes? Attendance norms are helpful in nudging the majority of the less (or non-) serious students into class, while the more serious would anyhow attend. Eventually, the absence of such norms harms those who need the classes the most. The group overruled Giri and we moved on.

A few years later, a student was making a rambling argument against the norms requiring attendance that the university had recently communicated. Somehow he thought that not attending classes was his right and so the requirement to attend was an injustice. He was not the only one with this strange idea. Most of them were exactly the kind of people that Giri had in mind when he had said that those who need to attend classes most would be hurt most by not having rules for attendance. Time had proven Giri right. We reversed our decision, and set up a clear set of requirements for attendance.

There have been many such episodes of learning and changing as our university has grown. But I remembered this particular one because of the fracas over attendance norms in one of India's best universities.

This university seems to have recently introduced norms for class attendance. A large group within, including faculty members, seems to be opposed to this. Some of them have written about the matter publicly. It is allegedly one more action in a systematic attempt to change the culture and ethos of the university, turning it from the vibrant liberal haven that it has been, into an authoritarian cauldron.

This may well be happening or it may not. I have no insight into this (obviously) deep and fraught matter. But the arguments against the attendance norms in themselves don't wash. Students come to the university to study, so why rail against a mandate to attend classes? Giri's principles don't need to be repeated. Only if you have already bought in to the narrative of systematic effort to change the culture, can you see the action on attendance as another instance of these efforts. To outsiders, this much ado about a no-case weakens the culture-change narrative. People seem to be so trapped in an echo-chamber of their own beliefs that they are oblivious to this.

Autonomy is another matter on which there have been protests across many public universities. In March, the central government announced that 60 universities and colleges would be given full autonomy. The protests have been against the granting of this autonomy. Earlier, the draft regulations for autonomy had been opposed. To outsiders, it seems mystifying why people within universities would protest greater autonomy when all these years the higher education sector has protested against subversion of its autonomy.

Broadly, two reasons are being given for not wanting this autonomy. One, there is apprehension that autonomy is a covert path to reduction in public funding. Two, that autonomy implies that some people within the university will take all the decisions. Indeed, if by design or by happenstance, public funding is reduced, it will be deeply damaging to higher education. Universities need more public funding, not less. But nothing suggests that the move towards autonomy is in any way specifically about cutting public funding, beyond the general trend of the past couple of decades. Outsiders taking decisions has been continually condemned till now—and rightly so; now if insiders are allowed to take decisions, that is also being condemned.

Undoubtedly, over the past few decades, our public universities have become battlefields of vested political and commercial interests of the worst kind. Very few institutions or parts of institutions have survived this unscathed. This has turned Indian higher education into a stagnant wasteland. Poor governance, failure to recruit high-quality faculty, and turf battles between vested interests to gain and retain control define the fate of our institutions of higher learning.

Inside universities, there is mostly a comfortable or resigned acceptance of this status. People want to protect their territories, reputations and power. Anything that disturbs or threatens this equilibrium is resisted. And it is often done with soaring rhetoric; unsurprisingly so since that is the trade of people in the academy. Thus, saving public universities is not going to be easy.

Internal dissension, failure of structures of governance and poor public support contribute to create a vicious downward spiral. Change on all fronts is absolutely essential but ever elusive.

Anurag Behar is the chief executive officer of Azim Premji Foundation and leads the sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education.

Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com. Read Anurag's previous Mint columns at www.livemint.com/othersphere

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