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ARTHUR DUDNEY
OPINION

Beyond Techno-Coolies

How the merits of a liberal education continue to evade Indian students

LORD Curzon, the newly appointed Viceroy of India, was on the defensive in 1899. "I read in many newspapers," he told graduates at the University of Calcutta, "that our system of higher education in India is a failure, that it has sacrificed the formation of character upon the altar of Cram."

More than a century later, "the altar of Cram" still demands worship from students. Rote learning, fossilised curricula and arbitrary examinations are the norm even at India's top colleges. Despite the growth in higher education and the much-vaunted success of the outsourcing and IT economy, the system can neither keep up with the rising demand nor can it, in many cases, provide a solid education. But change may be coming soon as about a dozen education-related bills are debated in Parliament. As India attempts to expand both the quality and capacity of its universities, a key question must be what role the liberal arts should play.

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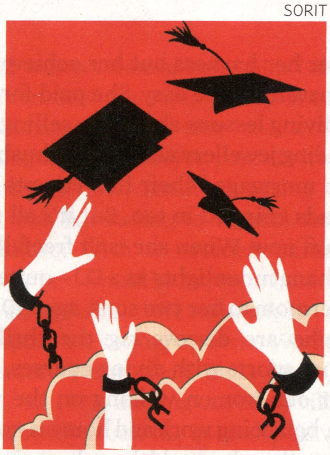

Many societies, including India's, have recognisably liberal educational philosophies. Both traditional streams of Indian education, Sanskrit and Persian, valued broad-based knowledge and argumentation. In the West, the idea of a liberal education goes back at least twenty centuries to the Roman philosopher Seneca, who defined the liberal arts as the general education worthy of free men as opposed to the practical training required by slaves. Translating for our modern sensibilities, Professor Grant Cornwell, president of the College of Wooster, a top US liberal arts college, suggests that a liberal education develops "habits of mind and character that will equip young people as problem-solvers, independent thinkers and innovators".

Cornwell acknowledges the pressure on India to produce graduates with marketable skills immediately, but says liberal education's opponents are wrong to frame it as "self-indulgent, impractical, or an approach to education for the privileged elite". He argues that the liberal arts are a prerequisite to effective democratic and economic participation. The market will increasingly demand adaptable workers, he predicts, because innovation creates a need for frequent training in new skills. Pawan Agarwal takes a different approach in his timely book *Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future*. Agarwal's impressive statistics serve his plea for more technical education, but in his passion for training engineers to be engineers and doctors to be doctors, he sidesteps questions like the role of the liberal arts. Cornwell calls this quantitative approach to the problem "short-sighted". After all, would Seneca recognise a nation dominated by workers mass-produced on university assembly lines as a free society or as one that has enslaved itself?

Today's universities contend with historical contradictions. Higher education in colonial India was meant as a special kind of liberal training, attempting to produce, in Lord Macaulay's infamous phrase, "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect". If colonised Indians would not be a free people, the goal was to make a tiny fraction just free enough. No official review of Indian higher education has come to terms with its origins as a problematic colonial social engineering project replaced by a 1950s post-colonial social engineering project that privileged quality over quantity. The latter was responsible for the success of select institutions like the IITs and JNU, but also set the paradigm of neglecting other universities as resources were diverted to the "Institutes of National Importance".

The government's Working Group on Undergraduate Education (2006) identified a number of problems, including irrationally rigid degree requirements, outdated curricula, a lack of provisions for developing non-traditional courses, and inefficient funding mechanisms. The report pleads for "a pluralised model of the educational system".

India has more higher education institutions than any other country, and yet the government maintains a paradoxical top-down control. The University Grants Commission (UGC), the government's constitutionally mandated central body for funding and regulating higher education, lacks even the authority to decertify poor-quality degree courses. Many universities are likewise ungovernable because they are simply too enormous. Delhi University, for example, has over eighty constituent colleges and not even the most iron-willed vice-chancellor could ever coax agreement from all of them. DU's recent transition to a semester system had to be adjudicated by the high court. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that curricula are rarely reviewed, and that students have little flexibility to pursue their own interests in a degree course.

There are no incentives for students to develop themselves, according to Sukrita Paul Kumar, Professor of Eng-

lish at Zakir Husain College. "When students choose their subjects," Kumar says, "the real reason is not interest. Their choices are not informed choices." They are young secondary school students when they select their subject. The entrance examination system has built a status pyramid, with engineering followed by medicine and law at the top, while students with lower marks are "condemned" to commerce and arts. Among the most despised arts subjects are the departments of literature in Indian languages. There is a perception, according to Kumar, that such departments exist for undistinguished students "just to get admission".

IF students have little motivation to excel, the problem is even worse for professors. Faculty are tenured at the start of their careers and advancement is automatic, as opposed to most countries where tenure is an arduous process. In India, "it's only personal drive that takes you forward, not the system", Kumar says. The UGC has proposed a points-based merit system to reward performance but this naturally has its detractors. Teaching the liberal arts requires efforts that the system does not encourage.

If the state of unreformed academia is bleak, some experiments have shown the possibilities of a liberal education. Three such undertakings that are worth considering share a desire to recast education as personal development.

INDIA'S ASCENSION AS A GLOBAL POWER CAN BE BOLSTERED BY A BREED OF NEW PROFESSIONALS WHO POSSESS BOTH TIME-TESTED TECHNICAL SAVVY AND THE ABILITY TO ADAPT ON THE FLY.

Professor Rukmini Bhaya Nair of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT-D insists that the IITs have a social obligation beyond producing talented engineers. She is a linguist, a published poet and a literary review editor. Her office shelves are a gallimaufry of technical works and literary classics, but also *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and other decidedly "non-canonical" books. Nair frequently teaches the humanities course that all IIT-D undergraduates must take, despite their reluctance to leave the familiar quantitative domain of testable propositions. Her students are some of the most talented in India and she believes that her role is to introduce ambiguity, "turning them into beings who can build society as well as bridges". She has the luxury of liberalising their education precisely because IIT students are destined for lucrative careers. Nair's multi-disciplinary projects, in which her students often participate, consider the role of literature and language in contemporary society, from the classics to text-messaging.

Kumar and her English Department colleagues follow the DU-mandated curriculum. Unofficially, though, they are trying something different. Kumar noticed her students' dismay at being subjected to English literature when the goal for many was acquiring the English communication skills to be travel agents or call centre workers. To combat this, she and her colleagues have designed not-for-credit orientation courses that help students grapple with the fundamentals: Why study texts and why these texts? When students understand the logic behind a liberal education (and see that the official syllabus leaves something to be desired), creativity and enjoyment can enter the picture. "The market keeps the liberal arts from flourishing," Kumar says, in part because students aren't taught to see the value in what they study.

Ambedkar University, Delhi, is the largest ongoing experiment in alternative higher education. Set up by an act of Parliament in 2008, its governance is streamlined with inter-disciplinary schools and centres rather than colleges. Its charismatic vice-chancellor, Shyam Menon, has begun recruiting liberal arts-minded faculty from India's top institutions. The university's mission is "to create sustainable and effective linkages between access to and success in higher education". In other words, it has been designed to serve as a laboratory for multi-disciplinary studies that tap into students' diverse life experiences, which have been excluded from the traditional curriculum.

The withering of the liberal arts in India was not inevitable. Hindu philosophy has grappled with contradiction just as a liberal education, according to Cornwell and Nair, equips students to resolve it. Even the universities founded in British India conceived of their curricula as liberal, although the social deformation of colonialism, namely the need to suppress independent thought and ape the colonisers in order to gain advancement, ultimately defeated the purpose of a liberal education. Today, inertia is winning; India's success in non-technical fields mostly comes not because of its higher education system, but in spite of it. When the altar of Cram is torn down, and his handmaidens Rigidity, Bureaucracy and Complacency are sent packing, the possibilities for further success would be tremendous, perhaps along the lines of economic liberalisation twenty years ago.

Liberal education is not some fusty notion about reading good books, but is rather an important investment in the future. India will be a fairer and more productive society if more students graduate with not only a set of specific skills but also a liberal arts-inspired capacity to acquire new ones. Above all, the higher education sector needs the structural flexibility to break free from the lingering colonial canon. It is profoundly contradictory that so many educated Indians are proud of their heritage, but simply cannot comprehend its place in a university, as if Wordsworth and Dickens would be terribly upset if a great Indian writer appeared on a reading list alongside them. "It's unwarranted to carry on with the old and creaky paradigms of what the canon is," Nair says. "What we mean by excellence needs to be rethought." We have a once-in-a-century opportunity to do just that. ◘

(Arthur Dudney is an American Fulbright scholar based at Delhi University. These views are his own.)