

LEAVE TEACHING TO ACADEMICS: SUBJUGATION AND EXCELLENCE DON'T GO TOGETHER

Jawhar Sircar

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Jadavpur University is now surely a metaphor for both excellence and unrest that once characterised Presidency, more as a college than as a university, though it is sad to see how its present rulers are so ill at ease with the first and have steamrolled the other. History tells us that academic excellence and perpetual discontent have strange links, both licit and illicit, and also that the teaching community bristles at commands — real or imagined. The arts faculty of Jadavpur has already outgrown Presidency, but then, as we shall see, its ghost — in more senses than one — still hovers over the lily pools of Jadavpur. One hears stories of how Jadavpur's top mandarins — poor souls who are squeezed between an insistent state power and obdurate teachers and students on revolt — are reportedly pulled up at periodic intervals, for not being able to emulate the Presidency model. But then, costly cosmetics and genuflecting are strange to the cash-strapped, angry world of Indian academia, rare exceptions notwithstanding. It is not clear why submission to external instructions is so critical, as the real problem of admissions to colleges in this State lies not in Jadavpur university — it was grafted there, almost by design. What plagues numerous other colleges is that students' unions are openly extorting money for seats — as never before. This 'net practice' may warm up these junior syndicate leaders for bigger roles in public life, but such man-made problems only aggravate the crisis.

Higher education in the state simply refuses to move out of the mediocrity created by decades of Left rule and by subsequent populism. What is visibly common between both regimes is their mindless preference for professed loyalty over known merit and strangely, a large section of teachers who literally wormed themselves into power continue to rule, by switching jerseys. It is sad to note that only five state universities from this state that still prizes intellect over wealth could make it to the 'Top 100' of the Human Resources Development Ministry's national ranking. Jadavpur leads, by ranking 6th in India, while Calcutta university managed to stand 14th. Bidhan Chandra Krishi Vishwavidyalay, Kayani university and Burdwan university are pegged between the 75th and 96th ranks. Presidency figures no where, proving once again the inverse relationship between regime-friendliness and teaching skills. This institution is focussed on more, because Jadavpur university gained the most from its relentless decline — right from the 1970s. Several outstanding teachers from Presidency chose to settle in Jadavpur to escape intellectual frustration and the suffocation under colonial era rules. They enriched departments like English, while others like 'Comparative Literature' excelled more from the genius of their legendary teachers and less from College Street emigres. But both owe a lot to their faculty's

freedom to dream, experiment and innovate. Other arts departments also strove to outshine their rivals in other institutions — as constructive jealousy can, indeed, do wonders — but one has to confess that not all reached dizzying heights.

The relevant point here is that one of the successful practices that ensured the excellence of Jadavpur university (and many premium educational institutions) was the system of conducting ‘admission tests’ — to test the aptitude and worthiness of applicants. It is still not clear what great advantage would accrue to the state if students were selected only on the basis of marks obtained in their school-leaving board examinations. Jadavpur university required painful hunger strikes and ugly gheraos to retrieve its academic autonomy — that had almost been surrendered by a section of academics who obviously valued compliance over confrontation. One can not, however, condone students who repeatedly subjected their ageing vice chancellor and teachers to long, inhuman periods of confinement. After all, hunger strikes require strength of will power and unusual physical stamina — and they do exert moral pressure on ‘adversaries’ — while gheraos simply misuse the sanctuary that religion and academia had to earn from the omnipotent state, literally with blood and through terrible struggles.

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A longish tenure as the higher education secretary of the state gave one rare endoscopic views into the functioning of academia and the capacity to perceive how it differs so much from regimented organisations. And, one could well perceive its undisguised scorn for state power. One also observed, at close quarters, how teachers who were beholden to political power for their questionable placements or promotions — both in central and state institutions — brandished power. Everything from transfers and postings to professorships and permissions to go abroad were used, adroitly and clumsily, to create power centres and discourage merit. It is not as if academics are all other-worldly missionaries — as many are quite avaricious and can grovel for goodies — but the point is that they know their business better than bureaucrats and ministers. And this applies even when the elite within academia has to really strain to squeeze classes and carve the mandatory ‘contact hours’ with students — between their many or excessive foreign assignments.

Besides, we must remember that since mutual jealousies run high in this rather closed world, the ‘crab factor’ ensures that no single force can either rise beyond tolerable limits or wreck the institution — unless she or he is an amoral megalomaniac who has struck a deal with Mephistopheles, and can get away with it. It is, therefore, best to leave academia alone, so that its several self governing mechanisms that emerged from historical experiences and past mistakes, can work. These, I submit, are far better than external fiats and let us admit — one shirt just does not fit all.