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Editorial

On the Idea of a University

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The thought of a “University”, as we have experienced it as a part of the University of Delhi through the 70s, conjures myriad images and associations: a place for the pursuit of knowledge, learning, multiplicity of disciplines, teachers, and students from across the world, coffee-tea *addas* in cafes, campus life, a space for experiments in independence through self-discovery, debates, dialogues, politics, a threshold of a new world full of infinite possibilities, dreams, transformation for social justice, and much more.

This idea of a university has its roots in the late 1960s in Europe. This era was a landmark in the history of universities. It was marked by the turmoil of the civil war in the U.S.A., the Vietnam War, the human rights movement, the hippie movement, the Black rights movement, and student movements – particularly the hugely influential *May '68* movement that began in France, the impact of which was felt widely over time.

An outcome of this was that “cultural and academic domains were recognized as major areas of struggle in their own right and this was identified by the wholesale reorganization of French universities after May. The old structures, centralized and authoritarian, were replaced by more open forms of management, greater freedom in the drafting and launching of courses, and the possibility for different institutions to develop their own academic and ideological identity. The University of Paris-VIII (Vincennes), founded after May to develop access to higher education for part-time students and those without formal qualifications, was the best example of the attitudes that became widespread in the academic world after May... What is important here is the way in which the variety of new areas opened up after 1968 changed and broadened the terrain of politicized intellectual debate” (Reader, 1987).

This was a period of huge collective effervescence around the world, a period of questioning, breaking, and expanding boundaries of knowledge. It was a period that generated intense critical thinking, experimentation, and immense creativity in all fields: the sciences, social sciences, philosophy, mathematics, literature, music, theatre, cinema, arts, and more. The student movements were a part of this vibrant, alive ethos. Taking place throughout the ‘long 60s’ all over the world, their impact continued to be felt for a long time afterward, in both national and global scenarios and brought radical shifts in thought, political action, and pedagogical practices (Rico & Huerta, 2019).

This era saw the emergence of new cultural forms, and a culture that celebrated experimentation, and new approaches, methodologies, and challenges to the divisions of disciplines. It produced great minds like Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, Sartre, de

Beauvoir, Adorno, Bourdieu, Marcuse, and Horkheimer, whose works brought about radical shifts in knowledge and continue to be influential to this day.

The 1970s and '80s carried forward the legacy of the 60s, the world over as well as in India. A generation emerged that was eager to take on the world and transform it (Alkazi, 2021). Their icons were M.K. Gandhi, Ram Manohar Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan, and several thinkers and leaders of Marxist persuasions, notably, Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg, and Lenin, to mention a few. This era had a distinctive rhythm, born out of the interconnectedness of life within and outside campus, drummed by university specials, classes, canteens, discussions in cafeterias, college fests, *kurta pajamas*, sarees, *jholas*, and *kolhapuri chappals*.

It was a period of rich cultural activity on the one hand, and intense political activity on the other. Culturally, the ethos was vibrant with music and dance concerts: Pandit Ravi Shankar, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Ustad Allah Rakhah, Sonal Mansingh, Birju Maharaj, Yamini Krishnamurthy, Uday Shankar, Kishori Amonkar, Bhimsen Joshi; films of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen; songs of Bob Dylan, Joan Baes, Bob Marley, Beatles, Bollywood and ghazals of Begum Akhtar, Mehdi Hassan, Jagjit Singh, and Ghulam Ali, to mention a few.

The theatre of the absurd was at the fore (Alkazi, 2021). It was a movement that emerged in Europe during the 1950s and '60s, influenced by Albert Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, and was concerned with the angst of humankind, filled with a sense of hopelessness, struggling in vain to find a purpose and control its destiny. Plays by Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter, the forerunners of the movement in Europe, and Badal Sarkar and Mohan Rakesh in India, were staged across campus and beyond.

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Munshi Premchand, Srilal Shukla, and Rabindranath Tagore on the one hand, and Ayn Rand, Sylvia Plath, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Castaneda, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Maxim Gorky, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn were some of the avidly read authors who inspired and shaped the minds of students. Their books are commentaries on prevalent oppressive systems and engage with ennui, existential dilemmas, issues of social justice, and explorations of the self.

This period was also one of high political activity and grave crisis in India: the 1974 students' agitation, led by Jayaprakash Narayan, in Gujarat and Bihar against the rising price of food grains, cooking oil, unemployment, and corruption, the Naxalite movement, and the women's rights movement. Students were in the thick of all of these. This generation grew up actively participating in such an atmosphere of debate, disenchantment, and dissent, charged with a fervor to bring about change and make a difference.

University learning was grounded in the cultural and political temper of the time. It was not separate from wider social concerns and a desire to build a new social order. The pursuit of knowledge was a way of being in the world, integrated with the act of living, participating, responding to the need of the hour, and doing the right thing at the right time. Issues were debated in classrooms and cafeterias over cups of coffee and cigarettes, in informal study circles comprising both students and teachers, and the rigors of the teacher-student engagement generated a vast body of research and knowledge.

The university was, therefore, an ethos that fuelled intellectual curiosity and social commitment, which gave a distinct flavor not only to the nature of learning and the knowledge produced but also to the character of the university student. The search for answers and decolonization of the mind was an organic, self-propelling process. It came with

the flow of being on campus and was not imposed as part of the curriculum or courses specifically designed to inculcate ethics and values.

Students from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and regional backgrounds had always been welcomed. Each came with their own distinct aspirations and dreams, not all were politically and culturally active. Their narratives of university revolved around the pursuit of knowledge in classrooms, long hours in libraries and laboratories, quiet lunches from lunchboxes, chats with friends, and journeys back home. Their focus was on academic excellence, doing well in exams, and building a future for themselves. The university provided a space for all.

This period has given us eminent scholars, administrators, and academicians, who created the university as a space of freedom, of ‘becoming’, as a centre of knowledge where learning is a process that takes place through the pursuit of questions until one arrives at one’s own understanding, finds one’s own answers: a legacy that was carried forward through the 90s and the decades that have followed since. The production of knowledge was dialogic: a dialogue between teachers and students, between disciplines, between students and society.

This experience shaped an idea of a university as a place where it is possible for different, radically conflicting thoughts and ideologies to engage in meaningful dialogue. It embodies a vision of a space of academic and intellectual freedom for teachers and students, where learning is a joyous process and not drudgery. It nurtures the process of learning with minimal support from the administration and freedom from the controls of vested interests including the government. It is an experience that is not reducible to a sum total of teaching, research, publications, and innovation. It stands for a process that produces knowledge, shapes minds, and generates capacities that contribute to the needs of the times, responding to them and shaping the future.

Today, we stand at the threshold of yet another phase of transformation. The University of Delhi completed 100 years on 1st May, 2022. It began with 750 students and now has over 7 lakh students from across the country and the world. We celebrate these hundred years by recounting milestones, and innumerable achievements. There are statistics galore showcasing the university’s remarkable progress: growth in the number of students, faculties, departments, centers, and hostels; expansion of the physical infrastructure; growth in the number of academic Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Doctoral programs ([DU-CENTENARY Brochure 1.pdf](#)); organization of and participation in seminars, conferences; publications, awards, international collaborations, innovation projects, funding, and much more.

All of these are remarkable and make us proud, but the true measure of a university’s success lies beyond numbers and statistics. Amidst the celebrations, we pause to remind ourselves of our journey, and our legacy. We hold on to ‘our idea of a university’ and hope that it is not lost to nostalgia.

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