

Academic Quality and Autonomy

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In a recent piece, Prabhat Patnaik (*The Telegraph*, 2 April, 2012) lays out what he thinks are major threats to the autonomy of the domestic intellectual discourse in India. He comes up with 'coercion to conform' to academic fashions of the North and its hegemony in deciding the worth of ideas as a prime suspect. He also reserves special fire for the insistence on quality when assessing academics. Finally, he talks about the anxiety of the NRI academic about being increasingly irrelevant in India's academic circles. If one were to go beyond aimed-to-disarm self-congratulatory banalities resting on wistful anecdotes that the level of intellectual discourse in India was superior to Bangladesh, one might come to see the boy who cried wolf and the real wolf itself. One cannot argue for the autonomy to cheat millions of students, by posing the demand for quality as simply a conspiracy to defang heterodox ideas. The victims of the wolf may want a hearing. That affair can get very dirty.

For academic discourse, two things that are of utmost importance are quality and iconoclasm. Both are easier stated than implemented. People need iconoclasm in the world of knowledge to both expand and question their conceptions of the world. Ideas, especially those on which the reputation of stalwart academicians and their 'intellectual' children depend, those, which conform to ideologies of the state, are especially hard to challenge and discredit. It is important to foster iconoclasm so that knowledge does not become a tool in the sustenance of the powerful, but becomes a weapon for those who claim to want to change this equation between ideas and power, more than often recreate stifling power hegemonies themselves, if they happen to capture some part of the academic sphere themselves. All through the euphoric seventies and the pre-doomsday eighties, Marxist academics in India coerced budding students into their ideological predilections. Done through thinly veiled carrots and sticks and by peppering departments all over the country with their ideological kith and kin, this should serve as a grim reminder that intellectual fascism can be unleashed in the name of fighting conformity and hegemony. A veritable boom in the number of thesis and research papers coming out of JNU, CU and JU during the period that employed 'Marxian analysis' is a sad testament to this bias. Ideological limitations, the need to reward loyalties and conformity, combined with an intricate system of informal mutual back scratching helped permeate close-mindedness in academia, right up to departments in small colleges. Atop this hierarchy sat the nomenklatura—now, not so much out of favour as it touts to be, more out of fashion than it wants to be. The pariah status that an academic of the class of Ashis Nandy was accorded is a telling reminder how erstwhile champions of things heterodox can quickly transform themselves into defenders of status-quo, discouraging multiple heterodoxies. Iconoclasm, while being aimed at existing hegemons, cannot be a pretext for spreading petty mediocrity, to entrench vested interests, making their uprooting that much difficult. West Bengal is still reeling from this phenomenon. It is not yet clear whether the 'greenwashed' future will be any different. Though employed here for

the purposes of illustration, encouraging nepotism, spreading mediocrity, propagating hegemonies, creating a nomenklatura based on in-group loyalties, shrillness and service to power, is by no means an exclusively 'red' disease.

An ecology where reasoned iconoclasm reigns supreme needs, among other things, a democratic setup and a student-professor relationship that is like one between peers. It needs to be a space where deference to truth and evidence comes foremost, where plagiarism is dealt with ruthlessly, where students and research scholars who oppose the academic ideas of their mentors cannot be threatened with 'dire consequences', where individual brilliance of a student that surpasses that of the professor causes celebration rather than anxiety and where 'stalwart academics' can be heckled by sound logic and shown their place if need be. Finally, it needs to be a place where that great unmentionable called quality reigns supreme. The last point is especially important for research, as many of the researchers will come to populate the teaching departments of India.

One way, by which hegemonies are perpetuated in academia in India, are by faculty appointments based on considerations other than academic quality. In a scenario so rife with nepotism and favouritism based on academic lineage, political inclination and other vested interests, setting an objective quality bar hits right at the heart of these informal structures of patronage. Though by no means perfect, one useful index of academic quality is impact factor or H-index. Academic research, in the natural and social sciences, is mainly published in specialized journals. Impact factor or H-index are various measures of citation and quality of journal where one published their work, indicative of how many other people deem your research important or relevant enough to refer to it in their own work published in an indexed journal. There are many indexed journals in India too. While not prostrating totally at the altar of impact factor, deference to that deity might serve well to separate the wheat from the chaff generated by prejudiced, ideological and nepotistic calls that faculty recruitment committees often make, using the cover of subjective assessment.

The claim that NRI academics in Harvard and Stanford suffer from some kind of relevance-to-discourse-in-India envy is a just that, a claim. There is no evidence to show that an academic in India is cited more than his or her Boston-based NRI counterpart by academics based in Pune or Nasik or Satara. In fact, for all the fire-eating talk of undercutting and inverting the global academic pecking order, the reality is much more sobering. Pre-eminent warriors of 'autonomous' discourse make their beeline for Oxford University Press, Routledge or Ivy-League university presses, be it Harvard University Press or Columbia University Press, to get their thick books published. These books cost a fortune to libraries in India.

There have been for sometime currents within the world of science that seek to remove the commercial barrier to knowledge access. Open-access journals, which can be read freely all over the world, are part of this. The charge that peer-reviews may be prejudiced against those espousing uncomfortable and heterodox ideas is now being countered with innovations in the methods of review, open review and even scope for open-debate during the review process.

Journals with open access and newer forms of review are being cited highly and many have established their repute in a very short time. It is this process of open-access and open review to level the international playing field in knowledge production that India can ride high on, rather than viewing the demand for quality as a conspiracy.

On the question of quality and the conspiratorial scorn heaped at 'refereed journals of repute', it is better to mention P C Mahalanobis's *Sankhya*. *Sankhya* was and is, a refereed journal of repute, and at the same time, is published from India by the Indian Statistical Institute. It calls itself the "Indian journal of statistics." Its impact factor is comparable to the better journals of general statistics. *Sankhya's* latest issue (Volume 73, Series A, Part 2, Year 2011) has 7 papers from 15 authors. All but two are non-Indians. These numbers vary but the underlying point is clear. It is simply a quality Indian outlet of academic research that is also coveted by foreign researchers as a place to be published in. It would be absurd to argue that its high quality and concomitant stature in the globe hurts its autonomy or that it discriminates against research workers in India. The *Sankhya* project is no narrow nationalist project that some might paint it to be—rather it is a product of a certain confidence that a research journal can be Indian and of high quality at the same time.

Of course, all that there is or should be, has a context. It exists in the backdrop of India's stark social inequity, a global order that seeks to promote and reward certain voices and stifle others, an increasing commercialization and corporatization of the vehicles of public discourse, a culture that equates research utility with the private profits that it can generate. India needs vigorous affirmative action and democratization of academic and institutional cultures. The institutions need quality and autonomy and the imagination to wed the two. □□□