

INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE NEED FOR CRITICAL KNOWLEDGES

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ABSTRACT:

The construction of a reflexive modernity calls for people who can look back at their own society and correctly identify its greatest challenges. Modernity may be weak and poorly rooted in India, but this is just the situation in which more sensitivity is called for, not less. While many of the contradictions created by nineteenth century industrialization are surfacing now in India, the risks of late industrial societies, too, are making their presence felt. The weakening of social and normative knowledges cannot be said to be a problem restricted to liberal welfare states and threatens India, too. The dangers created by this weakening may take up special forms here, given the small ratio of educated elites in comparison to the rest of Indian society. The demand for critical and human knowledges will never go away. The challenge now is for us to rework how we can meet that demand.

The knowledges which gain currency in a society are hardly autonomous. We know that economic and political processes intertwine with culture to create and to demolish academic disciplines. The claim of modern academic disciplines to being the highest form of knowledge itself is the product of a particular juncture of history. The late medieval university in Europe was primarily a site for the study of theology and law (Rashdall 1895). The modern university emerged in the nineteenth century with the growing power of non-religious institutions in society. The university was not a puppet of the state, but yet could exist only with the blessings of the government. At several places like Germany and France, modern universities were created by the direct intervention of the state. The university's place in society was also cemented when alumni tried to monopolize the struggle for jobs and positions of influence. Even today the university manoeuvres to control legitimacy before the state and seeks to deny legitimacy to other forms of knowledge. The UGC must necessarily maintain a list of universities that it does not recognize. Or else the prestige and power

of those which enjoy its benevolence would weaken. This is not at all to say that all conceptions of truth are equal and that it is power alone that decides their validity. At the same time, what is taught as knowledge in higher education cannot be seen as absolute and pure, untouched by power and social context.

The historicity of knowledge is seen in the way the new universities had given pride of place in western Europe to the cultural knowledges which emerged after the renaissance. In spite of the industrial revolution, technical knowledges were still considered inferior in the nineteenth century university. It was initially only in Germany and the land-grant universities of USA that professional disciplines and technological research were made the centre of interest. Most European elites had a cultural and legal education rather than a technical one (Ruegg 2004). It was as late as the second half of the twentieth century that technology and science came to dominate most universities. Meanwhile the cultural knowledges, too, have been transforming. They are being shaped into forms that powerful actors find useful in organizing and controlling the workforce and society at large. Teachers of English literature are now to be seen marketing their wares as courses on management communication.

The pattern visible in late industrial societies is that of the continued growth of technical-instrumental knowledges and a concurrent decline of other forms. Those pockets of India which are connected to the global market mirror this trend. When universities are told to be relevant, more often than not it is meant that they should produce more graduates who can fit into the workforce. The market has held in thrall even our Knowledge Commission, and it focuses primarily on creating “human resources” from the point of view of the economy. It is revealing that disciplines like philosophy and sociology are entirely excluded in its report (NKC 2008).

The Darker Side of Instrumental Knowledges

The emphasis on utility, of course, need not be entirely a bad thing. As we move towards more complex societies, the rise of technical knowledges is inevitable and necessary. However, there is a darker side to their rise. Max Weber famously outlined it a century ago when he wrote of the rationalization of the world. We built an iron frame to free ourselves from the constraints of nature and history, he wrote, and then found ourselves in an iron cage instead (Weber 1958). The pathos of Weber came from his despair that the grasp of the iron cage would eventually close down

completely over the human spirit.

Scholars like the early critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have shared this pessimism (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972) but others have been less deferential to what they see as mere nostalgia for the past (Giddens 1995). Juergen Habermas saw the future and present as capable of being whatever we chose to make of them. For him the defining struggle was between what he called the system and the lifeworld (Habermas 1981a, 1981b, 1996). The lifeworld was the domain of meanings, subjective and shared. It was where what Habermas called communicative action could take place. This was action through dialogues, resting upon relative equality between the participants and upon shared aesthetics, emotions and beliefs. Communicative action had the possibility of permitting reason, justice and fairness to be grounds for social arrangements. The life world was where this could be worked out. The system, in contrast, was built up of objective forces and walls. It was the domain of strategic action, resting not on dialogue but on reaction and strategic choices in the face of non-negotiables. It was shaped out of social facts and proceeded through much higher degrees of compulsion than experienced in the lifeworld.

There were advantages in having a system on which to base our society. Communicative action all the time or in larger networks was slow and time-consuming. It called for bonding, dialogues and a creative exploration of shared meanings. The lifeworld was deeply meaningful, but doing things in it in a just manner was laborious and painstaking. However, if just frameworks could be built for strategic action, they could save huge amounts of time and effort in everyday activities. The growing prominence of the system went hand in hand with the rise of technical-instrumental knowledges. The latter helped predict causality and to guide the precise use of force. However, it should never be forgotten that the system had to be just. This normative dimension was what gave it legitimacy. And norms were best worked out not through strategic action, but through communicative action. Norms that were imposed or the result of symbolic violence could hardly be considered legitimate. Indeed, both the lifeworld and strategic action were needed in any given society. However, the legitimacy of the system had to come ultimately from the lifeworld. The loss of their connection led to the system taking up an oppressive and opaque role.

The danger posed to late industrial societies by the weakening of the social sciences and humanities is precisely this - the creation of an opaque society. The market and state power embody certain kinds of rationality while several others, too, are possible. Norms may be various, with the market and state being built on only certain out of a large range of possibilities. The powerful tend to

promote only the knowledges which they are able to use and which will serve them. Questions of norms and rationalities that are not consistent with the rationality of the market and large bureaucracies are destabilizing and slowly bled away.

The fissures of a technical-instrumental world

Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck argue that if modern knowledges are too close to the strings of power, then a grave danger looms. Only those problems and consequences will be visible which suit the powerful. However, the invisible threats are of no less consequence even if they have been pushed out of sight. Examples of the consequences of being blind to trouble spots are already around us. We have been witness to the triumphalism of corporate capitalism and a media entranced by its successes. However, neither the corporate czars, nor their puppet media and nobel prize winning economists were able to identify or warn us of the fatal flaws which have led to a near collapse of the global economy and thrown millions out of their jobs and homes. In India we have had a scandal of the magnitude of Satyam Computers, where a handful of managers, accountants and board members seem to have pulled the wool over everyone's eyes. The culture of India's corporate world seems to have norms that discourage critical inquiry of a deeper kind.

Giddens and Beck help us to understand what is happening through their concept of a risk society. Ulrich Beck (1992) says that the kind of industrialization which had developed in the nineteenth century is now undergoing fundamental transformation. Familiar concepts like class through which we grasped the tension points of the old industrial societies are no longer as useful as they were in the past. Beck says that a new social structure is struggling to emerge and we, too, are only in the process of developing the concepts which can recognize it and help us to act. What we do see are a series of fissures that reach out across the entire system. In this new risk society one of the key fissures is created by the growth of science and technology. The technical disciplines have demonstrated enormous capacity to impact our lives. It is in the character of these disciplines that they look at specific, technical features of what they study. However, the most important consequences of science and technology fall outside their own domain and field of vision. The consequences are political, social, cultural and economic, to understand which other kinds of disciplines like the social sciences and humanities are needed. Civil engineering, for instance, is ill-equipped to understand what happens to the life of the people when they are asked to leave to build a big dam over their homes. The civil engineer is taught to measure the strength of concrete and

stone. He has no concepts to measure the pressure and pains of human existence. The disjunction between the highly developed technical knowledges and their inability to grasp their consequences is one of the major generators of risk in technocratic societies.

The technical disciplines no longer have the concept of politics in their professional imagination. It is at best something unsavoury which politicians indulge in or is a description of the underworld of corporate manipulations. Yet, the very nature of technology is deeply political. When engineers build factories that displace thousands, they are engaged in a political act. The growth of a system of knowledge where people no longer have the categories to understand that they are engaged in political acts, Beck argues, is itself a politics of knowledge.

Anthony Giddens (1990) makes a point similar to Beck's, even though he comes to it from a different theoretical background. Giddens argues that the complexity of contemporary societies and their sheer scale is unprecedented. Modernity rests upon several kinds of disembedding among which one is the emergence of a sense of time and space which is not tied to a particular context. It is this which permits communication and collaboration across a global scale. Another of the crucial forms of disembedding is the creation of expert systems. Now we no longer have to engage at a personal level with different kinds of knowledges. For instance, one no longer need to know the details of how to build a ceiling to have a house. It is possible to trust an expert whose realm it is to ensure that the roof will not collapse over the resident's head. Trust, Giddens underscores, is at the core of modernity. We cannot fully verify the abilities of the expert so we choose to trust him. However, the emergence of such expert systems may go hand in hand with the suppression of knowledges that do not fit in. This may well lead to a situation where the expert does not have access to information that the materials used in the ceiling are carcinogenic. Risk, Giddens, argues, becomes a characteristic feature of modernity, along with trust.

Both Beck and Giddens point out that that technocratic societies are sharply vulnerable to systemic risks. The organization of technical knowledges is based upon the exercise of power in denying other forms of knowledge. However, this leaves them exposed to the risks which emerge from origins beyond their own particular domain. Modernity leads to a monolithic system of dominant knowledges, which is incapable of responding to problems and issues which come from beyond what these knowledges and expert systems have defined as rationality.

The answer, one must emphasize, is not the abandonment of modernity, but the development of a

reflexive modernity. Giddens and Beck call this the radicalization of modernity and argue that it is already taking place. The awareness of risk becomes the basis of a society which is continually reflecting upon itself. Reflexivity permits actions in response which seek to correct modernity's problems and which can overcome its fissures.

Knowledge and Modernity in India

The Indian context is quite different from the liberal welfare democracies of UK and Germany where Giddens, Habermas and Beck situated their work. Here modernity itself is still struggling to assert itself against the opponents of reason. Reflexivity is an even more distant, weak process. With the majority of Indians struggling to make both ends meet, the perception of risks from the environment is often an unaffordable luxury. Where Habermas saw the state threatening to choke communicative action, here most often it is the non-functional or weak state that one encounters. While reading theorists of modernity, one must weigh with caution their applicability to India. The state in post-colonial India has had small centres of modernity (often of contested interpretations) and a large hinterland where modern institutions negotiate and strike compromises with other social processes.

The higher education which we see in universities, engineering colleges and management institutes is primarily the offspring of modernity in India. Like modernity, it too has a weak foot-hold on our soil. While there were several sources of an Indian modernity (Pathak 1998), hardly any of them got institutionalized within the university system. The colonial Indian state had seeded and promoted several institutions of higher education. In early post-colonial times there was a fresh thrust to develop personnel for the Nehruvian vision of India. These institutions carried forward versions of knowledge that drew directly from sources in London and New York rather than Wardha and Auroville. While there continue to be attempts like dalit studies and feminism to break into new discourses that express the life experiences of the under-privileged, they remain subalterns in the university system.

The degree of inequality in access to higher education has been extremely high in India. As late as 2005-2006 the gross enrollment ratio of young people between the age group 18-24 was just 11.6 %ⁱ. In contrast most developed economies had a GER of over 80%ⁱⁱ. There has been a huge gulf between the educated with access to the emerging economy and state institutions and the

uneducated who were left out.

Even within the educated there has been a sharp cleft between an elite on the one hand and an internally differentiated non-elite section on the other. The basic form of social stratification embedded in Indian higher education was much the same as in west Europe before the second world war. There were a few elite universities from which came the managerial classes that ran the Indian state and big industry. These were primarily a handful of metropolitan universities like Delhi, Allahabad, Kolkatta, Madras and a very few others. Most elite positions in India were taken up by those who had had a cultural rather than a technical education. This, too, was close to the pattern of elites one sees in western Europe and America in the nineteenth century and till relatively late in the twentieth century.

One early exception in India to the preponderance of a cultural education among the elites before the 1970s came with the setting of the IITs. The original intention of the IITs, now covered by the dust of the ages, was to create the engineers who would build Nehru's temples of modern India. The disappearance of that objective from the IITs is instructive of the changing balance of power in India. Instead of looking towards service of the Nehruvian nation, the compass of middle-class students has swung towards other poles. They soon began to focus on going abroad, then on joining the corporate sector, especially IT companies and in recent years IIT students had declared investment banking to be the most prized destination. To place their impact, it must be remembered that they were a very tiny section of India. For many years the IITs were few and far in between, producing less than a couple thousand graduates a year. At least part of their prestige came from the scarcity of their graduates when compared to the size of India.

The overall size of higher education in India was very small, but within it the non-elite sector in terms of numbers completely dwarfed the premier universities and institutes. What was true of the rest of India's modern institutions was also true of India's higher education: there were a few centres of excellence, committed to modernity, the rest were a mass of struggling and failed institutions. In most of the latter only a ritual of teaching subjects like sociology and political science was maintained. Across India we saw English literature being taught in Hindi or Tamil, etc. medium. Here and there we can see courageous teachers struggle to keep a vibrant intellectual current going, but they are the minorities within their colleges and universities. A sharp stepping down of rigour and commitment towards reflection and questioning is seen when one moves away from a few centres. In some of Kanpur's colleges, for instance, hardly any classroom teaching takes place.

Young people who are holding down full-time jobs enroll in thousands in these colleges, knowing that they do not need to attend any classes and that they will still eventually collect a degree in sociology after just a few hours of mugging, supplemented if necessary by mass cheating. This is a picture true of most of India – north, south, east and west.

But even all this seems about to change. There is taking place a decline of the social sciences and humanities at both the elite and the mass ends of the system. And I will argue that not all the passing of the old deserves to be mourned.

Behind the basic changes taking place has been the changing balance of power in India, with the gradual growth of the corporate sector, especially after 1991. After “liberalization”, jobs in the state sector stagnated while those in the corporate and informal sectors grew. One consequence of this was a drastic alteration of priorities in higher education among the upper sections of Indian society. The economic and prestige returns from participation in the developed economy far outstripped most of what the Indian economy could offer. Globalization's effect on India's educated classes has been to pull them in very large numbers into a global economy, leaving vacuums behind whose impact we are still trying to understand.

One effect has been to drastically decrease elite participation in the social sciences and humanities. We are now seeing people getting admission to elite universities who come from substantially different class and caste backgrounds than the previous generations of students. The composition of elite faculty too has changed with all major universities complaining about how difficult it is to attract "quality" faculty. Within departments of social science and humanities there is a distinct air of demoralization and of feeling that one is no longer relevant. Part of this is because the new knowledges of power are so obviously something else. But the decline of state support, too, is a factor and it has some independent roots.

The moralities of the state moved emphatically away in the 1990s from choices guided by political and ideological concerns to choices made by the "invisible" hand of the market. We are told continuously by administrators and heads of institutions that the research which matters is that which articulates with the market. Studies of consumer behaviour draw large projects and make the university administration happy, while studies of farmers' poverty languish for lack of support. Departments of management mushroom while political science is threatened with closure.

The growth of the market need not always lead to the same consequences. The rise of the small and medium bourgeoisie in England had been the backbone for the struggle for a liberal democracy and the rise of these classes had been accompanied by an ideology of science and reason. In India we cannot say that the same process is being repeated. Big industry has been the major beneficiary of liberalization, with smaller entrepreneurs still suffering a licence raj quite similar to the old. The modernity that is being cultivated in Indian higher education under the impact of those interests is undoubtedly growing in size and impact. But it also displays a withdrawal from the social and philosophical breadth of vision which characterized its earlier avatar of state socialism. Instead what are promoted are the technical knowledges of management, organizational psychology and industrial economics. These disciplines embed a system of power that promotes certain questions over others. Elite MBAs and engineers fail to comprehend issues beyond what they have been exposed to. When confronted by a Singur or a workers' agitation, their responses range from irritation to embarrassment. Trained to be good employees, questioning the system is a transgression of their corporate ethics. Even when some of them wish to engage with the grave social problems they see around them, they are hobbled by the narrowness of their education. The decline of critical systemic theorizing at elite levels portends trouble for that same system in coming years.

At the other end of the spectrum – the higher education available in small mofussil towns - the fraud that was being conducted in the name of teaching sociology and political science is also beginning to lose some of its steam. These subjects are still popular because one hardly needs to attend college and can get a degree while also being a full-time worker. However, the proliferation of self-financed colleges has made technical degrees much easier to obtain. In states like Chhattisgarh it is difficult for some undergraduate colleges to get even a single students to study sociology. One must admit that that is not altogether a bad thing to happen.

The scale of this change is dramatic. In Uttar Pradesh there has taken place a mushrooming of self-financed engineering colleges, very much like Andhra Pradesh. In 2007-8 there were more than 49,000 seats in undergraduate colleges under the nodal Uttar Pradesh Technological University (as per its annual report 2007-8). In 2008-9 newspaper reports say that there were over 55,000 seats and it was proving very difficult to fill all of them. Virtually anyone with a passing knowledge of science and whose family could borrow about Rs 60,000 a year could walk up and occupy a seat in an engineering college. For those who couldn't pay that amount, apart from the usual reservations, the UP government would also be paying the entire fees of all students whose parents declared they

had an income of less than Rs one lakh per annum. Thus almost everybody who was likely to have the personal skills and social background to do even moderately well in science at school would be acquiring a technical degree. And for the rest there were also degrees in commerce and management.

What we are seeing at a sociological level is that, firstly, there has occurred a relative expansion in opportunity, in comparison to the past. Where twenty years earlier it was very difficult to get admission into an engineering colleges, today in several states of India that is no longer a constraint. To be sure there are bottlenecks and strata within engineering graduates. But at a systemic level, opportunity does appear to have increased.

Secondly, unlike any time in the past, the majority of the future service class would possess a technical education and not a cultural one. The contribution of their higher education to the political and social vision of this section would be of a very narrow kind. It may be argued that earlier, too, the weakness of institutions had also made the humanities and social sciences ineffectual. However that was not true at elite levels in the past. Now the nature of the elite itself is changing.

As an illustration consider the case of the Uttar Pradesh Technical University which was the nodal university till just a few months back for all the engineering courses in UP. The cultural education it offers its undergraduates in even the best of its colleges is illustrative. When a student joins B.Tech. in Civil Engineering, the discipline which educates builders of public roads and dams, in the first two semesters there is half a course on “Environment and Ecology” along with a mandatory course on “Professional Communication”ⁱⁱⁱ After that, till the end of their degree there is only a course on Industrial Economics and a course on Principles of Management (which seems to be optional)^{iv} . That half a course on environment and ecology is supposed to provide an adequate socialization into political and civic morality for our engineers. Little can be expected of even the highest rated institutions in the state. On top of it most professional colleges in UP pay very little and have a body of demoralized and weakly trained faculty. It should not come as a surprise when the graduates from such a system across the country demonstrate complete ignorance of basic issues.

Habermas in *Towards a Rational Society* (1970) pointed out that there were several expectations from a university in contemporary times. One was that it reproduced and advanced the technical knowledges on which the economy rested. Alongside this there was also the learning of cultures of

work, for instance, the values and orientations upon which the work of the medical professional rests. The university, thus, whether in terms of technical or cultural knowledges was closely associated with work and the economy. However this did not exhaust the role of a university in society. It must include, said Habermas, another key role which was the reproduction, elaboration and criticism of a society's culture. Societies have systems of meanings which circulate through a variety of cultural sites like films, magazines, kitty-parties and beer pubs. They are more numerous and broader in scope than work and are no less important in their impact on human life. An important aspect of higher education is to participate and reflect upon those meanings. The job of universities stop here either. For the cultural domain includes learning how to participate in the political system. A key aspect of university life must be to teach about power and its dynamics. Young people must learn about what processes drive decision-making in our society, must learn to reflect upon them and to participate in them. This is no less a part of the university's functions than initiating them into the economy. A university has the advantage of bringing to politics a spirit of reflection. Leaving political education to the media is a path fraught with danger.

By failing to develop a serious engagement of higher education with culture - political as well as non-political, we are creating a certain kind of "educated" Indian. The educated wage labour is making up a growing proportion of India's population, with the decline of agriculture and rise of urban employment. The culture of this section will have many consequences for the future of India. It is they who will have access to technology and it is from them that supervisory and managerial positions will be filled.

At present too many from the professional and supervisory classes seriously believe that the main danger to India comes from politicians and democracy. These classes feel more and more frustrated in their efforts to influence public life, but still are reluctant to engage with debates on the nature and processes of democracy. If these middle classes tend to opt out of a political system, among the consequences are an even greater loss of legitimacy for the processes of power.

For any political system to function without violence, it must have at least some minimum degree of justice and the people must have a level of faith in it. We see the absence of these all around us in the form of more and more recourse to violence and social disruption as the way to resolve issues and seek benefits. Little faith remains in the machinery of the state to guarantee fairness or justice. While violence in our polity is due to many reasons, the withdrawal from informed reflection by the upper wage labour only exacerbates it. Conversely, it is also the educated wage labour and

professional who has the possibility of bringing to bear the accumulated wisdom of history. It is through learning and access to academia that one is spared the effort of having to reinvent the wheel every time. Or having to discover the evils of fascism only by personal experience of what happens when a society closes its mind. An education suitable only to creating good technical employees for corporations is inadequate for creating good citizens for a modern democracy.

The struggle to expand space for critical knowledges

With the decline of the social sciences and humanities is decreasing our ability to imagine alternative forms of human existence. It was these disciplines which taught us that human possibilities were linked to history and to social structure. Their decline ensures that there are progressively fewer spaces for critical reflection on many key issues. Most adults now have no opportunity to study them after school. The school, however, has its own reluctance to engage with larger issues and controversies. The study of political and social processes is mostly reduced to memorizing rules of institutions. Controversies and debate are embarrassing for those who run Indian schooling. Even there it is most convenient and causes less trouble with the powerful to simply focus on rules, maths and physics and ignore the larger human questions of justice and freedom. The general trend is the same as that seen in modern institutions worldwide: a preference for technical knowledges that lead to individualization, a loss of a social and historical imagination and an increasing ignorance of basic human processes.

For instance, consider the way we teach about the social and political arrangements needed for a good society, in school textbooks. This is the central issue around which rotate at least 2500 years of debate, struggle and revolution. It is what Plato and Aristotle wrote about, as did Gandhi and Marx. It is intricately tied to the struggle for power and conflicts between classes and interest groups. However, most teachers and the education bureaucracy reduce this to a bland recital of procedures and rules - rules of elections, rules for the formation of the government and so on. There is no resonance with Gandhi's insistence that freedom calls for developing our own ability to control and harness our selves. There is no link with the loss of freedom which happens to workers when they lose control of their labour. Aristotle's warnings against giving too much power to any single group or individual seem to have never been made. The issues and debates disappear, all that remains are rules. The reasons for this are obvious. To talk of anything more is to talk of politics and that invites the ire of superiors and the education ministry. There is hardly any professional

group of educationists which can stand between the ministry and the school. In a country with millions of computer programmers, very few scholars exist with the authority to insist on a proper approach to school education. The result is a bloodless textbook, devoid of any contentious issues, as if there exist no interests in society and all that is to be seen around us is the result of a hidden but benign disposition.

The changing face of knowledge in our society increases the threat to reason and freedom. At this juncture, there is an urgent need for the social sciences and humanities to ask themselves difficult questions about their relevance to society. The first frontier is that of rethinking the content of the social sciences. It is from within us that there must emerge a new form of knowledge that speaks to the hearts and minds of the people, free from the guiding channels of commerce and domination. An important aspect would be the fusion of normative and empirical knowledges. It is futile to teach sociology without a political and and ethical trajectory to it. If one studies caste, one must also ask what purpose it had in the past and to ask what kind of society we wish to build in the future.

The second frontier is that of building new institutional spaces for this new social science. Most of the old undergraduate and post-graduate programmes are fading rapidly. It is essential to create viable support systems that protect their graduates from the vagaries of domination through the market. There will never be a businessman who will want to support studies of why exploitation is bad for human beings. That has to be supported by institutions and mechanisms that do not work through the logic of the monetary market.

At the same time, we have to find niches within the institutions of the new technological society where we can continue to speak truth to power. At present we try to teach critical knowledges on a full-time basis to young people who are consumed with anxiety about their employability. It is only to be expected that they will not be able to develop a commitment towards these disciplines. In contrast, when made available alongside the security of a vocational education, students demonstrate a fascination for larger philosophical and social questions. The humanities and social sciences are taught in the IITs and the immense popularity of those courses (when taught well) is evidence of this.

However, there is a vast audience which the critical academic disciplines completely overlook. As people grow older and experience more of the vicissitudes of modern life, they ask more and more penetrating political and sociological questions. It is at the older and more mature student that we

must aim. That is where we will find the greatest receptivity and the richest, most fertile soil. This calls for a serious rethinking of institutional formats. We have hitherto sought easy targets in the young. But now we will have to work out what kind of courses men and women in their late twenties and thirties and above can attend. Perhaps the way out is to have a series of part-time modular courses instead of the old full-time UG and PG degrees. People who work in factories and offices can find evening and weekend courses on flower decoration and photography in big cities. Why not courses on understanding and overcoming discrimination? We can also have these courses as part of the vocational degrees as in the IITs. Subsequently we can gradually stream the more serious and involved students into more thorough programmes.

There have been many encouraging attempts in India to build such systems of reflection and thence a modernity which is supple and responsive. In terms of content we have had the innovative social science textbooks by NGOs like Eklavya and very recently by the NCERT, too. The NCERT political science textbooks of classes IX to XII are a good illustration of how larger questions can return to Indian education. They depict democracy in all its glory and all its ugliness. Democracy is not the rules of the Parliament, but the struggles over issues and policies that occur in this institution. Several factors led to this fresh approach being taken. One of them was that for the first time there was a sizable number of committed social scientists who used their professional reputation to balance the watering down tendencies of the bureaucrats. Professionalization creates a pressure group of its own in society. There are indeed grounds for hope where concentrations of scholarship go beyond a certain threshold. This lesson may be constructively applied at many other sites.

An institutional format that may have potential for the future is exemplified by the IITs which insist on compulsory humanities and social sciences courses for all undergraduates. They understand that these courses give students something which their science and technology courses cannot. Engineering and management colleges are growing and we must press for the incorporation of similar courses there, too.

Another institutional format is seen in what was developed jointly by several NGOs like Eklavya, Digantar, Vidya Bhawan and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences for a master's programme in elementary education. It is an example of how to overcome the problem of educating interested people but who had their own lives and careers to follow. It was aimed at highly committed teachers and activists who wished to learn while also continuing with their regular work. This programme

sought a solution through a mix of online and classroom teaching. There are many more such experiments taking place in India today.

The construction of a reflexive modernity calls for people who can look back at their own society and correctly identify its greatest challenges. Modernity may be weak and poorly rooted in India, but this is just the situation in which more sensitivity is called for, not less. The fissures created by the weakening of social and normative knowledges threaten India, too, and cannot be said to be a problem restricted to liberal welfare states. While many of the contradictions created by nineteenth century industrialization are surfacing now in India, the risks of late industrial societies, too, are making their presence felt. Those dangers may take up special forms here, given the small ratio of educated elites in comparison to the rest of Indian society. The demand for critical and human knowledges will never go away. The challenge now is for us to rework how we can meet it.

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