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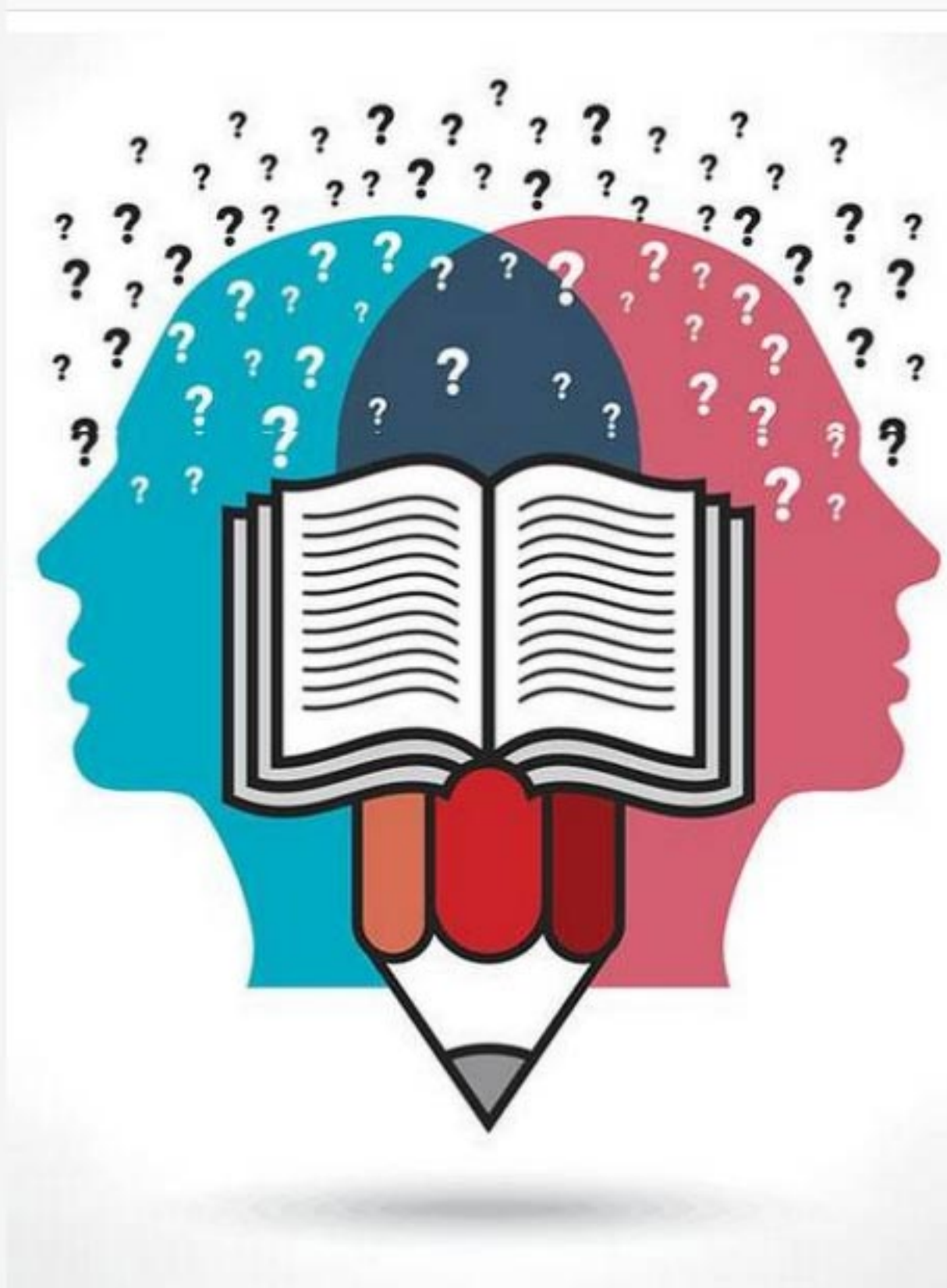
Reading between the rankings



Pulapre Balakrishnan

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**A university's culture is its most valuable resource. Feeding a repressive culture bodes ill for India**

Two recent developments draw our attention to the state of India's universities. The first is the release of the annual ranking of the world's universities by the *Times Higher Education (THE)*. The other is an announcement by the Prime Minister, as reported in the press, which has an even closer bearing on the future of higher education here.

The newcomers' signal

While university rankings are to be taken with a pinch of salt and should not elicit knee-jerk responses, that they are broadly indicative may be seen from the latest edition. The universities placed at the top all have breadth in the range of disciplines offered and have been recognised as centres of knowledge production for decades, if not for centuries. The ranking of India's universities has some elements that were predictable and others that came as a surprise.

Thus, while the Indian Institute of Science topped, as usual, the list of Indian institutions that made it to the global top one thousand, three very new ones improved their ranking considerably. These are IIT Indore, which finished ahead of most of its 'founding five' sisters, the JSS University, Mysuru and the Amrita University, Coimbatore.

To get a definite idea of what contributed to the higher rankings of these universities we would need to study the indicators chosen by the *THE*, but that, though located in smaller cities, they could lead the three universities of Calcutta, Madras and Mumbai, set up in the mid-1800s and with a large number of students on their rolls, is surely of interest. We would be advised to not cling to the data that the said institutions are relatively new, leaving them more nimble, for the universities ranked highest by the *THE* are over eight centuries old. So it would seem that there is something these three institutions in question are doing which leaves them ahead of a very large number of much older Indian universities. It should prove useful to pursue this line of thought.

Almost exactly at the time the *THE* rankings were released, there was held in Delhi the 'Conference on Academic Leadership on Education for Resurgence', jointly organised by University Grants Commission, All India Council for Technical Education and the Indian Council for Social Science Research, among other institutions, and attended by over 350 Vice Chancellors and representatives of the universities. This is a powerful grouping indeed.

Delivering the inaugural address, the Prime Minister announced that the government would make available ₹1 lakh crore for infrastructure in higher education by 2022. The Prime Minister is also reported to have emphasised the importance of the Indian Institutes of Management Bill of 2017 granting autonomy to the IIMs. He correctly pointed out that this meant that the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) will no longer dictate their curricula. Somewhat earlier the government had announced a list of 'institutions of eminence', the idea underlying which was that they are now free to set their own rules and regulations. While the freeing of universities from external control and increasing their resource base is for the better, the question is whether these moves can by themselves raise higher education in India to the desirable global level.

There are two aspects that need acknowledgement from a survey of the state of higher education in India. First, the rankings, though imperfect, suggest that Indian universities are lagging in their research output. This by itself should be worrying, but another aspect, namely the migration overseas even at the undergraduate level, suggests that not even the dissemination of knowledge here is considered good enough by Indians.

It's not about money

The estimated flow of income overseas due to fees paid to foreign universities is around \$2 billion. Surely, resources cannot be the barrier to providing world-class teaching in India? University teachers are paid well enough and the availability of material is no longer a problem, with highly affordable Indian editions of the best international textbooks.

The crucial factor is the absence of the norms internal to the Indian university that enable desirable outcomes with respect to teaching and research. Among these norms would be an expectation of excellence from both teachers and students and the assurance of autonomy to the former. This autonomy, it may be asserted, is to be expected not only in relation to external agencies such as the UGC or the MHRD but also within the university, including from peers. In fact, within the university the latter is all that counts.

Many years ago the science administrator C.P. Snow spoke of the 'two cultures' of the arts and the sciences, respectively, that co-existed in British intellectual life. He had lamented the near-opacity of the contents of one culture to the inhabitants of the other, leaving them apart and the country poorer for it. Snow had, however, not bothered to examine the culture within the two cultures he had identified. Presumably he had not thought them particularly wanting. In India today we would be advised to reflect upon the culture that pervades the Indian university. Beneath the mushroom cloud of UGC regulations, governing everything from hours to assessment, there are no norms making for the attainment of excellence or the empowerment of faculty so that they deliver to their highest potential.

On the other hand, one often encounters established practices that reward mediocrity and restrict autonomy of the faculty. It needs to be emphasised that this 'culture' is mostly owed to the university itself; it is not something that is imposed upon it.

Two illustrations that follow aid in estimating the distance between Indian universities and universities elsewhere in the world in this regard. Even three decades ago it would have been possible for a young lecturer to offer a set of lectures at the university ranked the first globally by the *THE* without either the administration or his peers having any say in the matter, something that is less assured in India. Secondly, it is unlikely that in a leading world university there would, directly or indirectly, be an attempt to pressurise a teacher to change her assessment of a candidate's performance. The autonomy of a teacher is both a value in itself and designed to contribute to the larger goal of excellence in the production and dissemination of knowledge. In India this value receives little recognition and its crystallisation is thwarted, irrespective of the ideological persuasion of the regime governing the university.

The invasion within

It is not as if the idea of the university as a space of freedom and intellectual responsibility has received universal acceptance globally. However, the best regarded universities of the world today yet harbour some of the norms which ensure that they remain ahead. Culture may be difficult to measure but when its meaning is reduced to norms as the rules of the game, it is easy for us to see what is missing here.

No amount of hand-wringing over India's place in the world university rankings or pumping resources into infrastructure building can help if the culture is not conducive to creativity. Its culture is a university's most valuable resource. Feeding a repressive culture bodes ill for the future of our universities and, therefore, India's place in the world of knowledge. Rightly we rue the fact that Nalanda, an international university that had flourished in India over a millennium ago, was destroyed through foreign invasion. Today our universities may be being destroyed by our own short-sightedness.

Pulapre Balakrishnan teaches at Ashoka University, Sonapat, Haryana