

UGC and JNU: A Tale of Exception Told in Two Acts

Language Undefined

The Jawaharlal Nehru University was conceived as a “different” university 52 years ago when a Bill on it was introduced in Parliament. By the early 1970s itself, it was clear that the University was fulfilling its objectives with 20% of its students drawn from the Scheduled Castes alone. Even today, the University is as rural as urban, has more women than men, with socially and economically backward students forming the overwhelming majority. It is also a place of excellence, not as conveyed by ranking systems, but by the value its research holds for its peers across the world.

Ayesha Kidwai (ayasha.kidwai@gmail.com) teaches linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

More than 52 years ago, on 24 December 1964, members of the Rajya Sabha were asked to consider a bill that would lead to the creation of another university in Delhi. Moving it as the *Jawaharlal Nehru University Bill* in December 1964, the education minister and a former Justice of the Bombay High Court, Mahomedali Currim Chagla, made a passionate plea for considering this university as a memorial to Nehru’s life, work, and ideals, and a promise that this university would be different. But parliamentarians were dissatisfied with what Chagla had to offer, both with the fact that it was to be named after Jawaharlal Nehru and the relatively tepid blend of “uniqueness” that was being proposed. The Bill was therefore referred to a Joint Select Committee in the next session.

“Inspired by Love and Guided by Knowledge”: Parliament imagines a new kind of university

The Joint Select Committee submitted its report on 3 November 1965, and created the context for the stimulating discussion that was to follow. What would be the role of the state vis-à-vis the university and vice versa, what would make it truly “Indian”, “relevant”, “excellent”? Two notes of dissent to the report of the Joint Committee, both of which objected mainly to dedicating the university to “fulfilling the ideals” of Nehru, initiated a process of fashioning in the mind what a truly radical conception of an Indian university would be. A university, H N Mukherjee and P K Kumaran said, must be a space for “systematic thought”, free of “partisan pressure which might stifle intellectual creativity”; it must create a community—“a continuing membership of minds devoted to the tasks of learning and of the good life...inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” It cannot ever be a “church” or “caged in the cult of a prophet or any great man”, M B Lal and H Barua said, because it “must represent all of India in its totality.”

When the Joint Select Committee’s report was tabled in the Rajya Sabha on 1 December 1965, Chagla informed the House that discussions on the Bill from the Select Committee had led to them to conceive this to be a university of “an entirely different and new type”, quite distinct from the 70-odd universities in India at that time, and one which, “if it functioned properly, would be a real

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memorial to Jawaharlal Nehru". This university would work to promote social justice and secularism, social responsibility, the composite culture of India, scientific temper, and international understanding, and would teach students sensitive to the "social needs" of the country. Nothing in this university would be a "replica of existing universities", it would teach all that had not made it into university syllabi yet for most other universities, making "special provision for integrated courses in humanities, sciences and technology in the educational programmes of the University" (because "knowledge is one and it should be integrated, and a man should be an all-round man".) It would establish departments "for the study of languages, literatures and the life of foreign countries" to inculcate in students "a world perspective" and "international understanding", and its doors would be forever open for "students and scholars from outside...so that there should be an international atmosphere in this University."

No old models of university structure and hierarchy were to be replicated in this university being fashioned in the mind of the parliamentarians, and so that it could define its own higher standards, JNU was not to be, as originally proposed, the southern sister of the Delhi University. It would not be made to "carry a terrible burden from the old University" by affiliating the 17-odd colleges south of Ajmeri gate; rather, its relationship with other institutions would be based on collaboration and mutual exchange.

A large part of the debate that followed the revised Bill was about the wisdom of naming it after Nehru and whether the institution should be committed to fulfilling his ideals. That point was both won and conceded ultimately, as while the university's name remained as such, the First Schedule that was ultimately enacted referred only to how the university would "endeavour to promote the study of the principles for which Jawaharlal Nehru worked during his lifetime". For the intent, Chagla said, was never "to propagate Nehruism", or "to set up Nehru as a prophet".

I do not want the students to go to this University to pay respect to those ideals merely because Nehru believed in them but to consider those ideals as part of our national legacy, to criticize in them, if necessary, to suggest changes in them, or as I said, to give a new life to them.

But beyond the name, every aspect of the Bill was queried -was the envisaged structure of the university not too radical? Interdisciplinary Schools as the statutory bodies rather than disciplinary faculties departments? Why was there no important role for a registrar? Wasn't the proposal that the vice-chancellor would be appointed even before the university began too radical, and that he could handpick an academic advisory committee with whom he would work to conceptualise the university too rash? Wouldn't allowing students representation in a joint council with teachers too bold a move? Was there any point in having both a chancellor and a visitor? How could the university be guaranteed enough autonomy if it were to have a chancellor? Most of these queries were addressed by Chagla alone, readily agreeing to legitimate objections and amendments, patiently explaining away misunderstandings, because he was "certainly not in favour of making the university a department of the state", and "the cause of education would be lost in the country if the autonomy

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of the universities is undermined.”

In the debate, the aspect in which other parliamentarians had the greatest role was in deciding who would be the students that come to study to this university. Most of the passionate advocates of setting up a unique historical experiment were Oxbridge trained, but they were also attracted to the curricular, and pedagogical innovations of emerging British universities like Sussex. Their education in England and Europe had led them to ascribe a high value to university autonomy—as a legacy from the “good life” of being students there—but their political commitment convinced them that in India, *all* education but particularly higher education had to play a socially transformative role. As G Ramacandran argued, in the Rajya Sabha on 2 December 1965, this would only be possible if

Let education in this university be one hundred per cent free for a thousand of the best young people we can select; make education completely free.... Instead of asking talented boys to pay to sustain the university, the university will pay the highest talent in this country to come and make what you wish it to be. So what should this university be? Post-graduate; no under-graduate in the campus a residential university restricted to one thousand students of the highest calibre, learning and working and pledge to carry out ideals which Nehru stood for.

Chagla, and the rest of the Parliament concurred, with members in both Houses repeatedly stressed the necessity of a residential postgraduate and research character for the university. In the words of Chagla, on 16 November 1966:

This university will not be intended for children of the rich. We have provided for entrance examination and I hope we will get the most talented boys and girls from all over the country, however poor they may be and by a system of scholarships we will see to it that the poorest boy and the poorest girl, if he or she is talented, will have an opportunity to study in this university.

This understanding, though never inscribed explicitly in any statute or rule of the university has guided the policies on fees, scholarships, and cost of living estimates in JNU ever since.

How did the parliamentarians feel the need to imagine the university anew? A large part of the answer comes from the debates around the University Grants Commission (UGC) Act, passed ten years before the JNU Act. The voluminous discussions around the Bill made MPs think closely about

the nature of the relationship between the state and higher education in a young decolonised nation, the social mission that university education had to play in forming a new future for its citizens. Another part of the answer comes from the years following the formation of the UGC itself, when via the presentation and debates around the UGC annual reports, the Parliament came to understand the true state of higher education and research in the country.

The UGC Act Debates and What They Taught Parliamentarians

The Bill had a rough ride through the Parliament, made even worse by the apparent lack of interest that Maulana Azad, the Education Minister, had in it. Introduced in the Lok Sabha on September 30 1954, as a Bill for "the coordination and determination of standards in universities and for that purpose, to establish a University Grants Commission, the Bill was greeted with all round hostility for its encroachment on university autonomy through both its financial powers and its mandate to determine standards. On 22 February 1955, RenuChakravartty said in the Lok Sabha:

Autonomy for free scope for the development of university education, according to the needs and traditions of a particular university must not be interfered with. For instance, there are the words "determination of standards". This a very vague term and it may even become dangerous.... For instance, the Lucknow University may say that it would like to specialise in sociology, or may decide to have a special type of education most suitable to women. The Calcutta University, for instance, may like to lay special stress on domestic science; or some other university may choose to specialise in some other subject. Standardisation must not lead to stereotyping.

Speaking in the Lok Sabha on 22 and 28 February 1955, S S More also protested:

This country is a vast country. Different States have different difficulties, different problems, and the educational development of all states is not even. Therefore in assessing what should be the proper standard, or in their efforts to co-ordinate the work of the different Universities, the peculiarities of the states, the social conditions prevailing in all the States and the particular classes of society which are trying to take advantage of this University education must be deciding factor, and some dead bureaucratic attempt to create uniformity which will yield to the same yardstick is not and could not be the objective of this University Grants Commission.

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The pervasive anxiety about the Bill in the Lok Sabha led it to be referred to a Joint Select Committee. On its return—and even though M M Das saw the changes effected as having “virtually reduced the University Rights Commission into an advisory, recommendatory body”—the Parliamentarians remained highly sceptical of the government’s intent, seeing it as a naked attempt by the government to school universities in India, and to erode their autonomy. The specific provision that the UGC must be guided by directions from the Central government attracted a great deal of ire:

I should have thought that universities are constituted under a charter or under an enactment of the legislature and once they have been so constituted under an enactment of the legislature, the purpose which they are expected to fulfil are absolutely national. It is therefore unconstitutional, apart from its being improper on the part of an outside authority, to tell the universities that there are national purposes other than those in enactments for them to fulfil. (Krishnaswamy, Lok Sabha, 24 November 1955)

Others spoke out sharply against the idea of uniform standards, and the very idea that the UGC could claim to have the expertise to set these standards.

This country has now got about 31 Universities and in each of these Universities there are efficient groups of teachers who take care of education. There are also different faculties and Boards of studies in these Universities and I think they are the best persons in whose care we can entrust the cause of education. In all the Universities at the present moment there exist not only Boards of Studies but also Academic Councils and Senates where we have not only the officers of the University but also distinguished persons who are educationists or who have got high distinctions in various spheres. There are also at the same time representative leaders of public opinion in many of the controlling authorities of these Universities....The people who serve you in the colleges, in the universities, in the laboratories, and in the different research institutes. Ultimately, they are the persons who have been working there all the time—who have got the experience and who will be able to tell you exactly what is needed if you want to improve the standards of education in our land (Satyendranath Bose, Rajya Sabha, 21 March 1955).

Eventually however, the UGC Bill was passed more or less as it was, because the constitution empowered the union under Entry 66 of List 1 to enact legislation for “the coordination and determination of standards in universities”. The parliamentarians would also have been convinced by

the logic provided by interventions such as that of Syamnandan Sahaya in the Lok Sabha on 23 November 1955:

Standardisation need not necessarily mean a particular standard from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas in any subject. Standardisation would be based on certain standards which may be different, for different areas, and different subjects....A second class MA from one university is one who secures 50 percent marks or 55 percent marks. In another university he who secures 45 percent marks is placed on the second class. When applications are called for stating that second class MAs are required, the one securing 45 percent in a university where 55 percent is required for a second class becomes a third class. So, some kind of all-around standardization in such directions is certainly called for.

But Parliament's assent did not come before the government had to give detailed clarifications that it had no intention to undermine university autonomy. As Deputy Education Minister, K L Shrimali assured the Rajya Sabha on 7 December 1955, the intention was to combine "freedom with planning":

I would only like to say that there is nothing in the University Grants Commission Bill which makes any attempt— and the Government has also no intention—to encroach upon the autonomy of the Universities. But the Government has a certain duty to perform the duty of reorganising the Universities and putting these houses of learning in order. It is the duty of the Government to see that these Universities perform the social functions and they realise these social ideals which we all cherish. And I would like to say that it is in that spirit that we should approach the question. I can assure you that the autonomy of the Universities will be secure.

UGC in Action

Through the annual reports of the UGC from 1958, the Parliament was made painfully aware that the coordination and determination of standards in universities was no simple task. There were several kinds of degrees handed out, and several standards of qualification. Respect for university autonomy and the fact that education was not yet a subject on the concurrent list, entailed that a major task of the institution was to persuade the Indian universities to accept the three year bachelor degree as the standard, with eleven years of schooling as the eligibility. By 1965, only 46 of the 71 universities

in the country had been successfully cajoled.

During the UGC Act debates, more than occasional mention was made of how expansion and innovation of university education should be one of the prime duties of the UGC, and perhaps parliamentarians had hoped that with the formation of the UGC, beginnings would be made in both directions. By the time the first annual report of the UGC was presented in April 1958, it became clear however that neither would be on the agenda any time soon. In response to the popular demand for college education, a number of state and private universities had, and continued to mushroom all over the country, and there was very little the UGC could do to coordinate with them, given that education was not on the concurrent list. Let alone innovation and expansion in a manner that made education accessible to the poorest, the UGC had its hands full awarding recognition to these universities, and determining minimum standards for awards of degrees, infrastructure, determining teachers' eligibility and their salary scales. In response, the UGC operating then (as now, in straitened circumstances) could ultimately come up with only two recommendations by the early 1960s: please stop opening new colleges and universities and reduce the number of students enrolling in higher education (even then, the excuse cited was "indiscipline").

Members of parliament (MP) were in quite a despair that nothing new was being attempted, and that the UGC policy had to be solely dictated by the emptiness of its coffers. While MPs agreed that there was indeed overcrowding in universities, and that standards of education were falling as a result, they felt that the solution was to spend more, rather than less, on education. Over the next few sessions, they protested more and more asserting that access to education, and especially for research degrees, was limited to the rich, as poor and rural students simply screened themselves out. Bhupesh Gupta and Govinda Reddy angrily demanded that there should be no restriction of admissions to universities; Rukmini Devi Arundale and Rajkumari Amrit Kumar wanted expansion of the university system into residential universities which were set away from the cities, to which yet others added the demand of free or fully financed education for the poor and rural students.

What led to the Jawaharlal Nehru University Bill was then the combined effect of both the discussions around the UGC Act and its reports and the desire to innovate, to create a place of excellence where standards could be evolved without reference to existing priors. The policy masterstroke lay in recognising that educational innovation and excellent standards were inextricably linked to equity of access and democratisation of university structures.

That the JNU experiment was to be a success became evident by the early 1970s itself, as by 1974 even as the university was beginning to make a name for itself, 20% of its students were drawn from the Scheduled Castes alone. (*The Times of India*, 25 September 1974)

Even today, the university is as rural as urban, has more women than men, with socially and economically backward students forming the overwhelming majority. It is also a place of excellence,

not as conveyed by ranking systems, but by the value its research holds for its peers across the world. And certainly before February 2016, it was usually a place inspired by love and guided by knowledge most of the time.

Successive generations of JNU students and faculty have prided themselves on their commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry, rigorous questions that have relevance both to the world of knowledge and the worlds their holders inhabit, and for persistently striving for greater social inclusion and democratisation of university policies and structures. That a large part of this comes from kernels sown in the debates in the Parliament around the JNU Act, and which is not part of the discourse (any longer), must not be regretted, because it is merely indicative of the robustness of the university's foundations, that these commitments can be rediscovered afresh by each generation that passes through.

Not JNU Exceptionalism but an Exception

Although it was the UGC that had recommended setting up another university in Delhi in 1960, once the Joint Select Committee had woven its magic, it was no longer in the loop. Nevertheless, its chairperson conveyed support for its success to the Rajya Sabha, despite the fact that the UGC, its standards and coordination, never once find mention in the intense discussion on the JNU Bill. In the years after the JNU Bill became an Act, the UGC Annual Reports faithfully recorded the growth of the university's innovative programmes, the acquisition of the land for its campus, and its own disbursement of grants to it. JNU's experiments with knowledge and standards were never interfered with, and JNU was listened to patiently.

In fact, the UGC often, without attribution, borrowed from JNU's precise formulations—ironically both the 2009 and 2016 version of the UGC Regulations on award of MPhil and PhD degrees—draw in part from the JNU Ordinances. For many recommendations made by the UGC, including the UGC *Regulations on Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions* (published in the Gazette of India of 2 May 2016, but whose binding nature no university is likely to be held to), the JNU's experiences have been drawn upon by the commission. In fact, even as late as 2009-12, when JNU's research student-to-supervisor ratio shot up because it had faithfully implemented the *Central Educational Institutions Reservations Act*, UGC did not penalise the university for not being able to adhere to the limit of five MPhil and eight PhD students per faculty member, accepting the logic that in a research university with a multitude of departments that do not have BA or MA programmes, this ratio would just mean a waste of resources.

Was JNU treated with laxity by the UGC because of its left-liberal ethos and proximity to those in power? Quite the contrary—JNU students certainly have not been the friends of *any* regime—it was

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because its research standards, programmes, and outputs have consistently been judged to be quite excellent by its peers, including by the metrics that a hostile government has decided to institute. The fact that JNU has done well is a testament to how right the Parliamentarians of 50 years ago were when they decided that plans of academic excellence are best built on the bedrock of democracy and justice.

While JNU struggles every day to making sure that the small and successful experiment it is survives, it is the UGC that has strayed far away from the object behind its creation, which in the words of the then Deputy Minister for Education K L Shrimali, was an attempt to build “a kind of partnership between the government and the universities, and that “there is no rivalry between the universities and the government”. It is definitely time that the UGC revisit its own legislative history, and to recognise the role that it must play. The words of S S More are as good a place as any to begin:

Education is not some dead material which could be lumped up and given some final shape according to the wishes of the Central Government or any other Government. It is a live thing, integrated with the lives of the people, integrated with the lives, aspirations and social conditions of the people. Any attempt to create a dead uniformity will be an attempt to create a stuff which has no life, which cannot expand.