

# Re-inventing the Indian University

## Arguing from a Lokavidya Standpoint

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The term university here is used to broadly refer to higher education, which includes medical and engineering colleges, law and management schools, mass communication and art schools, research establishments along with of course the regular university. Indian university is an imitation enterprise. It is not located in Indian history, culture or knowledge traditions. It has little connectedness with man and nature of the tropics. Its content, form, styles, methods of work, methods of argument, standards, values, everything is derived from what happened in England and Europe and what happens now in United States of America. The university as such in the West too is not connected with the needs, aspirations or knowledge circumstances of the people there, the imitation product that we have manufactured is further away from our people in all these respects. As a consequence and concomitantly there is almost complete absence of anything new, creative or innovative in the university here. It is a place of socialisation, opening paths to move into the world of an elite, almost completely urban. Its connection with any kind of knowledge is very tenuous, the defence, atomic energy and space installations notwithstanding. This paper argues that the world has entered an era when it has become possible to change all this. The world has entered a period of massive destabilisation of the world of knowledge, creating conditions for wholesale rejections and grand new initiatives. If we do not re-invent the Indian university now, we are bound to slip further and rot no end. The university so far has been conceived as and is also in practice a place of organised knowledge activity in a sea of ignorance. Walled campuses have been as far away from the people epistemically as the walled palaces of the kings used to be from the people in respect of the power they commanded. Re-inventing the university, it is suggested here, requires to reconceptualise it as a place of organised knowledge activity located in a sea of knowledge; people, peasants, artisans, health workers, women, artists and variety of others, all being seen as knowledge beings carrying out their daily and specialised activity based on their own knowledge, mostly not derived from the university.

### World of Higher Education:

Higher education has become extremely expensive and once again therefore, entry into it has become extremely restricted. Some mitigation of this situation is attempted through affirmative action in pursuance of the objectives of social justice, that is through reservation for the backward classes in addition to

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the already existing reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. However, there is enormous social resistance by students in advanced and professional colleges, most of whom come from the upper castes. It has also been challenged in the courts up to the Supreme Court. This is because there is huge rush for higher education in absence of other pathways for secure, organised and relatively prosperous life. This rush is for the Engineering colleges, Medical, Law and business schools, namely for institutions which promise a future. The regular university teaching the sciences, social sciences and the arts is no more attractive. The obvious reason is that training in these subjects does not lead to employment. But there is perhaps a deeper reason namely, that these sciences and arts no more seem to occupy the apex of the knowledge pyramid.

Globalisation has brought in its wake new values in the sphere of education. Utilitarian principles seem to be in the lead, utility being defined by the needs of the given market and the large corporations. Across Europe there is a movement against the corporatization of the university which generally includes making higher education more expensive, tailoring the content according to the needs of corporations, changing the entry rules, tightening the program and generally taking away the democratic and cultural content of the university. In India there is a strong argument that products of our higher education apparatus are largely unemployable. This is attributed mainly to absence of quality teachers, which is in turn said to be due to teachers' salaries not being commensurate with salaries in corporations. So goes the argument that salaries of teachers must be increased greatly to attract competence leading to improvement in the quality of teaching, which alone in turn can produce graduates with some competence and so employable. Since due to privatization the increased salaries can come only from the increased fees of students, such an argument inevitably pushes the costs of education upwards, which then demands a credit structure for loans for students from financial institutions, from banks and so on. This is an obvious trap for education to be turned into a handmaiden of financial power. However, slowly but steadily a drift in such a direction can be noticed. It is seen in the new forms of privatization and control in the sphere of education. Even the very expensive business schools and institutes of technology which have become possible by government financing them, now openly argue against 'government interference' and express a wish for closer collaboration with the corporations.

Another effect of Globalization seems to be in the demand for 'high and uniform standards' across the world. If India has to keep-up in the global race it must have a large number of institutions of very high standard (upgrade old ones and build new ones). This seems to be the most important conclusion of the National Knowledge Commission. This implies that public finance for higher education will largely be cornered by these apex institutions and effectively the

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university will split into two—the apex institutions and the run-of-the-mill. The former will be catered to by public finance to produce graduates and professionals for the new trans-national economy and conduct research according to the needs of the global market led by the corporations. Whereas, the latter will cater to numbers, satisfy the politically correct cannons of social justice and keep meeting the popular demand. It will provide service providers and technicians. In the entire process education is the chief victim. Knowledge and education assume the status of commodity and resource and the entire sector caters to developing institutions which may aspire to be listed on the Stock Exchange.

#### **The Information Revolution :**

The computer and communication revolution has caused unprecedented changes. The rise of information science and knowledge management is the source of radical changes in paradigm and the old hierarchies in the world of knowledge. Communication techniques are dislodging the technologies of production from the central place they occupied in human life and in understanding the human life. Internet and mobile use has started defining the meter of progress which was one's made up of production of steel, fertilizer and power. The job market reflects this shift too. The rise of information as science is tending to change man's view of himself. There is a tendency developing to see human history in terms of different stages of development of methods of communication and not as it was earlier done in terms of different stages of development of technologies of production. There is a new trend in biological sciences to attempt to see the basic processes as information processes, materially given effect to by the chemical and physical processes and not as it was done earlier to see them as chemical processes resulting into information processing. These are massive changes. They make the science we are familiar with stand on its head. The philosophy that such new understanding entails, may conceptualise the world as mainly consisting of representation and communication, meaning and syntax, simultaneously populated by receptors and emitters. The world of science consists of things and forces in the ultimate analysis. If these are the kinds of changes in paradigm underway, then no wonder the world of knowledge is going through a storm whose causes are rather difficult to pin down.

The internet is another source of the destabilization in the world of knowledge. With information processes recognised as second to none in importance and terrific connectivity produced by the internet, knowledge management seems to emerge as an entirely new element in the world of knowledge. First come into existence as a technique of intra-corporation knowledge management, it has been steadily growing in meaning and presence. As the computer and the internet erase the distinction between knowledge and information, or say turn all knowledge into information or conversely, depending

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on one's view point, the world of knowledge expands in an unprecedented fashion. The criteria of legitimacy change and new hierarchies come into existence.

The criteria of legitimate knowledge are no more the same as they used to be in the Industrial Age. Scientific method, controlled experiment, reproducibility, cohesive incorporation in the existing world of science, certificate by professional bodies and journals no more stand out as requirements to be satisfied for a method, skill or understanding to be accepted as legitimate knowledge. If the piece of information, understanding, technique, skill or practice is usable by the methods of computers and communications, that is if they are organisable by the information technology, then it is legitimate knowledge. In actuality, such organisation leads, or is expected to lead, to enhancing market competitiveness. The new candidates in the field of knowledge now, therefore, come from people's understandings and practices, namely, *lokavidya*, known in the literature mainly as traditional knowledge. To the new epistemic dispensation it does not matter as to where and how a piece of knowledge has been produced. Production of knowledge and the methods thereof are not the issue, however important they may be. Thus, information, understanding and practices that were strictly declared unscientific and not proper knowledge have entered the world of knowledge making this world look very different from what it used to be. As a result of this, a fundamental condition that separated ordinary man and ordinary life from the university has broken down. This is where we shall look for the reconstruction of the Indian university.

The hierarchies of the old world of knowledge have also been swept off their feet. The global economy and the Internet have created the conditions to use a market meter for all knowledge. This is a practical meter and theoretically the new outlook refuses to accept any hierarchy in the world of knowledge, save knowledge management, which sits at the top, declares itself a genuine member of the world of knowledge and proceeds to assume the command. It is now knowledge management that would reorder the world of knowledge. When science ruled, now for centuries, the world of knowledge had developed the well-known hierarchies: science at the top, physics within it at the extreme top, life sciences at the lower end, then the social science and then the art, performance, communication, representation and what have you. Even a cursory look at the university shows that it is no more so. Departments of commerce, mass-media and management attract more students than the science departments. There is a rush for investment banking, law and business schools. The engineering and medical rush continues unabated. Places outside the regular university in all these and for training in contemporary art forms have multiplied. The new institutions, private universities do not often have the science and social science faculties. Financial institutions and corporations control the flow of knowledge and resources to their advantage. The idea of truth is a clear victim. The world of knowledge no more has truth seekers of the scientific world. Although *lokavidya* gets a new

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recognition, it comes with a price. It must take the shape of the new utensils, be organisable by the computer, that is be softwarable. Sitting at the top of the cyclone in the epistemic world knowledge management sucks in everything of substance into the virtual world. All knowledge that is produced anywhere feeds into it and all knowledge at the site of production stands emaciated and alienated. Knowledge producers thus enter into a fundamental conflict with knowledge managers. This corresponds to the split of the university into the run-of-the mill institutions and the apex institutions. This split is headed to do a great damage to humanity and the struggle against it involves liberating the university from the global trap and relocating it in the society it is a part of.

### **Lokavidya and the New University:**

This is a suggestion to reconceptualise the university as a place of organised knowledge activity in the vast bed of *lokavidya*. Four questions in this respect seem important—

- (i) What are the strengths of *lokavidya*,
- (ii) What is the nature of this organised knowledge activity, from now on called university knowledge in this section,
- (iii) What is the relation between university knowledge and *lokavidya* and
- (iv) What kind of formal structures and general social support one should think in terms of?

In spite of enormous hurdles through the colonial period, *lokavidya* has remained the source of spiritual engagement with life as well as the source of strategy for material survival. So the strengths of *lokavidya* are far too many to enumerate. We shall therefore, recount only those that are directly relevant to the exercise at hand.

- (i) *Lokavidya* houses the knowledge traditions of this civilization.
- (ii) *Lokavidya* is always contemporary knowledge, modified, corrected, changed, improved upon and reconstructed incessantly, daily, according to the experiences, needs and the genius of the people.
- (iii) *Lokavidya* belongs to open society. It resides in ordinary life and serves ordinary life.
- (iv) All knowledge starts with *lokavidya* and must return to *lokavidya* for its ultimate validation.

Traditions are living practices that date back through history and have a logic of change and growth woven into them. What happened in the past and is found recorded in books, but is not a living practice, is not tradition, but history.

*Lokavidya* refers to living practices, in fact praxis in all departments of human life. As the term suggests, its identification today is in contrast to organised knowledge mostly the practice in present day university with respect to any domain from performing arts to science and engineering colleges. The universities teach mostly knowledge produced in the West and also some other knowledge, indigenous as well as of other civilizations, but all formatted and canonised according to the frameworks of European 'reason' and the scientific paradigm. *Lokavidya* has no externally imposed constraints other than those that are there in ordinary life. Since, it belongs to ordinary life it embodies a certain type of continuity. This is the case of knowledge over time showing continuities of real life. This is what enables it to be the knowledge tradition. Also since it belongs to the open society it necessarily has open-arms existence, welcoming and assimilating all that serves the human kind.

The discourse on knowledge is so asymmetric favouring the economically prosperous and the organized such that by *lokavidya* people often tend to understand something which may be about the past, about the knowledge that there was. However, this is because the epistemic, economic, political and cultural asymmetries all feed into one-another, reinforcing one-another to shape a highly asymmetric public domain and its semantic characterisers to the complete disadvantage of those who are poor and who have not gone to the school, however knowledgeable they may be.

Since *lokavidya* belongs to the open society and has an open handed existence it grows with the times, incessantly changes welcoming the new and rejecting the worn out. It happens through real day-to-day practice in society, it happens guided by the sense of reality, proportion and genius of the people who hold this knowledge and who are at their day-to-day work. In this *lokavidya* hardly ever uses theoretical guidelines or arguments to reject something or accept a new practice. Considerations are practical and societal. It apportions no knowledge to the dustbin.

All this in a sense makes *lokavidya* some kind of 'first' knowledge and also the last knowledge. So historically speaking all knowledge originates in *lokavidya* and all knowledge ultimately must return to *lokavidya* in practice. Knowledge that refuses to do so turns *satanic*, for it loses its interface with the human criteria. So university knowledge and *lokavidya* ought to have a friendly dialectic between them to constitute the world of knowledge. For too long has the university belittled *lokavidya*, but *lokavidya* and masters of *lokavidya* do not look at the university as the enemy or the oppressor. This creates the condition for reinventing the Indian university as Gandhi said on the occasion of the inauguration of the National University in Gujarat during the non-co-operation movement in 1921, that he was not asking us to repeat what there was centuries ago but to rebuild based on our tradition and enriched by the later experiences. *Lokavidya* itself

constitutes that incessant rebuilding which is based on our tradition and is enriched by the later experiences. But this rebuilding has a defensive niche, an ambience which is economically depressing. It has no capacity to take risks to represent itself more imaginatively, more colourfully, in more attractive forms. It lacks articulation in accepted canons of semantics in public realm. The need is not that it be part of any grand theoretic framework, in fact it defies such frameworks. The need is of facility for artistic expression, for the flowering of all those capacities of people which have found no occasion to flower in and around *lokavidya* under the present conditions. Let us reinvent the Indian university to do all this, to reflect a creative genius, to be connected with the people and to serve the people. Let university knowledge be located in a sea of *lokavidya* like the natural beads in an actual sea. We need such reconstruction of the socio-epistemic process to solve the problems created by the industrial world, namely the problem of destruction of environment and ecology, the problem of pollution, disappearing bio-diversity, climate change and the need of equitable energy use distribution. The only way left is to reinvent the university from a *lokavidya* standpoint.

### **New University – The Place**

The university ought to be a place of knowledge activity guided by the genius of the people of the region expressed in the epistemic finesse of the technical experts, communication experts, artists, spiritual men and women and the moral highs of the region. A university shall develop methods of expression, articulation, representation, collaboration, co-operation, training and networking with respect to the knowledge in society in that region. It will not be a nodal agency for doing all this. It will develop methods and teach them to whosoever wants to learn, who will have to find the ways of actually doing these things in society.

The university shall not prepare any data bases of knowledge. It should however, in the natural course have information about who are knowledgeable persons in the region. These knowledgeable persons should be frequent visitors to the university in both advisory and participatory functions. The university is not a place of knowledge production which is done in society by the multitudes in the ordinary course of their lives and also in special circumstances by the specially gifted. The university represents a manner of organisation of knowledge in society.

The university will have positive and vibrant relationship with the local market and the institutions of local self-government. The local market will keep the university aware of the actual practices of the people which it can in turn influence through dialogues. Institutions of local self-governance would be expected through a broad government policy to support the university, facilitate the task it decides to do. Both the local market and the institutions of self-

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governance have a natural privilege to influence the university in ways they deem fit and conversely. These are seen as interaction among equals.

This university will have a philosophical relation with frontiers of knowledge advancing all over the world. This will be realised through a program in philosophy which teaches critical social assessment of (i) the frontline technologies, e.g. information, bio and nano technologies and cognitive sciences, (ii) the new media, advancing art fronts and language, (iii) advances in law, economics and political administration and (iv) *lokavidya*.

Financial support for the university comes from the government. The functionaries of the university shall have financial assistance commensurate with the well-being of the region.

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**Note:** Ideas expressed in this paper are part of a growing set of ideas in Vidya Ashram, Sarnath, Varanasi. More elaborate treatment of some of these ideas can generally be found in writings of the members and close associates of Vidya Ashram on the website [www.vidyaashram.org](http://www.vidyaashram.org)