

PROBLEMS OF REDESIGNING UNDERGRADUATE SOCIAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM

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The problems of redesigning the undergraduate curriculum of any faculty can be discussed only against what the contemporary world expects from higher education. Since the colonial times the college or University education has been instrumental to social mobility, for it has been the prerequisite for all well-paid positions in most occupations. This has brought employment chances to the forefront among the criteria that justify higher education. As employment chances in the capitalist world economy are largely centred round industrial enterprises various technical subjects of application have been gaining an upper hand in higher education. In the context of global industries and world market the boundaries among nations wane and every enterprise values factors like taxes, transportation infrastructure, availability of communication technology, the cost of labour and, most important, the quality of the available workforce. But the purpose of higher education is not merely the production of an educated workforce to assume that catering to employment needs is its be all and end all. It has to serve society through the preservation of cultural and community riches, development of civic and social responsibility, and advancement of critical knowledge. So the development of an informed citizenry is as important an aim of higher education as the preparation of a world-class workforce.

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THE DEPLORABLE PLIGHT

The plight of our undergraduate curriculum today is so deplorable that we cannot hail it in anyway better than what existed in British India. Although production of the clerical and accounting workforce and making of a civil society of modernity were the intentions behind the colonial higher education curriculum, it was somewhat challenging. The students did attain a certain level of higher cognition, analytical ability, and communicative efficiency irrespective of the sciences or social sciences or languages in which they graduated. The level of percolation of the latest knowledge was quite higher than what it has been since Independence, despite the fact that the net impact remained colonial modernisation and spread of values suitable for justifying colonisation. However, western education did trigger a worldview of comparative perspectives and a bit of critical social consciousness too though as inadvertent and undesired fallout. We know how colonial modern education led to the rise of National Movement.

Over the decades, despite the various Commissions, Curriculum Development strategies, and new pedagogic experiments, the hiatus between latest knowledge and syllabi on the one side and acquired knowledge and its social application on the other has been increasing. Higher education in the Country has become the least challenging due to a variety of complex reasons of which the obsolete syllabi, academic incompetence of teachers, and outmoded schemes of evaluation are some of the visible manifestations. On top of all, learning has become alienating, deskilling, and extremely depoliticising, be it a science, social science or language. The learner gets lost in the descriptive literature and dead phrases of outmoded knowledge. A review of the undergraduate level syllabi of any region in the country reveals this exasperating plight of higher education.

MG University Experience

The MG University curriculum development experience is illustrative of what is feasible in the normal course. In 1998 Mahatma Gandhi University made a concerted effort to change the outmoded structure and contents of the undergraduate syllabi followed in its colleges. The University did it through a yearlong campaign and a series of joint meetings of the Chairmen of the Boards of Studies and Workshops of teachers. It almost gained the dimension of an academic movement. In spite of all these, very few disciplines in social sciences could be extricated from their unenviable state of characteristic obsolescence.

History is one discipline that could shed away the obsolescence to a great extent and forge far ahead of the current national standard set by the Curriculum

Development Centre of the UGC. From the history of dynasties and politics the new syllabus moved on to socio-economic history and history of ideas, institutions and structures, with a shift of focus from historical conditions to historical process. Papers of historical explanation replaced the papers emphasising historical description, marking a total deviation from the practice of compartmentalization and faceting to integration and correlation. Insistence upon the primacy of materialistic causation, conversion of the communal periodisation into the paradigm of social formation is an important feature of the new papers. The rejection of the sequential ordering into the rise and

fall of empires, their corresponding categorization into 'bright' and 'dark' ages, the concept of historical 'golden ages', and the concept of 'Asiatic Mode of Production' are other features of deviation. All the papers necessitated at least a tenuous understanding of social theory and critical historiography. A major advantage was the chance to familiarise the students with the historiographic riches accrued over the last two or three decades through a large number of new books published in India and abroad.

There was resistance from the part of the teachers as the changes turned out to be drastic to them. Weak libraries, non-availability of books and unfamiliar concepts were the main impediments that the teachers pointed out. We could overcome these by making the books available in the market, persuading the Principals to buy them for their libraries and organising orientation courses besides taking the Trade Unions in confidence. In fact, the real impediment was the reluctance of the teachers to read new books and improve their knowledge. The School of Social Sciences offered leadership to the task by preparing the curriculum and organising short-term courses to orient the teachers to the new syllabi. The revised syllabi of this discipline have been partly or completely emulated by the Sanskrit, Calicut, and Kannur Universities. It has exerted some impact even on the Kerala University.

All said and done, the fact remains that the structure and composition of the History curriculum are still conventional. Its newness is confined only to the updated contents, introduction of a few emerging areas of knowledge and application of some of the learner oriented methods like mandatory assignments of term papers, book reviews and seminars. Actually, there is a long way to go to place the undergraduate curriculum in the discipline anywhere near the internationally avowed goals.

Goals of Undergraduate Curriculum

The academic target of undergraduate syllabi anywhere in the world is to provide the fundamentals of the discipline and familiarise the contours and boundaries of

its interdisciplinary flourishes in a general way. A graduate is not expected to be a professional in the graduated discipline, but a generalist with a certain level of cognitive ability, analytical faculty and communicative skill. Here comes the relevance of a carefully prepared syllabus of intellectual depth, addressing itself to bright minds and turning to be challenging to the students. The social and national target is to prepare a responsible and informed citizenry with capacities to make a living and partake in the national development endeavours. Here comes the social relevance of the forms and levels of knowledge the syllabus is to embody. The syllabus should have the potential to facilitate the inculcation of the relation between knowledge and social progress.

In the capitalist Countries the academic target is very well realised. Nowhere in the world the socio-national goals get realised, for everywhere they constitute the rhetoric but not real, because of contradictory power relations and conflicting interests in the society. So the socio-national goals are conceived and interpreted in various ways that broadly belong to two mutually exclusive streams namely: the liberal interventionism and the radical populism.

According to the liberal interventionist perspective, the socio-national target can be realised through higher education reforms. They assume that an updated/upgraded curriculum will enable the educated to accentuate national development and make their living through participation in the national development strategies.

In the radical populist perspective, the making of responsible citizens and capacity building to participate in national development are not easy targets, because there is no ideal national/social scene of development combining economic growth with equity. Moreover, they argue that the education system is an integral part of the unjust socio-national/international set up and an instrument that reproduces the set up and never a catalyst that transforms the society.

Autopoietic Effect⁴

We have to conceptualise the question of curriculum development in the light of the theory of institutional and structural reproduction of social power relations through education. In today's unjust world, the making of citizens responsible and empowered to perform well in the national development, needs to strengthen the faculty to critical assessment, which a liberal reform of higher education cannot achieve. In stead, a radical re-structuring of the higher education space is essential for it. But it is easier said than done, because organised efforts toward radical reconstitution of undergraduate curriculum are indications of basic power struggle

carried forward to the realm of academics. Committed moves to articulate space for the politics of knowledge at the undergraduate level, such curriculum development initiatives of radical nature, presuppose the beginnings of a protracted struggle against the dominant socio-economic system that will not let itself go. Any effort to fundamental reconstitution of graduate curriculum aiming at the expansion of critical knowledge and its radical social use for praxis intervention leading to structural transformation is always deterred by the world capitalist system. The capitalist system's autopoietic capacity to co-opt everything including its own enemy, as self-referential component, becomes operational and diffuses chances of an academic revolution. The reason is that it needs higher education to help maintain status quo in social power relations rather than tending to upset them. This would mean that theoretically the field of higher education planning is a site of contesting power relations.

However, it is not the capitalist system that plays the villainy against efforts to achieve the academic goals of curriculum development fighting academic obsolescence, but it is the middle class mediocrity that does. Capitalism cannot encourage mediocrity, for only academic excellence and expertise of the highest quality can ensure competitive success in the global market. The liberal interventionists' hue and cry for academic reforms makes sense in this limited context of seeking ways to exhilarate capitalist development. But autopoiesis of the organisational and institutional set up replete with middle class actors, facilitating the reproduction of mediocrity, impedes even the capitalist goal of academic updating. In fact, it is this middle class autopoietic effect that has turned out to be the stumbling block in the path of undergraduate curriculum development in the Indian states.

Feasible but only Politically

Theoretically speaking, a serious move to update and upgrade the undergraduate curriculum emphasising the politics of knowledge and aiming at social transformation cannot happen in our Country where democratic Government is a weak coalition of conflicting interests. The academic institutions are structured by the dominance of middle class actors of mediocrity, who reproduce the set up from bad to worse. Hence radical reconstitution of academics as a strategy of social transformation is a theoretical implausibility.

The theoretically implausible becomes the politically plausible only when the curriculum designers and practitioners are determined to make the move toward curriculum revolution real. But how do academicians go political if they have been

systematically depoliticised through higher education? An inevitable feature of higher education today is its ability to distance the learner from social reality. The more they learn the farther they remain from the society. So under normal circumstances academicians do not become political. To be political means to be committed to organised actions for social progress, which is difficult for academicians who almost as a rule remain ignorant of the social use of their knowledge. This explains why even mere curriculum development in our country incessantly fails to take off.

Any effort to reform the syllabus for rendering up-to-date knowledge, however, peripheral it is, has a positive impact provided it aims at bringing the social use of knowledge to the forefront. Updated knowledge alone does not help, for it seldom guarantees the dissemination of its socially useful aspects. The knowledgeable should know the epistemological link of their knowledge to social progress. We have only to look for the number of activists among our specialists to know how negligible the number of such knowledgeable is in our society. There is an incredibly severe dearth of academicians with appropriate awareness about the social relevance of their specialised knowledge. This is well indicated by the poor participation of our academicians in the public policy debates based on their specialisation.

The Social Need

Social Science knowledge cannot solve any social problem, but it can develop critical consciousness about social, economic and political processes, which is extremely important in a democratic society. There are numerous issues like violation of human rights, gender discrimination, child abuse, dispossession of marginal communities, denial of common property rights, environmental degradation and so on besides the hackneyed questions of socio-economic inequality, poverty and exploitation. Students graduating in social sciences should be able to acquire the socially useful knowledge in their disciplines to get themselves empowered with the faculty to critical assessment, the vital service that the society needs the most from higher education. For, this knowledge is essential for any citizen to effectively participate in policy debates, a crucial function she/he has to discharge in democracy. In that sense, updating social science curriculum in people-centred and empowerment-oriented ways is part of the popular democratisation strategy.

The trend today is to address the question of undergraduate curriculum development solely as a means to resolve the problem of mounting unemployment. All the larger social goals are neglected. It has led to the dilution and unscientific diversification of courses in the name of applied fields at the expense of pure sciences. Any graduation programme should base itself on a profound area of knowledge as its central concern rather than running astray in search of enterprises that are not

fields of intellectual depth. One cannot graduate in skills that anyone can acquire without much intellectual effort. How can any one design an Applied Course in Tourism without making it shallow? An intelligent graduate in any serious discipline will be far better employable in the tourism industry than a top-ranking bachelor in Tourism.

Paths of Diversification

Several non-conventional areas of knowledge are emerging as a result of multidisciplinary and cross-faculty researches today. Many of them are interdisciplinary domains of knowledge that belong to none of the conventional disciplines. Disciplines are drawing closer to one another and their boundaries are waning. Even faculties merge and give rise to new faculties that defy kinship with the extant ones. Correspondingly many discipline-based Departments disappear or get radically reconstituted all over the world. This is a sure sign of the collapse and phasing out of conventional disciplines and discipline-based Graduate Programmes. It is therefore, imperative for us to move on from the stale areas of mono-disciplinary culture to the interdisciplinary nature. Departments of each discipline/sub-discipline have to restructure themselves by merging with one another and emerging afresh. Those of us who refuse to change and tend to duplicate the courses in conventional disciplines are inevitably doomed to replacement.

Many new areas of knowledge are emerging in the domain of Social Sciences, which the conventional Departments can absorb to get themselves structurally adjusted to the changing social needs. The interface of Geography, Environmental Systems and Human Existence is one example of an emerging area of great possibilities and potentials in the context of the contemporary social needs in India. Geography is the most neglected, least updated, and much wanted vital social science. The discipline of geography traditionally encompasses the study of spatial patterns in both the natural and cultural environment. The dynamic and interdisciplinary character of the field is making it increasingly linked to a wide range of societal and environmental problems, including those related to urban and suburban economic development, poverty, crime, human health, water resources, water quality, soil resources, biodiversity, habitat loss, and climate change. A Department of Geography and Environmental Systems highlighting the importance of interactions between natural environmental systems and social, political and economic systems is becoming increasingly relevant far more than a conventional Department of Geography or Geology. Graduate Programmes can be designed combining natural sciences, mathematics and social sciences with human geography as the central domain. The exposure to knowledge about the interconnectedness of faculties conventionally separated into sciences, social sciences and humanities

can produce graduates with better vision, analytical skills and cognitive ability. The complexities of socio-spatial processes of our times need the service of such graduates.

Career Prospects

The expertise of graduates trained both in physical and human geography with special focus on the impact of human activities on environmental systems, is becoming increasingly important as we approach the next century. Programmes in physical geography offering specialisation of such matters as the development of landforms, patterns of climate, soils, vegetation and interactions among these features of the physical environment are not available in the colleges or Universities of the Country. Even at the postgraduate level there is no exposure to Human Geography providing insights into the homologous relationship between socio-economic development and spatial changes. Many papers of a conventional graduate programme in Geography can be substituted by papers providing knowledge about the spatiality of economic development, transportation, crime, urbanisation, diseases and healthcare besides political, cultural and social geography. Such graduates may find employment with companies seeking expertise in geographic information systems and remote sensing, cartography, planning, facility location, distribution, transportation problems, and so on. Public-sector employment opportunities include Town and rural planning Departments, the Census Bureau, environmental education Departments, law enforcement agencies, Geological Survey, the Environmental Protection Agency, state environmental and natural resources management agencies, Land-use Board and transportation planning, etc.

All Social Sciences can stake claims on various areas of knowledge in the aforesaid domain of interdisciplinary study for designing curricula for courses of career prospects. A conventional Department of Economics can diversify itself along Economic Geography, Environomics, Ecological Economics, Sustainable Agronomics and so on. A variety of graduate programmes with thrust areas like Alternative

Development Economics, Rural Resource Planning and Development, Participatory Rural Development Management, and so on can be designed. Similarly, the Department of Political Science can diversify its graduation programmes along Alternative Development Politics, Grassroots Democratic Processes, Local Self-Government and so on by restructuring the Department as named after any of such developing areas. A Department of History can move on to Applied History and give rise to Departments of Applied Historical Studies, Departments of Environmental History, Landscape Archaeology, Historical Geography, Local History,

Historical Ethnography and so on. Pure theory Departments are always essential as the most fundamental component in future too. Sociology of the conventional kind can rigorously reconstitute itself as Departments of Social Theory, Social Analysis, Social Development Studies, Social Management Studies and so on. Discipline based grouping will have to go and new Departments will have experts from different disciplines. People from Geography, Political Science, Sociology, History and Economics will join together and form a Department. They join not as conventional discipline based experts, but as experts in human geography, alternative politics, social theory, environmental history, alternative development economics and so forth.

There are several such areas cutting across sciences, social sciences and humanities, for us to diversify disciplines and design new curricula for future needs. One may feel that these are too specialised areas of knowledge to form part of undergraduate curriculum. But that is a misconception based on old notions about the contours of disciplines, much of which is redundant. With most of the obsolete stuff bypassed and learning made a challenging activity, major part of what we consider as specialised areas of postgraduate curriculum can be included as undergraduate subjects. Such a shift is indispensable because restructuring of undergraduate curriculum has to advance only along socially and intellectually viable paths of diversification.

Endnotes

- 1 See Report on Course and Curriculum Restructuring , Mahatma Gandhi University, 1998-99
- 2 One can compare the course syllabus and contents of History adopted by Mahatma Gandhi University in 1998-99 with those in the UGC Curriculum Development Centre, the latest volume. Even the postgraduate curriculum prescribed by UGC is utterly obsolete in the case of the discipline History.
- 3 For a discussion of related ideas see, Jerry G. Graff and James L. Ratcliff, *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Comprehensive Guide to Purposes, Structures, Practices and Change*, San Francisco, 1997
- 5 See discussions in Niklas Luhmann, "Systems Theoretical Perspective," quoted in Raf Vanderstaeten, "The Autopoiesis of Educational Institutions: The Impact of the Organisational Setting on Educational Interaction," *Systems Research and Behavioural Science*, vol.19 no. 3. p.243
- 6 Raf Vanderstraeten, "Autopoiesis of Educational Organisations.....Op.cit. p. 243-53. Also see, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, New Delhi, 1990. pp. 5-10. See the relevant discussions in his *Homo Academicus*, Translated by Peter Collier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

- 7 There is a liberal and welfare oriented perspective also. See, Timothy K. Stanton, *Civic Responsibility and Liberal Arts Education: Linking Public and Community Service to the Curriculum*, New Jersey, 1987. Also see, Frank Fischer, "Beyond Empiricism: Policy in Post-positivist Perspective," *Policy Studies Journal*, vol. 26. No.1 (1998)
- 8 The growing interconnectedness of disciplines is emphasised by the UGC in its X Plan Profile, New Delhi, 2001. p.5. Also see, Robert M. Diamond, *Designing and Improving Courses and Curricula in Higher Education: A Systematic Approach*, San Francisco, 1989.