

***The Idea of the University: Histories and Contexts* by Debaditya Bhattacharya, ed. New Delhi: Routledge, 2019, Hardback, ₹ 995.**

***The University Unthought: Notes for a Future* by Debaditya Bhattacharya, ed. New Delhi: Routledge, 2019, Hardback, ₹ 995.**

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An ontological vis-à-vis teleological enquiry of the journey of the university since its inception in the medieval Europe down to the neoliberal developments/challenges of the universities from the former colonies foregrounds the liminalities and contestations pertaining to its discursive and non-linear progression. This gradual process of the university's evolution from an essentially elitist institution under the sway of the church towards a more liberal democratic public institution of learning further uncovers the contemporary debates on the *raison d'être* of public universities almost across the globe (owing to the conniving strategies of the dual forces of neoliberalism and Right-wing neo-nationalism). Drawing analogies from the historical and contemporary records on functioning of the university and scholarly debates on the "idea of the university," Debaditya Bhattacharya's two critical volumes, *The Idea of the University: Histories and Contexts* (2019) and *The University Unthought: Notes for a Future* (2019), make significant interventions into understanding the present crisis "permeating the academic corridors" and the causality of subsequent "academic indigence." A futuristic endeavor of "re-imagining" the university through a re-positioning of its democratic ethos within the shifting demographic structure of the "state" alongside the demystification of the myth of the (first) world class universities in the third world situates Bhattacharya's volumes within the larger body of research on post-colonial academy.

The process of historical foregrounding vindicates the "idea of the university" as an autonomous and dialogic space, which encourages novelty in research, teaching and learning, and newer forms of knowledge production and democratic dissemination of the same while also problematizing its much-debated material allegiance to the state and the market. The detailed introductions of both the volumes demonstrate a historical and deconstructive deciphering of the naturalized compromise with academic freedom and functional autonomy, exemplary mostly of Indian and other South Asian universities. Beginning with an embedded critique of a recent controversy in the Central University of South Bihar, entailing the contentious binary of 'JNU-versus-us', Debaditya Bhattacharya's article "Of Feudal Intellectual Capital: The History of the New Provincial Universities" (Vol-I; henceforth, I)

further unfolds the devious presence of the politics of feudalism mostly in the new central universities, which came into existence under The Central Universities Act of 2009. He has aptly woven various incidents such as the hike in tuition fees, and the Vice Chancellor's order of suspension of a faculty member from the central university of Jharkhand for inviting a retired professor from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) with the prevalent feudal culture and authoritarianism in these new central universities largely located in the provincial towns. Tracing the root of such demographic discriminations and compromise with academic ethics and freedom in the colonial markers of Indian higher education, Bhattacharya viably argues, despite the reformative measures adopted to democratize and revolutionize the educational sector post-independence, Indian academia fails to curb the entrenched prejudices and much naturalized relegation, pertaining to the caste, gender and class identities and other geo-political conditions.

Having brought in the 'discontinuities' in the draft proposal of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Bhattacharya rightly problematizes the unscrupulous intention of the withdrawal of government support as it advocates the categorization of the universities in different types such as, 1, 2, and 3, thereby perpetuating/validating the ranking-based grant/loan disbursal, across the Indian higher educational institutions. These matters also entail the homogenous drives of "autonomization" and "docilization" of universities, notwithstanding their geo-political and cultural differences which are discussed at length in his other essay: "Between Disciplines and Interdisciplines: The University of In-discipline" (Vol-II; henceforth, II). Responding to two recent incidents, i.e. proposed termination order to the faculties from three specific departments at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 2017, and a letter from the University Grants Commission (UGC) stating an enquiry and imminent closure of the Centre for the Study of Discrimination and Exclusion (CSDE) of JNU, this essay subtly indicates the fateful intentions of the present government to encourage conformity and submission of its own subjects by thwarting their critical abilities. The shift from an "interdisciplinary scholarship aligned to the cause of social justice" (195) towards state-sanctioned interdisciplinary projects, essentially regulated by the neo-liberal market machineries disregarding even the economic barriers, as Bhattacharya asserts, creates newer modes of socio-cultural divisions, thereby propelling the Indian higher education towards much intricate post-millennial challenges.

Janaki Nair's article, "The Provocations of the Public University in Contemporary India" (II), while emphasizing the ontologically 'political' nature of the public universities in

India, conspicuous enough in the unanimous resistance of the students against the colonizers in the early twentieth century, meticulously unpacks the gradual shift in the political drive since independence. Though she upholds the distanced political approach of the public universities, she deftly argues how such typical academic demeanour allows several external political and cultural machineries to control the modalities of education, according to the dominant interests of the state. The rise of English speaking new middle class, with a gradual transformation in the status of English in India, as a ‘cultural capital’ of the modernized India further expedites the drive of English education through a bidirectional process of decentralization and subsequent privatization of education, thereby desisting from the democratic ideals of higher education, while engendering newer modes of social divisions. Drawing on the infamous Ambani-Birla Report (2000) and recent evidences of students unrest in several universities like JNU, HCU and FTII, she critically locates and resents the shift in understanding of the university as an autonomous democratic public sphere, espousing critical dialogues and self-reflection towards a skill-based ‘anti-intellectual’ training factory permeably tied to the material interests of the corporate agencies.

Supriya Chaudhuri (II) inquires through a set of analytical pointers “the crisis” of the Indian public university not only within the framework of the co-option of intellectual production and academic freedom by the ruling-party hegemonies but also in the skewed enactment of the Nehruvian model of liberal university education. Sharing Janaki Nair’s concern with the baneful effects of the policies endorsing privatization of the academy while persisting on the state’s feudal control over academic matters, she further probes how such ceaseless bureaucratization, and the recent practices of large scale curtailing the higher education budget, not only results in the compromise with the ethical base of the university, but also severely impairs the ‘parrhesiac’ orientation of academia. Finally through an effective criticism of an expensive re-modelling of the liberal arts education in the private universities, she calls for a radical re-thinking of the public university essentially as a ‘public space’ geared towards a revival of the true spirit of ‘interdisciplinarity’ through a sustained academic engagement with the ‘new humanities’. Aditya Nigam’s “Decolonizing the University” (II) looks closely into Supriya Chaudhuri’s recommendations through an intellectually ‘decolonized’ perspective. The derision of the specious modes of adoption of western standards, notwithstanding the socio-political and geo-cultural differences, is coupled with his endeavour to vindicate a rigorous critical engagement with the intellectual matrices

from the West, while being firmly grounded on indigenous experiences and our own understanding of modernity.

Sukanta Chaudhuri's (I) deconstructive approach of understanding the policy directions hinges on his perspicacious analysis of different policies and government schemes, underlining a deliberate attempt at underfunding the Indian public education sector. Complying with the cardinal questions addressed in the volume, he throws light on the current politics of uneven distribution of funds in the public universities, not pertaining to the academic parameters, but driven by the dominant religious and political interests. A government scheme of 20 'institutions of eminence' further unveils the complicity: as though not initially indicated, it later includes a non-existent private university in this distinctive category which aptly substantiates his reservation with the credibility of the tag of 'eminence'. Thus, to bolster the university education in India and to restore the nation's human resource pool, he pressed on the urgent need for a non-discriminatory school education and "a pyramidal structure of tertiary education" (Sukanta Chaudhuri, 124). Responding to the deceptive neoliberal tropes of equality, Nandini Chandra in her piece "The Surplus University" (I), effectively critiques the increased 'GATS-ification' of Indian higher education, and a post-globalization shift in the public image of the university. Referring to the polarization in the availability of the resources, due to the exorbitant rates of their subscription, she ethically argues how such factory-made online knowledge dissemination, devoid of deeper insight and individual skills, not only widens the chasm between different social groups, but also severely undermines the value of 'belabouring,' as the prerequisite for knowledge acquisition and individual excellence. This collective 'lack' in specialized knowledge, Chandra claims; slowly replaces the ontological definition of the university with a factory image, committed to produce unskilled professionals.

Drawing on Lyotard's anxiety over the moral and intellectual foundations of the neo-liberal university, Rina Ramdev's essay (I) revolves around the metaphor of 'The University of Excellence' in the attempt to unearth the discursive traces of mercantilization of knowledge production and dissemination. Bringing in the politics of ranking, API score, and world class education, she posits that the uncritical application of homogenous parameters of evaluation (introduction of the CBCS and semester system), dispensing with the ethnographic and geo-political contradistinctions, also entails a much intricate process of 'interpellation' of the epistemic directions of the nation. She also argues that the metamorphosis of the regulatory bodies such as UGC, ICHR, and others into surveillance agencies, which

culminates in their attempt to delimit the scope of academic research, along with the punitive audit culture, evident enough in the assessment of NAAC or NIRF further drive higher education into its circumscribed space of intellectual retreat. Though on a similar note with other contributors, Ania Loomba (I) places her critique of this staggered process of privatization of Indian academy within the rubric of deceptively homologous tropes of neoliberalism and Right-wing fascist forces. Her major concern lies with deciphering the concomitant devaluation in the paradigms of teacher-student relationship and their respective status within/outside the university. Locating the power-ridden corridors of Indian universities, against their Euro-American liberal counterparts, she arrives at her concept of ideal university, rooted in a socialist vision of a free space, upholding self-reflexive practices and redressal of disparity in distribution of resources amongst the universities.

A systematic departure from the defensive mechanisms, entailing the liberal humanist discourses on the university, allows Anup Dhar (II) to work on a dialectical re-visioning of the pedagogical praxes of the Indian universities. In order to interrogate the university as a mediatory space between “post-capitalist praxes” and “anti-capitalist critique,” he philosophically resorts to the “master-hysteric” duality in Lacanian discourse on the university. His provocative resolution of ‘action research’ is premised on a critical re-rendition of Spivak’s idea of “righting wrongs,” as it seeks for an unswerving denial of “a parrot’s training,” through a careful historical re-positioning of several flaws and the ‘lack’ in collective Indian consciousness, thereby paving the way for self-transformation (‘askesis’) and ‘development practice’. Dhar also emphatically situates the pressing need to eradicate the socially entrenched forms of gender stratification and discrimination within the applied interdisciplinary studies in disciplines like Gender Studies and Women’s Studies. Following the root, Prabhat Patnaik’s “The Commoditization of Education” (II) offers a detailed historical documentation of an unprecedented shift in the teleological definition of the Indian universities from a state-funded liberal model towards a neo-liberal corporate hub and a saleable commodity. While ushering in Gramsci’s supposition of the “organic intellectuals of the people,” he adds that the conjoined force of “commoditization of education and communal-fascism” could be effectively countered through an informed critique of income-wealth dichotomy and demystification of economic policies.

Responding to the almost homomorphous challenges, faced by the U.S. American universities, Henry A. Giroux (II) emplots the ‘peripeteia’ in the U.S. American higher education in the ‘Walmart model’ of culture and intellectual production and the ‘new

brutality’ of the Trump regime. Apart from a scathing criticism of the decline in the perception of the university as a democratic public sphere, he raises a set of critical questions, so as to safeguard the welfare model of higher education from further “disposability”. The questions range from a well-directed problematization of the transformation from a market economy to a “market society” to a gradual shift in the power equation of the ‘ivory tower’ (from faculty members to the neo-liberal managerial class). Thus as reformative measures, he asks for a radical restructuring of the pedagogical ethics of academy through a prolonged process of relocation of funds into welfare activities, increase in awareness and active participation of the academicians in resisting the authoritarian hegemonies, through a deep-rooted empathy for the subalterns. Extending Giroux’s assumptions, Ari Sitas (II) sententiously foregrounds his reflections on the contemporary crisis in university education within the labyrinthine networks of fiscal-political equations. Having identified ‘dissent’ within the constitutive framework of the university, he questions the credibility of present day campus struggles as they in a way fail to come up with a radically alternative vision of the university, through a meaningful ideological resistance against neo-nationalist aggrandization and increasing corporatization of academia.

Pursuing the urgency of a plea, Mosarrap Hossain Khan’s piece (II) goes back to the colonial era of Indian education, in order to demonstrate his claim of quite an amiable co-existence of the European liberal humanist model and the discursive question of ‘national culture’ during that time and even after independence. The unfinished “Nehruvian project of Indian nation-building” (100), coupled with the rambling religious interests, is later taken up by the Hindutva forces which entails a large-scale militarization of Indian public universities as manifest in the deployment of coercive state machineries in universities such as JNU, HCU, BHU, and JU, among others. Thus, attempting a materialist solution to such pervasive crisis, Peter McLaren (II) takes refuge in Freire’s concept of developing critical consciousness through education. Following Giroux’s supposition of educators as ‘transformative intellectuals’, his essay “Revolutionary critical pedagogy” investigates the politically neutral status of academicians and simultaneously re-asserts their role as ‘activist-interventionist’, through radicalization of classroom pedagogy and active resistance of oppressive social forces in other public sphere(s).

The pressing need of ‘resistance’ to curb the dictatorial approaches of the government to silence/co-opt the collective intellectual voice of the country, under the façade of ‘depoliticization’ of the campus space is explicated further in Anand Teltumbde’s “The

University as Passivity?” (I). Placing students’ activism (political) within the foundational and democratic ethos of the university, his critique of the deliberate suppression of students’ movements (mostly secular left-wing students’ organizations), by the oppressive Right-wing political parties and even their students’ body, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, aptly reverberates his discontent with the systematic estrangement of the university from its humanitarian values, and social responsibilities. Referring to the recent ‘Occupy UGC’ movement against the hierarchical structure and discriminatory algorithm prevalent in the Indian university system, Hany Babu MT (I) delves into the churning issue of caste politics in Indian universities. Citing both the instances of anti-reservation campaigns and suicides of many Dalit students across the country, visible in the recent incidents at IIT Chennai or HCU, he directly engages with the question of upward social mobility of the downtrodden sections within the shifting demographics of higher education. Tracing the discursive representation of students uprising, and subversion of dominant religious and economic discourses in non-metropolitan universities like BHU, Prasanta Chakravarty (I) re-locates the palimpsestic presence of alternate political dialogues, outside the metropolitan center. A ‘symptomatic’ reading of a novella by Kashinath Singh, *Apna Morcha* (2007) enables him to further unfold a profound historical connection of BHU with subversive political and cultural praxes and moral resurgence since its active participation in the ‘bhasha andolan’ during the 1970s. Finally, drawing parallels between Singh’s novella and present Right-wing repression of democratic ideals of the university, Chakravarty calls for a resuscitation of leftist discourses, as a befitting counterforce.

Wendy Brown’s resentment with the shift in “The Vocation of the Public University” (I) pertaining to the advent of ‘share-holder capitalism’ brings into discussion the erosion of democratic and egalitarian values and a gradual re-positioning of the university as a profit-generating body. The unbridled privatization of the public universities across the globe, apart from turning them into “privatized public universities” (48) with hefty tuition fees, severely impairs the welfarist model of the state. Thus, distancing from the “economic entities driven by shareholder value” (49), Brown opts for a liberal re-visioning of the vocation of the university within the trajectories of public interests, and not in moving away from it. Further contextualizing Brown’s assumptions within the “postcolonial university contexts across sub-Saharan Africa and Bangladesh” (Bhattacharya, I, 27), Mushahid Hussain’s essay (I) satirizes the undercurrent of this neo-liberal drive permeating the public universities from the post-colonies. Dispensing with the socio-cultural and ethnographic

differences, the trend of homogenization of standards, contingent on the post-globalization developments across these third world countries, he argues not only turns universities into a hub of ‘dirty politics’, but also mars the prospect of critical pedagogical discourses, espousing social justice. Through a scathing criticism of the public policies of such countries, he laments over the ever-waning status of the public universities, through strategic fund cuts, adjunctification of teaching profession, religious extremism and curtailing of academic freedom.

The contested trajectories of academic freedom and autonomy of the university, Lawrence Liang contends (II), turn further intricate with the privatized publication ethics of neo-liberal era and complex equations of ownership of knowledge. Shedding light on a recent case lodged by Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Taylor and Francis, and Routledge against unauthorized photocopying of the copyrighted materials at a photocopy shop in Delhi University, he offers an unsparing critique of an essentially post-liberal trend of considering academic production as private commodities owned by the corporate companies in the guise of copyright act and intellectual property rights (IPR). He further argues that this trading of academic publications, and more pointedly in a developing nation like India, with its own historical baggage of diverse socio-economic exploitations and divisions divests higher education from equitable distribution of resources, and democratic ideal of mass enlightenment. Having brought in the judgement of the Delhi High Court on this photocopy fiasco and the phenomenal verdict of ‘fair dealing’ exemptions in copyright law and its applications in the contexts of Indian public universities, Liang upholds the claim of open access of intellectual resources, as a constitutive marker of public education system.

Dhruba J. Saikia and Rowena Robinson in their detailed study on “scientific research productivity in the Indian university sector” (II) further raise their concerns about the shift in the direction of scientific research and training in India from public universities to supposedly specialized laboratory-based research of independent research institutes. Putting their propositions forward, the article further elaborates on the conditions of scientific research in India, considering the perpetual impediments, such as, lack of infrastructure in public universities, uninterrupted process of academic bureaucratization, and asymmetrical pattern of teaching-learning process. With a more focused attention with the publication of scientific research articles and their dissemination in the public domain, Shobhit Mahajan’s “In Search of a Scientific Public Sphere” (II) draws our attention on the controversy in the purview of the language of specialization. Drawing on the larger language politics in post-independence

India, he calls for a comprehensive re-structuring of scientific education in vernacular mediums, through wholehearted institutional support and encouragement in such egalitarian ventures of producing quality text books in native languages, and delivering lectures in them, thereby enlarging the scope of a more critical public engagement with scientific developments.

Debaditya Bhattacharya's *The Idea of the University* also creates an alternate space for personal reflections and memoirs so as to look into the widening rupture between theorization and praxes exemplary of postcolonial Indian academy from subjective historical perspectives. Having taken recourse to her own experiences in independent research institutions and different central and state universities, Lakshmi Subramanian's essay (I) aims at charting the transformation in Indian university education historically from the 1980s until the present. Her appeal to safeguard academic freedom, as the foundational principle of the idea of the university against the right-wing censorship of intellectual rights through an overarching signifier of 'anti-nationals', beautifully coheres with her suggestion of a well-intentioned ideological resistance of 'new-brutal' state machineries. The embedded sarcasm in Vijay Prashad's "Don't Study, Be Happy" (I) rests on his account of students' movements in South Africa and India against the neo-liberal incursion and co-option of academic ethics. Taking into account the hike in tuition fees, Prashad shares his anxiety over the far-reaching implications of such severe attack on the democratic political disposition of the university.

Paramita Banerjee's "The Presidential Transition" (I) takes on the moment/case of 'autonomization' of Presidency College, as her focal point of enquiry. Through a personal and historical anecdotal journey, Banerjee claims that despite retaining the nostalgia for more of an exclusivist excellence, the upgradation in its status as university upsets the culture of 'dissent' in the political activism of the campus, to a great extent. Akanksha Ahluwalia, Ishan Mohan, and Sagar Sachdeva in their jointly penned essay, "University: The State's Kitchen" (I) attempt to trace the evolution/devolution of the university space from a democratic public space to a 'prison-industrial complex'. The increasing underfunding of research in 'humanities and social sciences and steep downturn in their position within the university community create the backdrop for their strong critique of technocratic developments in higher education sector and their radical re-imagination of the university as the potential 'other'.

Debaditya Bhattacharya's edited volumes on *The Idea of the University: Histories and Contexts* (2019) and *The University Unthought: Notes for a Future* (2019) look critically into the ideological and intellectual indigence affecting the university education in the 'post-liberal' era. The essays, apart from investigating the causality of the predicament of the public universities in India and other parts of the world, also chalk out a detailed blueprint of an ethical re-positioning of the university and the resurgence of its democratic and critical ethos within the ever-shifting paradigms of the post-globalized national contexts. Although both the volumes adequately address different markers of inequality through an informed critique of disciplinary, economic, social, gender, and geographical divisions and stratifications, as manifest in the spiraling privatized culture of the public universities, the politics of/in provincial universities and the question of women's education, in my opinion, are somehow understated compared to the detailed analytical framework of inquiry. The definition of provincial universities in India transcends the fixed trajectories of the non-metropolitan central universities and effectively incorporate a large number of state universities within its definitive boundaries, which further complicate the differences between metropolitan universities and their provincial counterparts. Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha and Subhendra Bhowmick (2020) in a jointly penned article critically build upon Bhattacharya's assumptions on non-metropolitan universities so as to investigate the perpetual plight and the stigma of 'backwardness' analogous to many state-run universities from provincial towns. In a similar vein, the issues concerning women's education in India, and attainment of gender equality through education require further attention through a conscientious feminist re-examination of several government policies espousing female literacy and their flawed realistic manifestations. Finally, as the struggle for re-definition of the academy continues, the intertextual connections between Debaditya Bhattacharya's edited volumes and other contemporary works on the third world universities by scholars like Andre Beteille, Pankaj Chandra, Apporvanand, and Gaurav J. Pathania, among others accentuate the urgent call for a structural and functional re-visioning of the idea of the university.

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