

# DELHI UNIVERSITY @ 100

Institute of Eminence or Crumbling Edifice?

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**T**he centenary celebrations of the University of Delhi were inaugurated on 1 May 2022 by the Chancellor of the University, Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu. On this occasion, a commemorative coin of ₹100 as well as a stamp was released. The year-long celebrations, with many events and programmes, are planned to be held in the University. Completing a century is clearly a landmark event for any institution and must undoubtedly be celebrated.

The University of Delhi, or Delhi University as it is almost universally known, is a relative newcomer as far as universities go. The University of Bologna was founded in 1088 CE, followed by Oxford University in 1096 CE. Even in India, the Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Lahore were established earlier than Delhi University. In the late 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, Delhi was considered a backwater as far as education was concerned. The educational centre for north India was Lahore, with its many fine institutions, including Punjab University.

Prior to the establishment of Delhi University, Delhi's educational landscape was essentially its four colleges: St. Stephen's, established by the Cambridge Mission in 1881; Hindu College, founded as a nationalist reaction in 1889; Ramjas College, set up in 1917; and the oldest, Delhi College, formally established in 1824. Delhi College, now called Zakir Husain Delhi College, had many illustrious scholars like Master Ram Chander and Maulvi Abdul Haq. It played an important role in translating into the vernacular several scientific treatises as well as works of Greek philosophy. These translations played a key role in bringing Western scientific

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knowledge to the literate elite at that time. All these colleges were originally affiliated to the University of Calcutta, but later changed their affiliation to Punjab University, Lahore.

At the Delhi Durbar in 1911, King George V announced the shifting of the capital of British India from Calcutta to Delhi. Any capital by rights ought to have a university, and so the University of Delhi was set up in 1922 with two faculties—arts and science. The existing four colleges were affiliated to it over the next few years. In 1933, the Viceroy's residence was shifted to what is now Rashtrapati Bhawan, and the erstwhile Viceregal Lodge Estate near the Ridge became the nucleus of the University campus. The Lodge has been the Vice Chancellor's office ever since, while the other buildings have housed some of the other departments and offices. For instance, the Viceroy's ballroom became what is now the convention hall, and the stables of the Viceroy's establishment became the laboratories of the physics department—or so goes folklore.

The University truly came into its own during the tenure of Sir Maurice Gwyer who served as the Vice Chancellor from 1937 to 1950. New departments were opened while the existing ones, especially in the sciences, were augmented. Laboratories for teaching and research were started, and eminent academicians were hired as faculty. This trend continued even after Gwyer's tenure, and in the 1950s, the university could boast of some of the finest minds in Indian academia. These included D. S. Kothari (physics), T. R. Seshadri (chemistry), V. K. R. V. Rao (economics), P. Maheshwari (Botany) and many others who were not just eminent academicians, but, more important, institution builders. Right from acquiring funding, to hiring the finest teachers, to building infrastructure, these stalwarts laid the foundations of the University as we know it now.

It was during the 1960s and early 1970s that undergraduate teaching, which had hitherto been split between the colleges and University departments, became the exclusive preserve of the colleges, while the departments now focused on postgraduate teaching and research. This led to the expansion of the departments in terms of the number of students as well as research scholars.

Unlike the colleges in other parts of the country, colleges in the University are constituent colleges and are not affiliated, and hence have always formed an integral part of the University.

Some of these colleges rank among the finest places to get a well-rounded undergraduate education. They have groomed a whole generation of students by exposing them not just to academics, but to sport and other extra-curricular activities as well.

Some of the teachers in these colleges were legendary and acquired cult status in their respective fields. They were not just brilliant academics who could have easily got an academic position at any institution, but also exceptional teachers who inspired their students. Their contribution, in terms of the normative norms of academics, viz., cutting-edge research and publications in journals, might not have been exceptional, but was more than made up for by their teaching and role in shaping young minds.

The departments also prospered because of excellent faculty members. The reputation of the departments attracted bright young faculty who then went on to contribute to improving the stature of the parent institution. This virtuous circle meant that the University was considered among the best institutions in the country for both teaching and research. Both national and international recognition came easily. Thus, when the University Grants Commission (UGC) started its Centre for Advanced Study to promote high-quality research, as many as three departments from the University were the first to be selected.

Delhi University's reputation as a premier centre for learning kept growing during the 1960s and 1970s, and it soon became the institution of choice for the best students. It also helped that the University was one of the few in the country where teaching went on smoothly even at tumultuous times during which teaching was disrupted at many other institutions. Bright students, who ordinarily would have gone to Calcutta or Allahabad University, came to Delhi.

The list of alumni from Delhi University reads like a virtual Who's Who—from politics to cinema, from law to bureaucracy, academics and sport, its alumni have gone on to distinguish themselves in many areas. Personalities such as Arun Jaitley, Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Justice D. Y. Chandrachud, Sanjay Kishan Kaul, Kaushik Basu, Ramachandra Guha, Mohinder Amarnath, among many others, have been students. There is hardly a field of human endeavour in which Delhi University's alumni have not shone.

Over time, as was expected, Delhi University expanded its footprint from one campus, a handful of colleges and departments to its present form with two campuses, 16 faculties, 86 departments and over 90 constituent colleges. Enrollment went up and it now has more than 5 lakh students on its rolls. A majority are in the School of Open Learning, and the rest in the various colleges and departments of the University. It continues to be counted among the best public universities, as evidenced by its selection some years ago as an Institute of Eminence. It also has a reasonable ranking in global university ranking tables.

Despite the mushrooming of private universities, Delhi University still remains the first choice for a majority of students from across India. It has a truly national character with representation from every corner of the country. The number of students seeking admission is several times more than the number of seats available. Not only is it popular nationally, but also attracts students from across the world, especially the Middle East, because of its high academic standards and affordability.

A cursory look at the state of Delhi University would seem to indicate that it is in rude health and will scale new heights in the future. However, any prognosis for the future must examine the institution's present state in greater detail and consider any possible trajectories it might take. Therefore, it is important to be cognisant of the role of a public university in any society and, in particular, in a country such as ours.



Modern universities trace their origin to the founding of Bologna University. Earlier, learning was mostly restricted to monasteries and institutions run by the Church. It is important to note that the first universities were essentially guilds of students and masters organised for the purposes of specialised learning of such subjects as law, theology and medicine.

Although founded in the late Middle Ages, the evolution of universities as institutions of learning accelerated during the Renaissance (with the Reformation as well as Guttenberg's invention of movable type), and especially during the Enlightenment and thereafter. In their present form, universities are the locations of

teaching, training and research in modern societies. Knowledge is created and distributed, and future knowledge workers are trained there. Universities are also meant to be arenas of free-ranging thought, creativity and debate which, among other things, lead to new ideas. At least for a century, these characteristics of universities have been almost universally accepted.

Moreover, public universities have another important role to play. Funded by the state, they are expected to be free from the pressures of private capital and can use this freedom to explore disciplines and areas of their choice. However, even in an ideal scenario, a public university is obligated to contribute to society in terms of generation of new ideas and technologies, as well as nurturing critical thinking in its citizens. It also has an obligation to further whatever goals society has set for itself, goals which might go beyond the narrow confines of disciplines and subjects. Universal access is one such goal—the obvious implication being non-discrimination in everything, except academic matters. In addition, at various junctures, societies might decide to compensate for historical injustices by agreeing to a set of affirmative action programmes. Access, thus, remains a crucial defining characteristic of a public university—access here as defined in its broadest sense to mean real, as opposed to *pro forma*, opportunities for everyone to high quality and meaningful education.

Thus, to see where Delhi University is at present, and is likely to be in the future, it would be productive to try and assess its performance in the areas of creation and distribution of knowledge. Further, since universities are sites where free thought and expression is encouraged, we would need to examine how Delhi University fares on account of encouraging free speech and promoting debate. And since it is a public university, we ought to be aware too of its efforts to provide meaningful, affordable high-quality education to all sections of society.

Teaching and training form an essential part of any higher educational institution. In Delhi University, teaching is divided between colleges for undergraduates and university departments for postgraduates. The departments also train students for research by running PhD programmes.

Quantitatively speaking, Delhi University, like all public education institutions, has done remarkably well. India's Gross

Enrollment Ratio (GER) for higher education, defined as the percentage of youth between the ages of 18 and 23 enrolled in tertiary education, has seen a steady rise from 11 per cent in 2006, to 23 per cent in 2014, to 27 per cent in 2021. If we use the international definition, then India's GER is more than 31 per cent. Thus, about one in three adults in this age group is enrolled in an institution.

Much of this increase is on account of the proliferation of educational institutions. From about 750 universities and 37,000 colleges in 2014, there are now approximately 1,050 universities and more than 42,000 colleges. For Delhi University, this increase in enrollment has come about primarily because of two sets of legislations. The first, in 2007, with what is called Other Backward Castes (OBC) expansion when the total number of seats was increased by over 50 per cent; and the second in 2019, with the Economically Weaker Section reservation, when there was a further 25 per cent increase.

These enabling legislations have not just increased the student population, but have also made a great difference to its composition. The number of students from previously under-represented or unrepresented groups has increased dramatically. These include not just students from poor households and backward castes, but also first-generation learners as well as students from rural backgrounds, including women.

Thus, it would seem that Delhi University has fared well on the score of providing access. However, increased enrollment does not necessarily translate into meaningful access. Students from these backgrounds are usually not as well equipped as their contemporaries from more advantageous backgrounds. These disadvantages range from language issues (a large number of them come from Hindi-medium backgrounds, and have trouble with textbooks and lectures), to a below-average academic preparation because of poor quality of schooling. Consequently, they are not entering a level playing field and many of them have trouble coping. They are, however, extremely motivated and ambitious.

Given the numbers, the scale of the problem is immense. Nevertheless, there are certain steps which could be taken to assist those who are motivated. Thus, the University could, for instance, offer remedial classes to make up for the lack of academic preparation. The linguistic issue is a much larger one, for which the government

would need to promote either the production of high-quality material in the vernacular or translate good text books (as was envisaged by the Knowledge Commission's National Translation Mission). In the interim, English speaking and reading classes could be organised to bridge the gap.



Teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is also beset with its own share of problems. These range from the lack of infrastructure because of financial constraints, a dearth of teachers, and a curriculum structure which seems to frequently morph from one acronym to another while being academically bewildering.

Almost every single college and department faces an enormous deficit in basic infrastructure, or what would be considered the bare minimum required for an academic institution. The list is long: inadequate classrooms, a clean and healthy environment for students and staff, a dearth of laboratory equipment, and much more. For instance, enrollment at the physics department, the largest in the University, increased by almost 100 per cent because of legislation. And, yet, there has been no increase in the number of classrooms since the 1970s.

There are now approximately 800 postgraduate students and more than 250 PhD scholars in the physics department. Classrooms are overcrowded and badly ventilated, a critical disadvantage in these days of physical distancing. There are few washrooms, especially for women, and barely any functional drinking water facilities. The budget for new equipment for teaching is ₹15 lakh a year, a figure which has not increased in more than two decades—and this, for the University's largest and oldest department! Conditions in most colleges are equally bad. For instance, in a premier college of the University, the annual budget for the physics lab is a paltry ₹25,000. This, when an oscilloscope of decent quality costs upwards of ₹40,000.

The situation with regard to human resources is even more critical. There are more than 6,000 vacancies for teachers in the University and its colleges which have not been filled. This is more than half the total sanctioned strength. For instance, the physics department has a sanctioned strength of more than 85 teachers,

but has only 39 on its rolls currently. Most colleges are making do with contractual appointments, oddly called ad-hoc teachers. And some of them have been teaching in this capacity for over a decade, their contracts renewed every year. It seems hard to imagine how a teacher, who is not even sure if she will have a job after a year, is going to be motivated. Administrative stasis, combined with ever-changing regulations, has led to this huge backlog which has impacted teaching in a very serious way.

Then, there is the issue of the curriculum itself. Over the last decade or so, there have been so many changes in its structure that it is sometimes hard to determine which particular one is being followed. These range from FYUP (Four Year Undergraduate Programme), to CBCS (Choice Based Credit System), to New Education Policy (NEP), and back to FYUP! These changes in the structure would still be desirable if they were academically sound and in tune with realities on the ground. However, that is not the case.

The new and improved system, which is going to be in force from the coming academic session, for instance, significantly waters down the curriculum for the core subject in an undergraduate degree. Instead of a thorough grounding in the core subject—a strength of past Honours courses at Delhi University—it offers Skill Enhancement Courses and General Electives. These choices might sound perfect since, after all, there could be little objection to a well-rounded education. Except that, as usual, policy makers are clueless about ground realities. Most colleges have neither the teachers nor the classrooms to offer more than a couple of these courses, and even these with the greatest difficulty. Even in the physics department of the University, the so-called general electives, which are meant for students of other departments as well, are taken only by physics students simply because it is impossible to adjust timings to suit the timetables of other departments, given the shortage of classrooms.

The new system also offers an option of dropping out after one or two or three years, instead of finishing the four-year programme. This option is as meaningless as some of the skill enhancement courses on offer: What kind of job would a student with a 1-year certificate or a 2-year diploma get when thousands of engineering graduates are forced to accept low-paying call centre jobs for lack



of opportunities? Once again, the mandarins framing policy seem to be supremely unaware of reality.

Possibly the most harmful policy concerns online credits. Currently, a student can get up to 40 per cent of the credits required for a degree through online courses run by accredited institutions. Despite the widely reported devastation inflicted on learning by online teaching, forced upon the nation because of the pandemic, it is unbelievable that policy makers still seem to regard it as a sound academic decision. The strong connections within the government built by the EdTech lobby might well be a coincidence, but EdTech companies are certainly salivating at the prospective returns from selling enabling technologies because of this decision. Or, perhaps it is a happy coincidence of interests of these companies with that of the state which seems to be wanting to wash its hands of publicly funded higher education for the masses. The slow but steady encouragement of online education will automatically translate into less funding for teachers, labs, libraries, and much more. What it will do to future generations does not seem to bother our policy makers.

As for research, the manner in which the system has been set up makes it almost exclusively the preserve of university departments. Apart from teaching postgraduates, faculty members in a department also take on students for a PhD. Here, too, it is evident that the lack of infrastructure and funding, byzantine regulations as well as bizarre policies have made it hard to carry out high-quality research.

Researchers are required to get projects from various funding agencies to fund their research. This is clearly a healthy practice and is followed globally. Funding agencies, after a rigorous peer review process, grant funds for equipment, personnel, among others. The University is expected to provide such basic infrastructure as space, power, and much more, for which it gets 15–20 per cent of the project funding as overheads. It is in the provision of these basic facilities that Delhi University falters. For instance, years ago, the physics department acquired a generator set to meet the needs of its teaching and research laboratories. It functioned for a couple of years, but has since become a white elephant. The reason—no funds for maintenance and, more pertinently, no provision in the budget for fuel to run the generator!

The purchase of equipment from project funding is a process so onerous that the bureaucratic hoops, which sustained research

in the University demands, are not for the faint hearted. Paperwork has to be followed up at all stages: from approvals, to ordering the equipment, and finally ensuring payments to suppliers. This takes time and energy which could be much more productively spent on research.

However, potentially, the most devastating factor for the research environment, not just in Delhi University but in all universities, is a UGC-mandated regulation. This regulation decrees that everything in one's academic career—from a PhD degree, to jobs, to promotions and increments—will depend on the number of research papers published. The motivation for this seems to be the near talismanic obsession that our politicians and mandarins have for various world university rankings.

That the very world university ranking system is flawed and can be gamed easily has been established conclusively. For instance, in an interesting expose, noted Pakistani public intellectual Pervez Hoodbhoy has shown how institutions in Pakistan have ranked high in subjects which do not even exist in those institutions. Since an important part of the evaluation criteria is research publications by faculty, our administrators seem to think that the only thing which matters in research is quantity, not quality. Deeming the number of research publications the only benchmark of one's capability has had a regressive side effect: the mushrooming of a number of predatory journals (those which take money to publish one's work), as has been pointed out by the UGC Chairman M. Jagadesh Kumar, himself. Even worse is the growth of PhD shops which routinely advertise PhD degrees, complete with the requisite number of published papers as well as typed and bound theses—all this can be acquired from the comfort of one's home and for a modest sum of a few lakhs.

Promotions for teachers are also linked to their research output. This loads the dice against them, including those in colleges who have no access to facilities for research. But human ingenuity knows no bounds; recently, at a promotion interview, a teacher who had not been active in research, or published for decades, was able to present the required number of research publications, all published in one year. He was of course duly promoted since he had fulfilled the mandated criterion of eight research publications in the previous 10 years. If our educational planners believe this to be the path to becoming a knowledge superpower, then one can only be amused.

Universities are not only meant for formal instruction and research; they are also sites to debate new ideas and to foster free thinking among young minds whose ideas may not always be in sync with what is acceptable to the state. But that is exactly how new modes of thinking take root and flower. Delhi University, until a few years ago, could pride itself on always encouraging debate and the expression of a variety of opinions. Not so long ago, one would, for instance, find a celebrated Marxist activist giving a talk in one of the rooms of the arts faculty while, outside, the student-wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was holding a demonstration. Protests regarding various local, national and international issues were common, with public figures addressing the protestors. And then, there were the coffee houses with their low, graffiti-covered sunmica tables, where the whole universe of ideas and ideologies was discussed for hours over cups of inexpensive coffee.

All those things are now in the past. To reserve a room in any campus building for a meeting, various forms giving all the details are to be submitted, and a fairly high sum of money paid, which makes it unaffordable for most small groups. And if this is not discouraging enough, permissions are routinely refused. Curiously, permissions are frequently refused for events with speakers who might hold opinions divergent from the 'official' narrative, while speakers affiliated to various organisations responsive to the current dispensation never seem to have that problem. Protests are banned on campus, with the result that students are forced to dissent in the small space outside the gate. It is a strange sight to see a handful of students, holding a peaceful protest with placards and banners, watched over by a huge contingent of police in riot gear and anti-riot vehicles. Anyone not familiar with the situation could easily be forgiven for mistaking those poor protesting students on the list of most-wanted terrorists.

Two of the three coffee houses on campus are now a distant memory; a third one at the Delhi School of Economics somehow has managed to survive. The main coffee house is now an administrative office, because a past Vice Chancellor had decided that coffee houses were places where students wasted time. The other coffee house was first replaced by a private outlet, but is now a canteen. While a canteen can efficiently exercise its core function of serving economical food to a high turnover of customers, it can never replicate the leisurely, slow-paced environment of a coffee house.

May 2022 has been the hottest month in Delhi in living memory. It was 41 degrees Celsius in the afternoon and I had just come from teaching a class in a room without electricity, packed with students. As I walked back to my room, I met a colleague who seemed extremely upset. Apparently, one of his experiments, which had been going on for 72 hours and was nearing completion, would have to be repeated because of the power failure that had caused his equipment to shut down. And this on the day after the inauguration ceremony, where speakers had held forth on how Delhi University would soon be joining the ranks of leading global academic institutions.

