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Tejas A. Desai

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INDIA**

EAST AND WEST, THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: A Cross-cultural Perspective on Higher Education

Tejas A. Desai

Assistant Professor

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Email: tdesai@iimahd.ernet.in

Abstract

Both India and the U.S. were once colonies of Great Britain, the world's first but short-lived global power. And both India and the U.S. ultimately threw off the imperialist yoke. Despite independence, both democracies inherited certain things from Great Britain. Whereas India inherited the English language, parliamentary governance, socialism, and, last but not least, the English educational system; the U.S. inherited the English language, the Judeo-Christian value system, and the "white" racial identity. The English educational system of India was augmented by Soviet-style central planning which resulted in several "Institutes" that have come to dominate higher education in India. Despite being ethnically closer to Great Britain, the U.S. evolved its own system of political governance, and, more important, its own educational system. While American higher education has come to define the "gold standard" for higher education, India still lags considerably behind in higher education. This paper seeks to explain certain cultural differences that may have contributed to this imbalance between the Indian and American higher education systems.

Keywords: Culture; Higher Education; India; America.

1. Introduction

Of all the major civilizations of the Ancient World (i.e., before 500 B.C.) — namely, the Mesopotamian, the Egyptian, the Indian, the Chinese, the Mediterranean, and the Olmec — perhaps only the Indian civilization can make a claim to some sort of continuity till the present time. Despite having been a civilization that produced, among other things, arguably the world's first university (at Takshashila), great religious treatises such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, great religio-literary epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the now ubiquitous mathematical concepts of the decimal number system, the zero and the infinity, the India of today is the world's largest democracy with a land mass roughly a fourth of that of the U.S. but a population more than triple than that of the U.S. It is a country full of paradoxical juxtapositions such as that of affluence and mass poverty, scientific advance and superstition, democracy and communism, and, in general, the ancient and the modern. More important, despite having a tradition of education that can be traced back to antiquity, the Indian education of today, especially higher Indian education, cannot be considered, with some exceptions, truly world class.

In contrast, American society as we know it has been around for slightly over 400 years. Despite its short history, American higher education has evolved into a world standard that is a magnet for attracting the brightest minds around the world. “Indeed, the American higher education system has become the worldwide “gold standard” for higher education, respected its leadership in research and scholarship and for providing access to large numbers of students.” (Altbach, 2001).

2. Higher Education in India

The existence of centers for higher education --such as the universities of Takshashila, Nalanda, Ujjain, and Vikramshila—in India before the influx of Europeans is well-documented in several history books. However, these centers were destroyed by invading armies starting circa 500 A.D. After these ancient universities ceased to exist, education in India became highly indigenous and local. Higher education as it exists today in India owes its origins to the British Raj. Indeed, the first modern university in the Indian subcontinent, the University of Calcutta, was established in 1857 along the lines of University of London. In contrast to the U.S.A., where the first institutions of higher learning were private, the University of Calcutta was state-administered. This reflects the

direct influence of Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, on Indian as well as on British higher education. Lord Macaulay articulated his views on education in a famous speech to the House of Commons on April 19, 1847. In this speech, Macaulay tried to make a case for active government involvement in matters of education¹:

“It is the duty of Government to protect our persons and property from danger. The gross ignorance of the common people is a principal cause of danger to our persons and property. Therefore, it is the duty of the Government to take care that the common people shall not be grossly ignorant.”

He goes on to say²:

“Unless, Sir, I greatly deceive myself, those arguments, which show that the Government ought not to leave to private people the task of providing for the national defense, will equally show that the Government ought not to leave to private people the task of providing for national education.”

Indeed, he felt that the principle of *laissez-faire* does not apply to education³:

“We have applied the principle of free competition to a case to which that principle is not applicable.”

Macaulay’s sentiments must have been shared by the government leaders of India during its early years after independence, because they explicitly followed a top-down—rather than a bottom-up-- approach towards developing institutions of higher learning. Even today, the institutions in India which provide the best higher education are almost without exception government institutions. In technology, it is the IIT’s (Indian Institutes of Technology); in management, it is the IIM’s (Indian Institutes of Management); in medicine, it is AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences); in statistics, it is the ISI’s (Indian Statistical Institutes); and so on. The establishment of the IIT’s was apparently motivated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), notwithstanding the fact that MIT is a private institution. Despite the much-touted IIT “brand”, a fact that is almost always overlooked is that 14 MIT professors have won the Nobel Prize in the last six years, whereas not one academic based in India has won the Nobel during the six decades after India’s independence. Furthermore, the best students from institutions such as the IIT’s leave India to pursue (post)graduate studies at reputed American institutions, MIT

being one of them. Thus, while there are many educational institutions in India providing quality education, they considerably lag behind in quality research.

3. American Higher Education: The Emergence of a World Standard

The earliest institutions of higher learning in the America were colonial colleges which primarily imparted classical and religious education. Outstanding examples of these are the Harvard College (est. 1636) and Yale College (est. 1701). Many such colleges sprung in what Arthur Cohen (1998) calls the Colonial Era (1636-1789). But, he notes⁴,

“Colonial colleges were only marginally connected with the advancement of knowledge. They did serve as archives because they had libraries and because their curriculum tended to perpetuate knowledge. But they were far from being centers of scholarship and research.”

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, German universities epitomized higher education, especially research. Thus, writes Cohen⁵,

“Beginning in the first quarter of the (nineteenth) century a number of American college graduates went to Germany for further study and returned with Germanic notions of the professor as an independent researcher responsible for guiding students in a particular subject field and for conducting inquiry in that field according to his own determination of the value of topics to study. An institution might appoint a tutor as a professor and then send him to Europe (at his own expense) to do postgraduate study in a specialized subject. By the 1830s nearly half of the Harvard faculty had received such training.”

By the end of the nineteenth century, other eminent American institutions had followed suit. Indeed, continues Cohen⁶:

“By the early years of the (twentieth) century an enduring pattern of higher education had been established...With greater or lesser emphasis on the various functions, universities both public and private exhibited several characteristics that they had inherited from earlier models. Their treatment of undergraduates followed

the British form of residential college. (Post) Graduate study and research was adopted from the German universities.”

What is noteworthy about the emergence of American higher education is that though in earlier times many Americans went abroad (particularly to Germany) for post-graduate study, America never experienced the phenomenon of “*brain drain*” which India continues to experience even after more than 50 years of independence from Great Britain. This perhaps has to do with the fact that the quality of life in America, including the opportunities for self- and economic improvement, was never significantly worse—and was perhaps much better—than that offered by Germany to an American student.

The trend of the brightest of Americans pursuing post-graduate study in Germany, especially in the Sciences, continued up until the rise of the Nazis. Among these students were luminaries such as the physicists J. W. Gibbs (1839-1903), and J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967); and mathematicians Garrett Birkhoff (1911-1996), Norbert Wiener (1894-1964), and Saunders MacLane (1909-2005).

But the above trend reversed itself, in a sense, when the Nazis took hold of Germany in 1933. Top-notch German intellectuals, non-Jewish as well as Jewish, started to emigrate to other countries, especially to the U.S.. These included geniuses such as Albert Einstein, Kurt Godel, John Von Neumann, Eugene Wigner, Richard Courant, Enrico Fermi, Eugene Wigner, Wassily Hoeffding, Andre Weil, and many others. This exodus of world-class intellectuals from Germany (and, later, Germany-occupied Europe) into the U.S.A further strengthened the American higher educational system to the point where it became the preferred destination for the best of all foreign students. Indeed, from about 1950 onwards, most bright Indian students began to prefer the U.S. to Great Britain in order to pursue world-class post-graduate education.

Some critics argue that the U.S. has over 3000 institutions of higher education, and that only a select few may be considered the best, with very many being below average. But this is true of any other nation, including India. India probably has more institutions of higher learning than the U.S., and yet does not have one institution of the stature of , say, Harvard or the University of California at Berkeley.

4. The Culture of Capitalism versus the Culture of Socialism

It is not a coincidence that perhaps the best higher education system in the world today, namely, the American higher education system, exists in a country that is the most capitalist one to have existed in human history. Many social commentators fail to note the positive correlation between economic and educational progress. A robust economy is needed to boost academic progress. Conversely, an excellent higher educational system drives a good economy. One can also look at this relationship from the point of view of supply and demand. For an economy to do well, it demands state-of-the-art skilled labor, which a good educational system provides. Conversely, a good educational system needs the financial support necessary to excel, which a good economy provides. This lesson was lost on independent India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Free trade and capitalism in general existed in India since before the first century A.D. Indeed, India was a key stopover point on the proverbial Silk Road. Indians were especially notable for trading spices and textiles. Free trade from and to India also continued after the 15th century when discovery of sea routes between the East and West led to the decline of the Silk Road. Furthermore, India did not fail to derive from the Industrial Revolution of Europe which occurred while the British were firmly in power over India. Examples of early Indian capitalists include the late, great Jamsetji Tata who founded a business empire that is doing well to this day.

Despite centuries of capitalist enterprises in India, the India that was born out of independence from Great Britain decided to go the socialist route starting with the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. An early example of restraining capitalism in India was the nationalization of Air India, India's first international airline, founded by the Tatas. For almost half a century after independence in 1947, setting up a business in India was equivalent to running through the gauntlet of India's gargantuan bureaucracy. This resulted in a massive and well-known network of corruption among the bureaucrats. It is no coincidence that the noted economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who was the American ambassador to India during the presidential tenure of John F. Kennedy and during the prime ministership of Nehru, is said to have lamented the "License Raj" in India, referring to the practice of getting a license for virtually every aspect of setting up a private enterprise. It is particularly noteworthy that in his own country, Galbraith was known as a left-of-center economist. It is also

enlightening to take note of American attitudes towards Nehru. For example, Judith Brown⁷ reveals in her biography of Nehru “a top secret note about Nehru circulating in the U.S. State Department in 1950”: “*He is their leader, their teacher, their critic; they look to him for guidance, not he to them. He does not tolerate their opposition.*” Nehru’s approach to central planning was not entirely unopposed. For example, the freedom fighter Vallabhbhai Patel was suspicious of Nehru’s approach. But Patel passed away in 1950. John Matthai, Nehru’s finance minister resigned in protest in 1950. It is not surprising that this tendency was inherited by his daughter Indira Gandhi who carried it to the *n*-th degree. For instance, in 1975 a court found her guilty of election fraud and asked her to resign. Instead, she declared a State of Emergency in order to stay in power. Judith Brown⁸ mentions:

“...it was not until well over a decade after Nehru’s death that Indian voices began to denounce the whole strategy of development behind the Five Year Plans, as India became infamous for sluggish growth rates (the so-called ‘Hindu rate of growth’), excessive government controls which bred corruption and bottlenecks and earned the scathing title ‘licence-permit raj’, poor management of state enterprises, and a massive population increase which outstripped the capacity of the state to invest in social goods such as health, housing, and education.”

It is astonishing that Nehru did not pay any heed to the following words of Gandhi⁹:

“I look upon an increase in the power of the state with the greatest fear because, although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress.

The state represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.

It is my firm conviction that if the state suppressed capitalism by violence, it will be caught up in the coils of violence itself and fail to develop non-violence at any time.

What I would personally prefer, would be, not a centralization of power in the hands of the state but an extension of the sense of trusteeship; as in my opinion, the violence of private ownership is less injurious than the violence of the state.”

It is not surprising that under the conditions described above, Indian higher education suffered. P. C. Mahalanobis, a contemporary of Nehru and the man who introduced statistics in India, had convinced Nehru of borrowing from the Soviet model of central planning. Among other things, this led to establishment of the well-known Indian Institutes of Technology (I.I.T's). Until recently, these institutes were highly subsidized by the Central government. It is also well-known that the best of the I.I.Tians go to the U.S. for (post)graduate education and find a rewarding career over there. This is the phenomenon known as the "brain drain". Thus, it is not surprising that the Indians have, by and large, not excelled in research.

Critics argue that most of the best American universities are private, and that, hence, there is no state or federal interference. This argument is flawed, since there are state universities such as the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and so on, which compete on an equal footing with private universities such as Harvard, Princeton, or Yale.

5. The Effects of Cultural Homogeneity on Higher Education

If one looks at those nations today which are more advanced than India as far as the overall standard of living *and* higher education is concerned, then one immediately notices that these nations exhibit a degree of linguistic and cultural homogeneity far greater than that exhibited by India. The first sign of cultural homogeneity is the existence of a common language of communication. For example, in the U.S. and Great Britain it is English; in Germany, German; in France, French; in Italy, Italian; and so on. A common language of communication in a country engenders a degree of uniformity that makes it easier to have a common national mission, be it higher education or be it economic progress (the two go hand in hand). But India is perhaps the only country in the history of the world in which the degree of cultural heterogeneity far outstrips that of cultural homogeneity. In its cultural constitution, India is more like the continent of Europe in that it has at least a dozen official languages. But whereas Europe is made up of different nations along different linguistic lines, a nationhood was imposed upon the subcontinent that is India. Thus, it has been difficult for Indians to adhere to and work towards a common national mission. Furthermore, within a given region in India exhibiting linguistic homogeneity, the still-prevalent caste system in India has made it difficult for such regions or states to have even a common state mission, let alone a national one. In

India, the caste system has made it difficult for a member of, say, the Brahmin caste to identify with the millions of people comprising the so-called “lower” castes, and vice versa. The form of caste system that exists in India does not, by and large, exist in the USA and Western Europe.

Besides the linguistic homogeneity, there exists in the West religious homogeneity. The West is by and large Christian. Though there is diversity in the forms of Christianity practiced in the West, there is a strong common denominator in the form of devotion to the teachings of Christ.

Besides language and religion, Western Europe and America share common “racial” and cultural identities which has made it possible for them to identify with each other despite linguistic differences. Despite the official sanctions against all forms of racism, it remains a fact that “whites”, by and large, still marry “whites”, and “blacks” marry “blacks”. Despite the significant proportion of people of African descent in the U.S. and Europe, the countries of the West are still overwhelmingly “white”. Thus, despite the ethnic diversity that is found in the West, the countries of the West may still be regarded as much more homogenous than heterogenous, whereas India, in almost all respects, is more heterogenous than homogenous.

Nehru must have anticipated the problem of a creating a solid Indian identity out of India’s multifarious cultures. But the solutions employed by him were flawed. His approach, and that of his daughter Indira, was more that of a “benevolent dictator”, than that of a democratic leader of, by and for the people. He and his followers thought they could make India an advanced and prosperous society by centrally planning India’s economy. It is a fact that there is a direct correlation between economic and educational progress. But the result of Nehruvian central planning was a bottling up of Indian economy, which in turn stifled Indian higher education.

6. The Effects of Ethnocentrism

With exceptions such as the I.I.T’s, almost all of current higher education in India is derived, for reasons obvious, from the British educational system. The seeds of the modern Indian educational system were sown largely by Thomas Babington Macaulay,

popularly known as Lord Macaulay. In his famous *Minute on Indian Education*¹⁰, Macaulay writes:

It will be hardly be disputed, I suppose, that the department of literature in which the eastern writers stand highest is poetry. And I certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded, and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England.

Such extreme forms of ethnocentrism did little else for India except gave rise to the so-called “Macaulay’s Children,” people who are Indian in origin but Western in taste and demeanour. Furthermore, it injected in the collective Indian subconsciousness an inferiority complex which in turn resulted in *imitation* rather than *emulation* of the Western civilization. Indeed, the various “Institutes” of educational excellence in India churn out students who are adept at imitating Western ideas, especially scientific ideas, but who hardly create new ideas on their own. Macaulay’s grandest legacy was to infuse the Indian subconsciousness with an inferiority complex and an insecure self identity to the extent that the Indians have been unable to effectively solve their own problems without relying on the West. This is precisely what Gandhi feared, and hence his emphasis on self-reliance which goes largely unheeded in India, but which is largely practiced in, say, the U.S. As far as Indian higher education and its benefits to India are concerned, Indians would have served themselves the better by heeding the following words of Gandhi¹¹:

“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”

The fact that a high degree of cultural homogeneity can bolster economic and educational progress does not imply that extreme forms of homogeneity are desirable. For example, German higher education was perhaps the best in the world in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries. But the efforts of the Nazis to enforce into being a nation of “pure” racial homogeneity resulted in an implosion of Germany to the point where it lost its lead on higher education, especially scientific higher education.

7. The Culture of Reason versus the Culture of Intuition and Faith

The invasions of India which began circa 500 A.D. together with an entrenched caste system resulted in an introversion and passivity in Hindu society at large to the point where creativity suffered. Indeed, Hindu society had become stagnant and passive to the extent that by the late 1600’s, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, an extremely orthodox Muslim, was ruling India. Around the same time, Sir Isaac Newton was codifying the first laws of physics and calculus. More important, with the advent of the eighteenth century began in Europe, particularly in France and Great Britain, the so-called Age of Reason or the Age of Enlightenment. Reason began to be seen as a cure for or a way to a cure for many of society’s ills and also as a necessary ingredient for bolstering technological progress and prowess. What resulted was an unprecedented absorption of reason and rationalism into the European mass consciousness. Reason and rationalism must have rubbed off on leading American intellectuals such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. In any case, because America and Europe shared a common ethnic heritage and also—to some extent—a common religious heritage, it was not hard to import the technological and industrial progress that gripped Europe subsequent to Age of Reason. Moreover, as noted in Section 3, American academics were getting trained in Europe, particularly in Germany. The result of all of the above factors was the infusion of logical thinking into the American as well as European mass consciousnesses to the extent greater than anywhere in the world. Consequently, it is not surprising that American and Western Europe are among the scientifically most advanced countries.

Reason and rationalism never took hold of the Indian mass consciousness, not nearly to the extent they did in Europe and America. Part of the reason has been a uniquely Indian emphasis on intuition far greater than that on reason. While intuition is necessary for educational, technological, and scientific progress, it alone never suffices. But this fact has never dawned on the Indian mass consciousness. Perhaps the greatest Indian mathematician to have been, Srinivasa Ramanujan, did *all* of his early work in mathematics based on intuitive principles. He was almost entirely unaware of the means—namely, the deductive and formal method of mathematical “proof”—which

would have allowed him to check if his theorems were right or wrong. It was only when he came in touch with the English mathematician G. H. Hardy that he learned formal mathematics. It is not clear why the Indians prefer intuition over reason. It may be because in Indian culture there is a centuries-old tradition of never questioning one's superiors—especially parents and teachers. Reason and rationalism thrive on the questions “How?” and “Why?”. But such questions are discouraged by traditional Indian parents and teachers who prefer that Indian children and pupils *intuit* knowledge rather than deduce it. One example of this is the multiplication tables that children are expected to memorize. While a pupil is expected to memorize that $9 \times 6 = 54$, he/she is expected to intuit the fact that $9 \times 6 = 54$ because adding 9 to itself 6 times gives 54, or that adding 6 to itself 9 times yields 54. Yet another example is music education. In Western music education, the *vibrato* is encouraged and taught through breathing exercises and correct singing posture. In the Indian film industry, the top playback singers possess the prized vibrato. Indeed, the industry insists on it. Yet, it is generally not taught by Indian music teachers. Indeed, in order to be successful at singing, an aspiring singer is supposed to *intuit* the vibrato through correct breathing which is never taught.

Of course, the above is not to say that rationalism is a panacea. The following note of caution sounded by Gandhi¹² comes to mind:

“Rationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence. Attribution of omnipotence to reason is as bad a piece of idolatry as is worship of stock and stone believing it to be God. I plead not for the suppression of reason, but for a due recognition of that in us which sanctifies reason.”

8. Higher education in a globalized world: An Optimistic Note

Since the economic reforms of 1991, the Indian economy has been doing very well. There are signs that the “brain drain” may be slowing down, though this cannot be confirmed without hard data. As the moneyed class in India grows, there is greater chance of involvement by the private sector in not only providing world-class education, but also in creating conditions for carrying out world-class research. The media of the Internet, the TV, films, and music are fast creating a “global culture” among today’s Indian youth. In the future, they will demand excellence in *all* aspects of higher education, and not merely

in imparting of knowledge. Consequently, in the future, it should become possible to obtain a world-class higher education anywhere in the world including India. It was more than a century ago that Rudyard Kipling wrote his *Ballad of East and West* in which he famously proclaimed that “*the twain shall never meet.*” Indeed, he should be turning in his grave now that, given the era of globalization has ushered in and is here to stay, it looks more and more possible that *the twain shall meet*, if they already haven’t done so.

Finally, this paper may give some the impression that India has more to learn from the West than it can teach the West. They would do well to recall the following words of the great Max Muller¹³:

If I were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow—in some parts a very paradise on earth—I should point to India. If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life—again I should point to India.”

Muller’s quote may be exaggerated, but its spirit is right.

Notes

1. From *Speeches by Lord Macaulay with his Minute on Indian Education*, pp. 304-305.
2. From *Speeches by Lord Macaulay with his Minute on Indian Education*, pp. 311-312.
3. From *Speeches by Lord Macaulay with his Minute on Indian Education*, pp. 316.
4. From Arthur M. Cohen's *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, pp 50.
5. From Arthur M. Cohen's *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, pp 71-72.
6. From Arthur M. Cohen's *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, pp 113-114.
7. From Judith Brown's *Nehru: A Political Life*, pp.192.
8. From Judith Brown's *Nehru: A Political Life*, pp.239.
9. From the *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, pp. 277-278, ed. Ronald Duncan.
10. From *Speeches by Lord Macaulay with his Minute on Indian Education*, pp. 349
11. From the *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, pp 172, ed. Ronald Duncan.
12. From the *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, pp 275, ed. Ronald Duncan.
13. From Max Muller's *India: What can it teach us?*, pp 5.

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