

Book Review

Amar Nath Mishra

D. V. Kumar (Ed.), *The Idea of a University: Possibilities and Contestations*. Routledge: Indian Subcontinent Edition, 2022, pp. 200, Price: ₹995, ISBN: 9781 0323 327 65 (Hardback).

University education plays a vital role in the multidimensional development of any country, be it in economic, social, or political terms. The book *The Idea of a University: Possibilities and Contestations* interrogates the very idea of a university and envisions it as a place of democratic possibilities and contestations—not merely as a centre of information dissemination. Universities are spaces where dissenting views should be advanced and allowed to contest. Universities are expected to critique and question prevalent practices, views, and institutions of society. However, in the era of excessive privatisation and politicisation, university spaces are being aggressively diluted in their function and capabilities. The present book is the intellectual attempt by eminent scholars in the country to revisit and revive the idea of a university in the sociopolitical context of India.

The book broadly discusses the ideological resilience of universities in the face of continuous commoditisation, homogenisation, and hegemonisation due to uncontrolled intervention of market forces. The book comprises 11 essays on various issues prevalent in university education related to inclusivity, diversity, gender sensitivity, and instrumentalisation of knowledge production. The book critically analyses the role of a university in curating the minds of young students as critical and social beings—not merely as accumulators of information. The chapters reflect on diversity of views, engaged tolerance, critical thinking, and engaging students in sociopolitical discourses in the country with full academic freedom.

It is argued in the book that the university is a site where the creative and critical exploration of ideas is expected to take place. Romila Thapar, author of the first chapter emphasises on the importance of critical inquiry which is lacking today in Indian universities. Thapar describes the

Author: Amar Nath Mishra, National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi
Email: amarnath@niepa.ac.in

increasing interference of financiers and other pressures on academic matters of universities. Quoting Newman's idea of a university, she highlights the role of Indian universities as a stalwart of democratic values where the critical interrogation of ideas and the creation of knowledge and belief should take place.

Prabhat Patnaik unveils the political aspirations behind educational reforms under different kinds of regimes—from dirigiste to neoliberal. Patnaik further argues that finance-capital-backed “educational reforms” are continuously reducing the university system to lifeless, degree-selling shops which is detrimental to the very idea of a university. Avijit Pathak convincingly critiques instrumentalisation of university education, building a strong case against this tendency. He criticises the water-tight compartmentalisation of knowledge which is taking place through a rigid, hierarchical, fragmented, and monastic framework. He also interrogates the Humboldtian idea of a university by emphasising on the importance of symmetry between teaching and research, which is seemingly lacking in the Indian context. Pathak argues that universities must go beyond the ivory tower approach—theoretical, intellectual exercises done for the sake of crafting beautiful ideas—and move towards critical and reformative discourses which transform the lives of individuals in their own reality by demolishing the dichotomies between theory and practice, knowing and doing, and intellect and wisdom (pp. 43–46).

Binod Kumar Agrawala places the idea of a university in a historical context and highlights the changing character of universities over the course of time. The author emphasises that universities cannot isolate themselves from sociopolitical changes. Balancing conflicts and contradictions through academic negotiation to pursue critical and creative engagement with ideas is the very essence of a university. The editor of the book, D. V. Kumar highlights three unnoticed normative challenges before a university which compromise its fundamental character: shrinking critical spaces, increasing commodification of higher education, and striking a balance between the so-called dichotomy of inclusion and quality. Kumar argues that the future of universities depends on how decisively they overcome these challenges.

Ayesha Kidwai analyses the debate regarding the genesis of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The author compares the unique idea of JNU based on Nehruvian principles such as liberty, equality, and secularism to the centrality of UGC and its meaning in India's diverse higher education ecosystem. The author argues that increasing technological intervention in higher education is pushing universities towards a technocracy where

the market and technology are becoming intellectual vehicles of universities. Maitrayee Chaudhuri emphasises the role of social sciences in developing critical consciousness among learners. She adds that education is not merely meant to mould learners into instruments of production with certain specialised skills.

K. Srinivasulu traces the historical rise of Osmania University where he explains how the university stood against the western notion that higher education could not be imparted with quality in a vernacular language. However, like many other universities Osmania University is also losing its glory in the face of neocolonial phenomena such as privatisation, commodification, and instrumentalisation. The author argues that the social sciences are the biggest victims of such developments in higher education, and concrete steps should be taken to restore the glory of universities like Osmania University.

Sajal Nag deals at length with the idea of nationalism and discusses how universities can become safe spaces where sensitive topics such as nationalism can be interrogated, and multiple alternatives can be visited through discussion and critical investigation. Vijay Laxmi Barara emphasises on hidden intricacies related to gender sensitivity in the university space. She presents several cases of covert and overt discrimination against women in recruitment and promotion. She reveals that women face multifold discrimination even in so-called enlightened and intellectual spaces such as universities due to their “informal invisibility” (p. 166). Barara’s idea of a university demands equality in academic affairs by envisioning a degendered university where opportunities and responsibilities are the function of merit and capability, and not merely awarded because of informal visibility and personal equations.

The book argues that deep societal linkages are fundamental to the survival and sustenance of a university. In his essay, V. Bijukumar discusses that public universities are not merely institutions of knowledge production but also vanguards of society against the evil of inequality and injustice. According to the author, public universities are bound by a social contract to maintain their public nature through deployment of critical pedagogy in the face of pervasive state intervention, destruction of the public sphere, and marketisation. Bijukumar highlights that the old contract between public universities and the society is being replaced by an unholy nexus between the state and the market to destroy the public element of universities and convert them into factories of commodified knowledge.

Although the book has contributions by authors of different orientations, all the essays revolve around a single theme—the idea of a university. This idea of a university should not be misunderstood as conception of an ideal university but as a manifestation of the fundamentals of any university that aims to inculcate democratic, secular, and humanistic values in students through critical interrogation, open discussion, and a thorough investigation of diverse views, beliefs, and notions prevalent in society. The book also comprises related essays which were earlier published in different journals and books.

In this volume, authors also point out policy failures and demand immediate interventions to address the normative challenges of university education from the government. A close reading tells us that this book reinvigorates the idea of a university from the perspectives of Newman, Gadamar, Habermas, and Humboldt in the Indian context. This is indispensable for Indian universities should they wish to refrain from becoming the Achilles heel of higher education.

Overall, the book generates a thought-provoking and critical discourse regarding the structure, nature, character, and mandate of universities in India. With insightful contributions from prominent scholars and academicians in India, this book is very useful for researchers, policy makers, sociologists, political scientists, administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders of higher education.