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Around Town

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Who is the Indian university really for? Delhi scholars critique NEP's gaps

Debaditya Bhattacharya's book launch in Delhi sparked a timely discussion on the state of higher education in India. Scholars Zoya Hasan, Simona Sawhney, and Tanika Sarkar were part of the panel.

Sakshi Mehra

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Debaditya Bhattacharya, Simona Sawhney, Zoya Hasan, Tanika Sarkar and Simona Sawhney at the book launch, The Indian University: A Critical History | Sakshi Mehra, ThePrint

New Delhi: At a time when sweeping reforms are transforming India's education system, *The Indian University: A Critical History* by Debaditya

Bhattacharya asks a pressing question: Who is the university really for? It cuts through official promises to reveal a system marked by deep inequality, political influence, and a growing disconnect from its public purpose.

Published by Orient BlackSwan, the book's launch at Jawahar Bhawan in Delhi sparked a timely and engaging discussion on the state of higher education in India. Scholars Zoya Hasan, Simona Sawhney, and Tanika Sarkar reflected on how the book reveals the growing influence of ideology, market forces, and historical amnesia in transforming the Indian university—steering it away from its democratic and emancipatory purpose.

For Bhattacharya, the trigger for writing the book was the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—a milestone in global education discourse that also exposed India's unresolved contradictions.

"I wanted to return to a self-critique of the Indian university—not a liberal longing for elite institutions or nostalgic visions of the university," Bhattacharya said. "I wanted us to begin from an acute, self-critical awareness of what I call the fraught publicness of the Indian university, asking: what gives it both its Indian-ness and universitarian character?

The author added that he wasn't interested in elaborate fantasies of Nalanda or Takshashila. "I show through historical archiving, they can't truly be called university ideas at all," he said.

Past and present myths

Bhattacharya's book takes readers through a sweeping journey—from ancient Indian centres of learning to the colonial institutions and the modern-day public university. Through it all, he examines how education in India has always been entangled in questions of power, myth, and social inequality.

Tanika Sarkar praised the dual critique for dismantling two enduring myths in the book: first, the idealisation of India's ancient universities as inherently

splendid and inevitable; and second, the belief that those models should guide present-day institutions.

"He (Bhatta) challenges both assumptions with two marvelous bits of myth-busting," Sarkar said. She highlighted how the author reveals the limitations of ancient centres of learning and exposes how statistical data is often manipulated to falsely project progress in Dalit and women's empowerment.

Sarkar traced the growing influence of the RSS, which has shaped the NEP with its ideological lens.

"RSS developed elaborate plans and pedagogical methods with utmost care. NEP is partly, if not substantially, shaped by its perspective," she warned, citing curricula infused with Hindutva worldviews, such as viewing the human body through an Ayurvedic lens.

This intertwining of ideology and education reflects a larger, more concerning pattern. "Religious nationalism today serves a dual function: It binds neoliberal privatisation of higher education with an overriding ethnocentric relevance." This marriage of market logic and ideological control, Sarkar argued, is reshaping education into something both politically and economically rigid.

Who is the university really for

Sawhney highlighted the issue of inclusivity—or rather, the lack of it. Indian higher education, she said, is fraught with tension between what it promises and what it delivers, especially when it comes to caste, religion, and real equity.

She argued that "merit" is still treated as something pure and untouched, protected from any efforts to redistribute power or privilege. "All these turns to inclusivity never managed to erode the idea that something pure, something detached from worldly conditions–namely, merit–was always in danger of being compromised."

She mentioned the Kothari Commission (1964–1966), which is a central focus of Bhattacharya's analysis. While the Commission acknowledged social inequalities, it fell short of offering serious remedies.

Sawhney said that while the Commission called for the eventual abolition of tuition fees at all levels, it ultimately cited limited resources to justify prioritising free schooling over free higher education. In effect, it supported the principle but settled for free tuition only at the school level.

Even more troubling was how the Kothari Commission report framed the idea of excellence. "We must recognise that the pursuit of excellence requires a discriminatory approach. Equal resources to all, irrespective of quality and potential, merely promotes mediocrity," Sawhney read the lines of the report. "A democracy cannot flourish unless it has a highly trained and motivated educated class."

She then recalled BR Ambedkar's 1947 speech to the Maratha Mandir, where he stressed that true transformation for backward communities could only come through access to elite, higher education. "The Brahmin Community is able to maintain itself against all odds, against all oppositions, it is due to the fact that strategic posts are held by Brahmins. That being my view, I must say that Maratha Mandir would not be serving the community if it spent its energy on the easier tasks of spreading primary education or secondary education. The Governments of many Provinces in India have been planning for the spread of Primary education and many people in India are feeling a sense of satisfaction and even gratitude. I confess that this move for the spread of Primary education leaves me cold."

Fragmentation and interference

Debaditya Bhattacharya's book is sharply critical of the NEP's approach to reform, which the author sees as fragmentary. While the policy calls for increased public investment and doubling the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), it

paradoxically proposes reducing the number of institutions, revealing a deeper inconsistency.

"The policy says that higher education should train us for infinite jobs in the future. Basically, it goes out and legitimizes the gig economy and says that higher education must actually try and cue us into the gig economy, into a job-loss economy. And the fancy name it gives to this training is 'multidisciplinarity'," Bhattacharya said. Multidisciplinary education is really a euphemism for multiskilling a workforce headed toward recession, according to the author.

While Hassan agreed with Bhattacharya's critique of NEP 2020 and rising ideological control, she also defended the accomplishments of India's public universities.

"None of the South Asian countries have really succeeded in establishing this structure of higher education, the structure of public universities. Today's campuses are far more heterogeneous and inclusive than they were a few decades ago," Hasan noted, drawing on her four decades of teaching at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

She acknowledged the crisis is real but argued it doesn't arise from a flawed model itself, rather from "persistent political interference, chronic underfunding, and the systematic erosion of institutional autonomy."

Since 2014—and even more so after 2019—Hasan said political interference within universities has only grown. As public institutions falter, private ones now dominate nearly 60 per cent of higher education, focusing heavily on technical courses while sidelining humanities and social sciences.

Hasan rejected the idea that India has too many higher education institutions. "The basic challenge of higher education in India is that we simply do not have enough quantity and quality," she said.

For her, bridging the GER gap with Europe or the US will require a significant expansion of public university capacity—not just in numbers, but in commitment to inclusive, high-quality education.

(Edited by Ratan Priya)