

Delhi University's Undergraduate Programme

Notes from the Archives

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This article draws on archival material from the records of the University of Delhi to recount the last major change in its undergraduate programme in 1943 when the present three year BA course was introduced replacing the two year intermediate followed by a two year BA. That change took almost two decades of consultations and debate before they were accepted and implemented and provide an insightful comparison to the current proposals for changing the University's undergraduate programme.

Seventy years ago, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University and former Chief of the Federal Court, Maurice Gwyer, pushed through a set of reforms that were later emulated by higher educational institutions across much of India. Following almost two decades of discussion, Delhi University's two-year intermediate degree followed by a two-year Bachelors degree (Pass or Honours, in Arts or Sciences) was duly replaced by a three-year Bachelors degree (Pass or Honours, in Arts or Sciences) in 1943. In the wake of recent changes and ongoing debates on University of Delhi's latest curricular reforms, it is worthwhile revisiting the contours of this debate from the past.

A Brief History

Shortly after the decision to move the capital of the British Empire from Calcutta to a new Delhi had been taken, the decision to upgrade the existing facilities for higher education began to be contemplated. In December 1919, the Chief Commissioner of Delhi invited the representatives of the three colleges at Delhi - St Stephen's, Hindu, and Ramjas - along with officials from the education department to a conference to discuss the lines along which a university might be established.¹

It was unanimously decided that a unitary teaching university would be established in Delhi and, that colleges would be responsible for teaching only until the intermediate stage; teaching beyond this stage would be transferred to the new university. Less than two years later, at a meeting of college representatives in June 1921, it was resolved that Delhi should have an independent examining university, with inter-collegiate lectures and university lectures on special subjects. The college representatives also resolved that at least two-

thirds of the representatives in the governing bodies of the University should be from the colleges, that the separation of intermediate classes from the BA / BSc classes could only be effected after such a separation had been effected in neighbouring universities, and after it was deemed financially feasible.

Five years later, a report commissioned by the Government of India noted that the excessive representation of college representatives in the universities' Academic and Executive Councils had impeded the development of a "unitary" institution, one of the founding purposes of the college, as enunciated in the Delhi University Act of 1922. It is worth quoting from this report at length:

It will be observed ... from the history of the negotiations that preceded the foundation of the University that although the colleges made a representation to the Government that a unitary, teaching and residential university should be started in Delhi, they showed very little enthusiasm for the scheme when they realized the precise implications of their demand. It is clear that they never regarded the separation of the intermediate from the BA classes as anything more than a remote possibility. Their demand was really for an examining university, with inter-collegiate lectures as a general rule and university teaching in special subjects. The proposals of the Government, as embodied in the Act, however, involve the gradual destruction of the colleges in their present form and the complete subordination of the newly constituted colleges to the university. It is obvious that an executive body on which the colleges were in a large majority was hardly the most appropriate agency for the carrying out of a policy which was not quite acceptable to them ... the point we observe emphasizes the futility of formulating any proposals which are likely to be opposed strenuously by the colleges, and the importance of securing their cooperation in carrying out any scheme for the future development of the University.²

Furthermore the report pointed out that according to section 7(5) of the Delhi University Act of 1922, it was not lawful for the University or any college to maintain intermediate classes after the expiration of five years since the passing of the Act, without the sanction of the Governor-General in Council. In conclusion, the authors of this report compared existing teaching practices at the universities of Dacca, Allahabad, Lucknow, Agra, Andhra and Madras Presidency and surmised that the separation of intermediate classes from degree classes was not so easy. The standard of secondary education had to be raised, for instance.

The report recommended that Delhi's colleges continue with intermediate teaching until an amendment of the Delhi University Act was effected. The foregoing discussion should have made clear the differences in objective between college representatives on the one hand,

and the Government of India which sought to look at educational matters from the perspective of the university. Also, the opinion of college representatives mattered, and unanimity of opinion on such weighty matters, was a cherished ideal.

Through the mid-1930s, college teachers and university authorities collaborated in “cooperative teaching”; a method that allowed for the centralisation of scarce resources. Thus, even colleges with “no provision for lecture work in a department of study for the BA course or the MA” could register students who would then be entitled to attend University lectures “organised on the cooperative basis and receive tutorial assistance from their own college”.³ Although this system did not work so smoothly in the late 1930s, it was revived during the years of the second world war. Thus, for example, K C Nag of St Stephen’s College, B N Ganguly of Hindu College, and V K R V Rao at the University, were all involved in cooperative teaching in Economics.⁴

In the meantime discussions for a transition to a three-year degree programme had not abated. In March 1936 the Academic Council of Delhi University decided to now accept the principle of a three-year BA and BSc course (Pass and Honours) irrespective of its adoption by neighbouring universities.⁵ Such a move would be essential to facilitate the university’s development into a “federal” university that would also give the colleges a certain degree of autonomy.⁶ What remained to be negotiated were the stage of admission to the university and the length of the different courses.

Gwyer and Delhi University

First appointed Vice-Chancellor for a two-year term in 1938, Maurice Gwyer went on to be unanimously recommended and reappointed by the Executive Council for two-year terms another five times; he was DU’s Vice-Chancellor from 1938-50. His contributions included introducing written contracts between colleges and teachers, fixing the minimum pay and hours of teaching for college teachers, encouraging the formation of the Delhi University Teachers Association (DUTA), supervising building activity in the new university site near the northern ridge, raising funds for new Professorial chairs at the university, soliciting contributions from the Delhi *rais* (elite), and further afield, such as the majestic bookshelves for the university’s burgeoning library from his alma mater, All Souls College, Oxford University. That Gwyer’s tenure was significant for the university’s future trajectory may be evinced from this little detail: one of the oldest residence halls for students at the university continues to be named after him, “Gwyer Hall”.

Early on in this leg of his multi-faceted and rich administrative career, Gwyer declared the inauguration of the three-year degree course to be a top priority.⁷ Accordingly, committees were appointed to suggest the steps required to amend the existing statutes, ordinances and regulations of the university. The 1940 interim report of the three-year degree course committee dwelt on the new conditions of admission to the degree course in the university,

interim arrangements for a temporary preparatory course to tide over the abolition of the two-year intermediate course, and general outlines for a three-year pass and honours course, both in the arts and sciences. The report included comparisons of the courses of study then being pursued in two-year degree courses in as many as 15 universities, from Annamalai University to Patna University. The report also included minutes of dissent or alternative proposals in the form of various appendices. Thus, for instance, we hear from Azhar Ali on the futility of making the study of modern Indian languages compulsory for just one year.⁸

The thoroughness, in evidence at this stage, of the process continued to be a mark of the deliberations in subsequent years. Ordinances were issued in 1942 to enable colleges to conduct preparatory classes that would help students to qualify for the new three-year degree course. Through 1942 committees prepared courses of study for the various proposed degree courses that were approved by the Academic and Executive Councils in April 1943. An additional set of qualifying examinations was held in October 1943 to enable students to join the new programme at the university.

It should be remembered that the total student population of Delhi University ranged between 2,600 and 3,400 in this time.⁹ Yet there seemed to have been no shortcuts taken towards passing this long-awaited set of reforms. V K R V Rao, the first editor of the Delhi University Magazine, and also one of the first professors to be appointed by the University, applauded the achievement:

It is a happy augury for the success of this pioneering attempt at educational reform that it is starting with the unanimous approval of the Court and the goodwill and support of all sections of the university and its constituent colleges.¹⁰

Gwyer highlighted the “courage” with which Delhi forged ahead and had “no doubt that our example will be followed by others at no very distant date”. He thought the reforms were a “landmark in the history of university education in India”, acknowledged the “divergence of opinion” that had existed and on which agreement was ultimately reached. He concluded with the hope that “this unanimity may continue and that the University of Delhi may ever be free from intrigue and faction, which have undermined and sometime ruined so many institutions in the past”.¹¹

Schooling and Standards

Even before Delhi University had graduated its first batch of students from the new three-year degree programmes, there were rumours that universities at Benaras and Agra were thinking of following suit. The long postponed reorganisation of secondary education at

Delhi commenced soon after, adding a year to the 10 year schooling period, hoping thereby to raise the calibre of students embarking on a university career. Already, by the mid 1940s, there were complaints that students were seeking university degrees for the wrong reasons, for status rather than

to cultivate clear thinking, try to see the truth without being carried away by slogans, dogmas, sentiments or prejudices... [to] keep an alert, open and receptive mind and at the same time retain your[one's] capacity for free and original thinking.¹²

These were years of enormous transformation, and not only in India. The strange and twisted contest between “liberal” and “authoritarian” states was at its height; invoking the youth movement, too, meant different things in different countries. The governing bodies of Delhi University at times seemed a microcosm of India as topics such as communal representation in university-wide elections, the importance of switching to the “vernacular” in the medium of instruction, and the meaning of autonomy for college teachers were continuously debated. Yet, there was unanimity of opinion on one thing – that the University of Delhi would be made worthy of the capital city of the British empire, and then of independent India.

On the crucial question of standards, there would be no compromise. This is why Gwyer made it a point to distinguish between the Honours course and the Pass course in his convocation address to Agra University in November 1945. He had heard a rumour that Agra was planning to introduce a three-year degree course with no distinction between the two courses. Gwyer opined:

It is inevitable that a single course designed both for students of higher intellectual quality and also for those of average attainments will tend towards a lower standard than if the two categories were kept distinct. Indeed, a course suited to the more brilliant men of their year would probably be beyond the capacity of the rest, with the result that the former will be deprived of opportunities of study to which the quality of their mental equipment would justly entitle them. Such at least is our experience at Delhi, and I hope that before the final decision is taken in this matter, the considerations to which I have drawn attention will be borne in mind.¹³

Epilogue

In method, form, spirit, and content, there is much to learn from this earlier spate of reforms in the university's history. The recent reforms being hastily forced down the throats

of an unwilling collegiate body -- semesterisation, the combining of a two year "Baccalaureate" with a four year "Honours" course, the banal listing of course offerings without adequate prior consultation and debate -- seem designed to bring down Delhi University's stature as India's leading public university, a dream that Gwyer did not live long enough to see fulfilled.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 8. Emphasis mine.

3. *Correspondence, Resolutions and Recommendations Relating to the proposed development of Delhi University as a Federal University* (1934-36), Office of the University of Delhi, p. 13.

4. University of Delhi, *21st Annual Report*, 1942-43; Vice Chancellor's Address to the Court, 6 December 1943 in *The Delhi University Magazine*. Edited by V. K. R. V. Rao. Vol. 1, No. 2. 1943.

5. *Correspondence, Resolutions and Recommendations Relating to the proposed development of Delhi University as a Federal University* (1934-36), Office of the University of Delhi, p. 37.

6. *Report of the Committee appointed by the Academic Council and the Executive Council to inspect the Recognised Colleges of the University*, Office of the University of Delhi, 1939.

7. See Address delivered by Mr Nalini Ranjan Sarker at the Convocation on 18 April 1942 in *The Delhi University Magazine*. Edited by V. K. R. V. Rao. Vol. 1, No. 1. 1942.

8. Interim report of the three year degree course committee, 1940.

9. University of Delhi, *17th Annual Report*, 1938-39 to 20th Annual Report 1940-41.

10. *The Delhi University Magazine*. Edited by V. K. R. V. Rao. Vol. 1, No. 1, 1942. p. 4. Emphasis mine.

11. Sir Maurice Gwyer, 'The Reorganization of the University' in *ibid*, p. 24. Emphasis mine.

12. Address delivered by Mr Nalini Ranjan Sarker at the Convocation on 18 April 1942 in *ibid*, pp. 54-55.

13. Maurice Gwyer, 'The Ideals of a University Education', Agra University Convocation Address, November 1945 in *The Delhi University Magazine*. Edited by S. Dutt. Vol. 3, No. 1, April 1946, p. 11.