Towards an Intellectual Community in India

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The basic thrust of Ramachandra Guha's article, 'The Ones Who Stayed Behind' (EPW, March 22, 2003) is that India, like US or even the UK can and should in course of time emerge as an autonomous centre of thought and discourse. This formulation should be seen in a context which is somewhat wider than what Guha has presented. Something about the state of Indian publishing and its interaction with the emergence and consolidation of an intellectual community in India would in my opinion strengthen the thrust of the argument.

Till about a century ago, the centre of thought and discourse in the English-speaking world was the UK. By the beginning of the last century, the centre had started moving to the US. At the end of second world war, there was no doubt that the US had become its unquestioned leader. The decision to locate the United Nations in New York was an implied recognition of the fact that the US had emerged as a world power and also graduated to become the leading intellectual centre of the world. The USSR was a formidable power no doubt and there was confrontation between these two countries for another few decades. But the US had one unmistakable advantage.

By then, English had emerged as the most important language in the world. However powerful USSR might have been and however productive that country was in a variety of ways, its international acceptance did not measure up to a position of undoubted leadership. Some other factors too were at work but, for obvious reasons, they cannot be gone into here.

A factor which reinforced the American position of leadership was that, even before second world war, there was a systematic attempt on her part to attract talent from all over the world. If there is one country in history which has built herself up on the basis of the identification and pursuit of talent, it has been the US. No wonder the American system of higher education and research had emerged as superior to what obtained in other countries. The invention of the atom bomb was an extraordinary feat of scientific research. Its use over Japan in 1945 might have been a political decision but of this there can be no doubt that both the invention and manufacture of the bomb had been done only in that country.

All these factors combined together to put the US in the forefront. It is not only in the field of Indian studies that the US is ahead of the rest of the world; it is ahead of everybody else in the different branches of regional studies. Guha has referred to the field of south Asian history. But the same can be said in respect of scores of several other fields of enquiry. No more need be said about this issue for it is obvious that, for almost half a century now, the US has been leading the world in accumulating knowledge and producing research in every possible area of knowledge.

Two corollaries of what has been said above need to be spelt out. One, though the UK was at one time the leading country in the field of knowledge in this era of globalisation, it continues to be one of the leading players even now. Several other countries of the world are also beginning to emerge as regional centres. Secondly, it has so happened that, largely because of our population and partly because of the study and dissemination of English for about two centuries in whatever bumbling way it might have been done, India too has emerged as a significant regional power.

In terms of her publishing strength, the UK is miles ahead of India but that is because of the historical legacy of what had obtained in that country before the second world war. Today India is not only the third most important country as far as the publication of books in English is concerned, in a number of other ways India is doing well. This is despite all the negative things that are happening and come in the way of India emerging as a bigger regional power. The weakness of the Indian university system and the relative lack of quality in scientific research are strong negative factors. But it is possible to overcome these problems provided more people think along the lines suggested below.

Some three or four years ago, I published a piece on Science Journals in India. Amongst other things, I had made the point that, despite all the negative factors at work, it is possible to plan the publication of science journals in such a way that about 50 of them are straightaway accepted as internationally comparable. In about a year's time, this number can be taken to 100 or so. In about five years, this number can be doubled, if not trebled. What is required is that a group of people connected with policy-making come together and adopt a plan of action.

This plan of action should survey the entire range of scientific research and identify those areas where Indian researchers are doing well and are currently published in foreign journals. Their numbers might have come down of late but with a little effort the situation can be reversed. During the last 10-15 years, China has forged ahead rapidly. That is because some master minds are at work in that country and there is a plan of action. What we lack is such a plan.

While this proposal was by and large ignored, I tried to interest one of the key policy-makers to see some merit in this approach. The response was not positive. Most people seem to think that India emerging as a regional centre of original research is not a feasible proposition. I do not agree with that perception. So far at any rate they have had the last word.
articles published must be internationally comparable. Beginning with a couple of them, that publishing house now has more than a dozen such journals as a part of its commercial operation. In this case, the state did not have to play a role. In the case of science journals, the situation is different. In any case, one bit of history needs to be recalled.

When the ICSSR was first established and the late J P Naik was its secretary, I talked to him at some length about the importance of scholarly journals and wrote a detailed letter to the chairman of the ICSSR putting forward this proposal. I argued that at that time something like 200 journals dealing with the social sciences were being published in India. Not more than 10-15 of them had the potential to be described as internationally comparable. When I wrote this letter, this publishing house was not anywhere on the horizon. Whatever my guess, it turned out to be correct later on. The number of journals under publication through the agency of this publishing house is approximately what I had identified as belonging to this brand.

I went even further and proposed that the ICSSR should help some of the academicians to subscribe to these journals. A system needs to be evolved whereby certain approved journals (according to a system to be defined for this purpose) are patronised in this unconventional manner. What I proposed was that one-half of the subscription should be paid by the teacher and the other half by the ICSSR. This would have increased the number of subscribers and improved their financial viability. But owing to all kinds of reasons into which it is not possible to go here, this proposal was not accepted. In my view, some variation of the proposal can still be reconsidered.

Owing to the dilution of standards at the university level, the number of potential subscribers is not as large as it could have been. Therefore some kind of help has to be administered from outside. In terms of expenditure, it would not come to much. Perhaps not more than a few lakh rupees. But it would be an enormous help to these journals and encourage others to improve their own quality as well as circulation. The objective should be both to strengthen the well-run journals and weaken the poorly-run ones; a form of intellectual family planning. If this appeals to some people, the proposal can be worked out in greater detail.

More precisely, what we need is a larger number of journals in the social sciences than are published today. The fact of the matter is that Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) takes care of the overall situation. Nothing like this is to be found in any third world country. On my several visits to Pakistan, a number of people commented upon this fact with a sense of regret that they did not have anything comparable to the EPW. The explanation is simple. Both the number of writers and readers is much less in Pakistan than in India. Even in India, the number is not as high as it could be and the proposal made above is partly intended to increase this number.

It should be clarified at this stage that the proposal visualised is more ambitious than what has been hinted at so far. While India needs to publish a larger number of scholarly journals, EPW fulfils that role to some extent and does something else too. What is required now is a plan to (a) provide an impetus to the science journals according to a plan that might be worked out, (b) initiate a scheme of helping teachers to subscribe to some of the better journals and (c) more or less ensure that every important university discipline has at least one worthwhile scholarly journal.

Education: Need for a Weekly Publication

The situation is so fluid and the areas to be covered are so vast that no more can be said at this stage. Something of the kind however does require to be done. What has been presented above are some tentative thoughts in the matter.

My own interest is in the area of education. It is a pity that the quality of what is published is so poor that it is not worth mentioning. In my opinion, what we require is a weekly publication. Two-thirds of it might provide news and one-third serious analysis. In order to collect news, it would be necessary to have something like 15-20 correspondents with the focus on collection of news about education. Obviously, it would cost a lot of money during the first few years.

Soon after the end of the emergency and in the early days of the Janata regime, such a proposal was discussed between the late Seth Goenka of The Indian Express on the one hand and J P Naik and Radhakrishna of the Gandhi Peace Foundation on the other. They both asked Goenka to get in touch with the present writer and I had two long meetings with him. At that time, I used to work with the Association of Indian Universities. Asked if I was prepared to give up my job and join the Express, I agreed to do so provided he could begin with a weekly page in The Indian Express devoted to education and gradually expand it. The proposal remained still-born however, because meanwhile more urgent things (as he perceived them) claimed Goenka’s attention.

No one should forget that India has more than five million teachers at the school level and 0.04 million at the university and college level. It should not be too much to hope that something like 0.01 per cent of the schoolteachers can be persuaded to subscribe. The inadequate knowledge of English of teachers at the lower levels would certainly be a handicap but that would not be so at the higher secondary, college or university level.

The kind of quarterly journal which I ran in the early 1960s and the one which the UGC used to run till about two years ago appealed to a limited audience. The circulation in both cases remained limited. But much more news is being generated at the lower levels than is being projected. The numbers involved are very large and those involved in this endeavour even at the policy-making or executive level runs into several thousands. There is room therefore for a weekly provided it offers a judicious mix of news and analysis.

Such an enterprise however cannot be official. The UGC journal suffered a great deal because it could not be handled as a private enterprise. In this particular instance, without somebody in the private sector coming forward to undertake such an enterprise, things will not get started. Let it be however clearly understood that, once again, the state would have a role to play. Regardless of what that weekly says, the state would do well to help in some way.

To draw a parallel with EPW would be misleading. EPW started at a time when planning for prosperity was the talk of the day. The founder was a man of extraordinary talent and, equally important, had a sense of commitment. Even before it closed down in its original version, it had made a place for itself. Today it is doing exceedingly well and going from strength to strength.

In developed countries like US and/or UK, state help is not required. The general state of publishing takes care of it. But in our country, despite all those advances which English has made, the number of people who form part of the intellectual community is not that all that high.

I have chosen to expand the argument advanced by Guha. What he has said was perfectly in order and I have no difference of opinion with him. But what I see in front of me is a situation where things could be vastly better only if we had the right kind of thinking in the right places.