

# LOCATING INDIAN UNIVERSITIES IN KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES: A Critique

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**Abstract:** Knowledge societies characterize a defining feature of the present era. Veering away from their initial connotation of 'scientific temper and reasoning,' today, they assume a new meaning in which the basis of economy, polity, and social action is knowledge. In the post-capitalist, post-industrial societies, knowledge has become the foundation of industrial productivity and social wellbeing. The crux of knowledge production has been shifting from the traditional disciplinary contexts promoted by academic interests in the universities to its applications for better productivity and wellbeing. Nevertheless, productivity and usefulness are accorded an epistemological appeal in defining what counts as 'knowledge'. In this context, the present paper discusses the changes in knowledge production and dissemination processes in knowledge societies and their implications for universities in India.

**Keywords:** Change, Higher Education, India, Knowledge Production, Knowledge Societies, Research, University, Teaching.

## 1. Introduction

Knowledge for a long time has been considered a privilege and an exclusive domain of only a few in any society. Secrecy was the organizing principle of knowledge. Nevertheless, the

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privileged and powerful played a dominant role in defining what counts as knowledge.<sup>1</sup> But, modern societies differ considerably from the traditional societies in terms of the ways and methods through which knowledge is defined, produced, organised, and disseminated. On one hand, the role of science and technology in the social, political, and economic spheres have made knowledge an important aspect of social life,<sup>2</sup> on the other, information revolution has challenged the existing systems for the production and dissemination of knowledge by introducing much sophisticated technologies for the storage and retrieval of information.

During the 1990s, the idea of knowledge society was used in different forms to refer to the great optimism of 1960s that commonsensical viewpoints would be replaced by scientific reasoning.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Peter Drucker used the term knowledge society first in 1967 to refer to a society of organizations dominated by the knowledge of specialists. For Drucker, knowledge is different from skill. Knowledge is the ability to know and skill is the ability to do.<sup>4</sup> He claims that in the post-capitalist society, the basic economic resource is no longer capital, labour, or natural resources. Value will be created through productivity and innovation, and the basic capital and economic resource is, and will be knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>UNESCO, "Towards Knowledge Societies," 17, <<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141843>> (20 June 2018).

<sup>2</sup>N. Stehr, *The Fragility of Modern Societies: Knowledge and Risk in the Information Age*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001, 22, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/christuniversity-ebooks/reader.action?docID=334570>> (2 August 2018).

<sup>3</sup>Jussi Valimaa and David Haffman, "Knowledge Society Discourse and Higher Education," *Higher Education* 56, no. 3 (September 2008): 265-285.

<sup>4</sup>Sherwin Klein, "Drucker's Knowledge Society and Socratic Sōphrosynē," *Business & Professional Ethics Journal* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 51-71.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

post-capitalist and post-industrial society is a knowledge society for two major reasons. Firstly, the source of innovation is mainly planned research and development. Secondly, the root of economic and social wellbeing of the society in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment rates are in the field of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, modern society's interest to control the environment and human beings, using knowledge as power, led to the domination of the instrumental forms of knowledge over aesthetic, expressive, and communicative forms.<sup>7</sup> This late 20<sup>th</sup> century optimism about knowledge has been well captured by Drucker: "... knowledge had always been seen applying to 'being'. Almost overnight, it came to be applied to 'doing'. Knowledge has become a resource and a utility."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the use of knowledge as an instrument for economic productivity has become a central thesis of the present knowledge societies.

In the present society, worthiness of knowledge is weighed in terms of its commercial use and efficiency in the market. Moreover, because of the close link between knowledge and commerce, industrial forces and business houses began to play an active role in defining what counts as knowledge and the production of 'commercially useful knowledge'. Universities are no more the exclusive domains of knowledge production as a variety of other organizations generate knowledge of application/utility value. Visvanathan put the declining significance of university in this context succinctly: "the modern university along with the market has anchored the liberal imagination. Yet meditations on liberalism ignore the theoretical centrality of the university."<sup>9</sup> Industrial/business ideals are accorded an epistemological appeal in defining

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<sup>6</sup>Bell D, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

<sup>7</sup>Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

<sup>8</sup>Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, 17.

<sup>9</sup>S. Visvanathan, "Democracy, Plurality and Indian University," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 40 (Sep. 30 - Oct. 6, 2000): 3597-3606.

what counts as knowledge by making utility value the benchmark of 'true knowledge'.

These circumstances have necessitated universities to reflect upon their changing status and functions in knowledge societies. Two notable responses of universities to this changing circumstance are recorded: adaptation and transformation. In the case of adaptation, universities become quasi-market organizations attempting to be entrepreneurial in their approach to teaching and research.<sup>10</sup> In the case of transformation, universities would succumb themselves to the conditions and regulations of knowledge regimes of the State and Industry at the national and international levels<sup>11</sup> and become complete capitalist enterprises. These adaptive and transformative responses from universities have implications for their role in the production and dissemination of knowledge. For instance, as a response, the traditional mode of knowledge production (*mode 1*) has been replaced by a new mode of knowledge production (*mode 2*). In *Mode 1*, knowledge has been produced by specific communities for academic interests within the disciplinary contexts, whereas in *Mode 2*, trans-disciplinary knowledge is produced considering its application value. Knowledge produced in *Mode 2* is more reflexive and heterogeneous than in *Mode 1*. The *Mode 2* type of knowledge production is an outcome of the transformative response of university to become a capitalist enterprise capable of producing 'commercial knowledge'. Research aiming at increasing productivity, in terms of material and human resources, can be an example for the *Mode 2* type.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>B. K. Clark, and Rosa D. Bruno-Jofre, "Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organisational Pathways of Transformation," *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 2 (2000): 171-176.

<sup>11</sup>I. Bleiklie, and H. Byrkjeflot, "Changing Knowledge Regimes - Universities in a New Research Environment," *Higher Education* 44, no. 2-3 (2002): 1-14.

<sup>12</sup>M. Gibbons, et.al, *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London: Sage, 1994, *Journal of Dharma* 44, 2 (April-June 2019)

In the *Mode 2* knowledge production, there is an increasing link between university, government, and industry. This link is largely attributed to the instrumentality of knowledge - use of knowledge for economic productivity. The risk of commodification and the involvement of full-scale market in higher education has become a reality in *Mode 2* production of knowledge. It is more real in the case of countries lacking a university tradition.<sup>13</sup> Commodification of education requires education to be economically efficient, quantifiable for monitoring, predictable to the market, and controllable by the industry.<sup>14</sup>

In the above context, the present paper looks at three important roles that a university has to play in the present society, they are: production of new knowledge; teaching and dissemination of knowledge; and organizing open discussions on relevant issues for the benefit of society. In terms of the above roles of a university, the following objectives are formulated for the present paper, which are: to situate the academic and administrative practices of university in India in the context of knowledge societies; to trace the challenges modern university has to face in knowledge societies in the performance of the above mentioned roles and; to suggest ways to overcome those challenges. In pursuance of the above objectives, the following section looks at the very idea of university as a major stakeholder of knowledge, foundational values of university and the changes in them over time.

## 2. The Idea of University

In Latin, *uniuersitas* means an assembly of people. In the formal sense, it is thus a corporation, usually bringing together people having a common interest. It was a place

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<<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/christuniversity-books/read.er.action?docID=1024114>> (15 June 2018).

<sup>13</sup>UNESCO, "Towards Knowledge Societies," 87.

<sup>14</sup>C. Chaka, and M. C. Mashige, "Revisiting the Postmodern Condition of a Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* 14, no.1 (2016): 19-42.

where individuals gathered together to cultivate their disciplinary understandings with the goal of reproducing and enriching disciplinary knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the main goal of university, as a corporation - assemblage of likeminded people - during the medieval period was mostly the production of knowledgeable people who were capable of enriching and disseminating the concerned branch of knowledge or discipline.

Two nineteenth century men played pivotal roles in the development of the present idea of university. They are, Cardinal John Henry Newman and Wilhelm Von Humboldt.<sup>16</sup> Newman, during the 1850s, noted that the very name of university is inconsistent with any kind of restrictions. He opined that argumentation is the lifeblood of university whereas doctrinaire thought passed on from the past is hindering the pursuit of truth. Newman advocated reasoned scientific debates in universities.<sup>17</sup> According to Newman, university should be a centre of learning and teaching must be the primary role of it.<sup>18</sup> In his conceptualization, university is an established community of learners devoted to the pursuit of truth, as an end in itself. He saw the role of university as developing a broad range of intellectual powers that goes beyond mere knowledge of facts or skills required for a particular profession.<sup>19</sup> Newman slumped the notion of the

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<sup>15</sup>Carlos B. Bazan, "The Original Idea of the University," in *Rethinking the Future of the University*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey and Dominic Manganiello, New York: University of Ottawa Press, 1998.

<sup>16</sup>Bert van der Zwaan, "The Idea of a University," in *Higher Education in 2040: A Global Approach*, ed. Bert van der Zwaan, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017, 19-30.

<sup>17</sup>John Henry Newman, "The Idea of a University," *The Newman Reader*, 2001 <<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/>> (15 July 2018).

<sup>18</sup>Zwaan, "The Idea of a University," 21. Online.

<sup>19</sup>Tony Coady, "The Very Idea of a University," *The Australian Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (summer, 1996): 49-62.

instrumentality of knowledge and saw the role of university as promoting the pursuit of truth.

Humboldt is the pioneer of the idea of modern university. For him, modern university education is characterized by a strong linkage between teaching and research. He stated that the acquisition of new knowledge is the benchmark of the university system.<sup>20</sup> He emphasized the holistic combination of research and studies in university. Basing his model of education in two ideals of enlightenment, individual autonomy and citizenship, he proposed university to develop students as scientifically thinking autonomous world citizens. He believed that unconditional academic freedom and research informed teaching should be the crux of university. The modern research university is usually associated with the Humboldt model where the creation of new scientific knowledge is the benchmark.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of university has undergone many changes since the days of Newman and Humboldt. Today, new terminologies are used to refer to university according to its evolving nature and functions. The terms like *Entrepreneurial University* – university which capitalises on connections and networks for teaching, research and service<sup>22</sup> and *Enterprise University* – university which has a strategically centralized leadership, highly responsive to the external settings and strives to use corporate and business forms of governance<sup>23</sup> are the familiar ones. Although, such notions provide us with a basis for the present analysis, they cannot be applied

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<sup>20</sup>J. Ostling, *Humboldt and the Modern German University: An Intellectual History*, Sweden: Lund University Press, 2018.

<sup>21</sup>G. Withers, "Creating the New University," in *Disciplining Interdisciplinarity: Integration and Implementation Sciences for Researching Complex Real-World Problems*, ed. Gabriele Bammer, ANU Press, 2013.

<sup>22</sup>Clark and Bruno-Jofre, "Creating Entrepreneurial Universities," 171-176.

<sup>23</sup>S. Marginson and M. Considine, *The Enterprise University: Governance, and Re-invention in Australian Higher Education*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

universally for the reason that any given university is embedded within the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the society within which it is situated.

### 3. Idea of University in India

The idea of modern university is a colonial contribution to India. For instance, in his report on university education, Radhakrishnan wrote, "universities of modern India owe little to our ancient and medieval centres of learning but one must not forget the existence of such centres since early times." He also stated, "The universities as the makers of the future cannot persist in the old patterns, however valid they may have been in their own."<sup>24</sup> Thus, while indicating the colonial influence on the Indian university system, Radhakrishnan acknowledged the importance and equivalence of Indian knowledge traditions. He categorically accentuated the need to follow global trends in university education without giving way to parochialism. It is not to abnegate the existence of views countering this position. For instance, Chakravarty argued that the post-Galilean thought is a development of the West and therefore, even if India was not a colony of the British, considering the tremendous advance and relevance of science, our higher education would have been enveloped within the western framework of scientific enquiry<sup>25</sup> leading to the influence of the West and Europe in it.

Many universities in India have been established by the initiatives of the governments in the past and present. The first three modern universities were established by the British in 1857 at Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras

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<sup>24</sup>S. Radhakrishnan, et.al, *The Report of the University Education Commission, 1962, 6 & 7*, <<https://www.educationforallindia.com/1949%20Report%20of%20the%20University%20Education%20Commis-sion.pdf>> (June 17, 2018).

<sup>25</sup>Sukhamoy Chakravarty, "Inaugural Address," in *Higher Education, Social Change and National Development*, ed. J. N. Kaul, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1993, 25-33.



(Chennai).<sup>26</sup> It is undeniable that these universities are developed imitating the British universities. For instance, the introduction of Arts, Science, Philosophy and Literature of Europe in the Indian universities following the suggestions of Wood's Despatch of 1854, implementation of administrative system consisting of chancellor, vice-chancellor and senate, and the affiliation system in the Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras universities similar to the London University are the testimonies for the imitation of the West.<sup>27</sup> Our understanding of modern university was from the centre-periphery model in which the centre is the source of invention and the periphery is considered a colony for the diffusion of knowledge. Within this understanding, western knowledge represents the superior centre, which is followed by the Indian universities ignoring the regional voices and knowledge forms from the periphery. Visvanathan<sup>28</sup> claims that we have failed to create a cosmopolitan idea of university. For him, cosmopolitan idea of university is an idea of university where varieties of knowledges are woven together to create new interdisciplinarity and to celebrate diversity.

Echoing the above concern of Visvanathan about modern Indian universities, Beteille<sup>29</sup> claimed that the institutional foundations of modern university system in India is weak and anachronistic to the social reality outside due to the imitation of the West in establishing Indian universities. For him, modern universities in India are antithetical to many traditional practices though not completely insulated from them. For instance, caste as a social reality in India is antithetical to the ideal of equality promoted by and within

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<sup>26</sup>A. Beteille, "The Indian University: Academic Standards and the Pursuit of Equality," *Minerva* 19, no. 2 (June, 1981): 282-310.

<sup>27</sup>Radhakrishnan, *The Report of the University Education*, 15 and 17.

<sup>28</sup>S. Visvanathan, "An Invitation to a Thought Experiment: Quality, Diversity and the Epistemics of University," in *The future of Indian University*, ed. Raj Kumar. C, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, 35-53.

<sup>29</sup>Beteille, "The Indian University," 282-310.

university. But, the far reaching impact of caste is carried into the university system as university has to depend upon its immediate social environment for the supply of teachers and students.

There are some attributes required for an institution to be known as university in India: (i). plurality of expertise among the faculty members; (ii). heterogeneous student population; (iii). incorporation by a sovereign power/authority; (iv). teaching and research activity; and (v). the right to confer degrees. Though these attributes are not unique to university in India, the amount of emphasis on some of them over others vary across countries. For instance, emphasis on research has increased in the Indian universities with the recent interventions of University Grants Commission (UGC) implementing Academic Performance Indicators (API) in the recruitment and promotion of faculty members. But, disciplinary fragmentation, academic dishonesty, and conflict of interest in terms of divergence between one's private interests and professional academic interests are some of the major challenges<sup>30</sup> that university in India faces in the present knowledge societies.

Universities in India have grown enormously over the years. Often, their growth, in terms of quantity, could be attributed to social and political pressures.<sup>31</sup> At present, on the one hand, the industry-university collaboration becomes inevitable for research funding. On the other hand, university has to compromise its autonomy to the State and its knowledge regimes as a result of growing dependency upon them for accreditation and sustenance. The above mentioned scenario in knowledge societies has led to the complex nexus between university, market, and politics. For instance, the UNESCO reports that university has to depend on market-

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<sup>30</sup>Stephen Marks, "Challenges of Knowledge Creation for Indian universities," in *The future of Indian University*, ed. Raj Kumar. C, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, 192-221.

<sup>31</sup>A. Beteille, "Universities as Public Institutions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 31 (Jul. 30 - Aug. 5, 2005): 3377-3381.

style organisations for funding as public funding is inadequate to cater to the increasing student enrolment. It states that the economic services have become important in global market with education becoming a chief export service item.<sup>32</sup> In his attempt to understand the future of Indian universities, Julian found that the market driven legal regimes put forth by the State to externally regulate universities is a major constraint for the autonomy and growth of universities in India.<sup>33</sup>

#### **4. University as Knowledge Producer**

Over time, what counts as knowledge has changed. For instance, in the present knowledge societies, knowledge aimed at describing the world is largely replaced by another form of knowledge aimed at action and engagements with the world.<sup>34</sup> As Lyotard put it succinctly, in today's society, the distinction is not between knowledge and ignorance, but, as in the case of money, it is between 'payment knowledge'- knowledge in daily use for survival- and 'investment knowledge' – knowledge used as an investment to optimize performance in the long run.<sup>35</sup> This emphasis on the utility of knowledge in the present society has its implications on the role of university as a producer of knowledge.

University is not the sole producer of this knowledge of utility. Knowledge of utility is created outside the university also with a limited vision and purpose. For instance, multinational companies, such as Google, Microsoft, Infosys, Walmart, IBM, and Shell have their own skill training centres, research and development wings aimed at developing new products/services and to equip their employees with the skills

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<sup>32</sup>UNESCO, "Towards Knowledge Societies," 89.

<sup>33</sup>Francis A. Julian, "Future of Indian Universities: Need for a Liberalized Legal Regime," in *The future of Indian University*, ed. Raj Kumar. C, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, 131-166.

<sup>34</sup>Gibbons, et.al, *The New Production of Knowledge*, 27-30. Online.

<sup>35</sup>J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, New York: Manchester University Press, 1984, 6.

required for the production process. In addition, induction training is a common norm for the new recruits. This attempt by the companies to train their workforce is often attributed to the lack of training during the formal education. In fact, a common allegation of the private sector is that the higher education in India is not catering to skills required for employment and industrial needs. For instance, the founder of Infosys, Narayana Murthy is quoted as saying “Most Indian youngsters (about 80-85%) are not trained suitably for any job. Our education system which focuses on learning by rote is not good for becoming entrepreneurs.”<sup>36</sup> He suggested students to decide their field of interest and join a company in that field to learn about it to become an entrepreneur. The purpose of higher education is looked narrowly as a means to achieve employment. If so, such an ‘education’ with a limited purpose of employment can be imparted directly by the concerned companies without the help of a university.

Besides, in today’s society, what counts as knowledge takes many forms. Habermas distinguished among three knowledge forms emerging out of the respective knowledge constitutive interests. They are: (i). Instrumental knowledge coming from the interest in purposive action; (ii). Hermeneutic knowledge developing from one’s interest in interpretation and mutual understanding; and (iii). Self-critical knowledge arising from the interest to reveal structurally embedded viewpoints and undisclosed ideologies operating behind the scenes.<sup>37</sup> In the present knowledge society, emphasis on instrumental form of knowledge has supplanted the other two forms of knowledge interests. The forms of knowledge having operational and strategic character are weighed high, demanded by the

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<sup>36</sup>“Rote Learning is Bad for Budding Entrepreneurs,” *The Hindu*, 18 April 2018, <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/rote-learning-is-bad-for-budding-entrepreneurs-says-narayana-murthy/article23578378.ece>> (8 August 2018).

<sup>37</sup>Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, 301-317.

society<sup>38</sup> and are reflected in the curriculum and purpose of university education. It is also a reason for the decline of humanities and social sciences, as these disciplines are rooted in the latter two forms of knowledge interests mentioned by Habermas.

The role of university as a producer of new knowledge is relocating from its primary independent position to a secondary one of dependence to the industrial needs in knowledge societies. The development of 'knowledge for itself' for which the traditional university stood for has no relevance in the present knowledge societies. On the other hand, the contemporary university, for its sustenance, has to take up the production and dissemination of instrumental-purposive knowledge. For instance, half a century ago, it was unimaginable to find a university which did not support the study of philosophy in India. Today, given the shift in the configuration and dynamics of the subjects towards 'purposive and instrumental' forms of knowledge, many universities do not have a department for the study of philosophy.<sup>39</sup> A survey report of Indian Council of Philosophical Research shows that only around 19 per cent of universities (including IITs) have philosophy departments in them.<sup>40</sup> Arts and humanities are also considered soft disciplines, which do not attract bright students. Rather, 'professional courses' aiming at skill training and employment are preferred.

The domination of instrumental form of knowledge has epistemological implications in the role of university as a knowledge producer. Firstly, in this mode of knowledge

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<sup>38</sup>R. Barnett, "University Knowledge in an Age of Supercomplexity," *Higher Education* 40, no. 4 (December 2000): 409-422.

<sup>39</sup>R. Barnett, "Knowledge, Higher Education and Society: A Postmodern Problem," *Oxford Review of Education* 19, no. 1 (1993): 33-46.

<sup>40</sup>Suhim Dubey, *History, Development and Status of Philosophy in Indian Universities*, Survey Report of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2017, 32, <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bw5GqSyEIRCQRXpSV01aUFJ5SDg/view>> (June 15, 2018).

production, epistemological boundaries are set in advance by the market aiming at its use value or cashability. Secondly, there is imminent possibility of knowledge claims and innovations becoming private, leading to the competition between business entities to use and own knowledge production. Thus, knowledge becomes an asset at the hands of rich who can pay for it. Thirdly, due to heavy competition, there is a danger of the emergence of likely factory mode of knowledge production wherein the researchers/innovators compete with each other in terms of 'quantity of knowledge' produced such as the number of patents, publications, etc. In the factory mode, knowledge production becomes mechanical and limited to the needs of market. Today, most companies have patent claims or forbidden their research and development cells from publishing innovations. This has systemic implications for the idea of university rooted in the pursuit of truth for the benefit of humankind. Rather, university is also compelled to produce knowledge, which can be sold as a consumer product. The competition between university and industry for knowledge production has also led to the decline of academic disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, literature studies, and history, which are not amiable to the idea of the instrumentality of knowledge.

### **5. University as Teaching Institution**

Today, there is more demand for problem-based learning at the expense of disciplinary fundamentals. Customized curriculum designing is in place to accommodate job aspirations and imaginations of students. In today's society, the State's interest to drive the educational system to boost economy and increase the GDP has also been contributing factors to this trend. This interest of the State is fuelled by people's tendency to see education as a means for prosperity. The above mentioned trend results in introducing academic programmes having prospects in the employment market. Programmes across universities in India are reshaped to include aptitude development and entrepreneurial skills.

Thus, the capacity of graduates to be economically effective in society has become a benchmark of success in education. Competency and outcome-based curriculum design, promoted by UGC, aiming at specific employability skills is a testimony of this trend in India. Rather than instilling curiosity to know, out-come based curriculum and pedagogy would promote instrumentality and rote learning among students by making them focus on result/outcome.

University education today has turned to favour the dominant epistemic of the present age of knowledge societies. The dominant epistemic of the present age is science in terms of its methods of inquiry. Accuracy, predictability, and reliability being the buzz words of science, the demand for the same on human sciences increased, though the latter form of science is not amiable to them. For instance, the emphasis on methods and procedures in social sciences is an adoption from sciences to establish accuracy, predictability, and reliability. Demand for humanities and social sciences have declined drastically as science and technology have become the dominant epistemic of the time attracting people through its applications in spectacular technology. On occasions, social sciences are reduced to information technology through digitisation and quantification. Also, many caring professions seek academic legitimacy in the university system claiming to be scientific.<sup>41</sup> Claims of evidence based practices and methods in the social work profession and counselling stand as best examples in this regard. Teaching in such professional courses is constrained at the levels of experience sharing and skill training in the absence of an epistemic base. Lack of knowledge in fundamentals and failure to ground the idea of service in relevant philosophies make social work and counselling services a profession aiming at lucrative benefits at the hands of students completing such courses.

A mandate of the modern university education is to cultivate talents and skills among the aspiring youth to be

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<sup>41</sup>Barnett, "Knowledge, Higher Education and Society," 33-46.

economically contributing and productive members of society. Often, this motive overrides the interests to learn and curiosity to know. Thus, in higher education teaching, terms stressing the importance of insight, wisdom, understanding, and critique are largely replaced by terms like skills, outcome, flexibility, and information.<sup>42</sup> The meaning of education in the present society has become narrow and fragmented. By emphasizing skill learning and technology, disassociated from philosophy, ethics, and culture, modern university education has not provided today's youth the opportunity to develop the faculties of empathy, reflexivity, and communion. Disciplined pursuit of knowledge has rather become an ignored lot in the educational aspirations of students and the vision and practice of university. Rather the pursuit of skills for the purpose of employment has become a priority of students and often universities are expected by the society and the State to function like Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) to cater to the skill requirements of the growing economy.

In knowledge societies, due to the growth of information technology and electronic gadgets, students are already overwhelmed with information. It posed a challenge to teachers as students cannot be convinced with information alone. As Wright Mills stated, what the students need today is to develop a quality of mind that would help them to use information and develop reason to understand the world and themselves in much larger settings.<sup>43</sup> Information alone would not provide the students with necessary wisdom for peaceful coexistence in the present society. Students should develop a quality of mind, which is analytical, scientific, and humane. In knowledge societies, the goal of teaching in a university must not be limited to the dissemination of information and skill development as mere use of information technology could accomplish them. Rather, teaching in university must be aimed at developing good human beings with analytical bend

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<sup>42</sup>Barnett, "Knowledge, Higher Education and Society," 33-46.

<sup>43</sup>C. W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Mumbai: Oxford University Press, 1959.



of mind capable of using his/her potentials to the benefit of society.

## **6. University as Public Knowledge Forum**

A touchstone of knowledge societies is the culture of innovation, rapid spread of inventions, and new ideas. Innovations cannot happen in vacuum. In order for this to happen, it is important to have a conducive social environment favourable to the cultivation of creative mind. In knowledge societies, there is a consistent need on the part of societies to assimilate new knowledge. This has created more demand for knowledge and learning. Today, in many developed countries a first degree has become a common social qualification.<sup>44</sup> In India, it is still an unrealised social aspiration. Internet and information technology has challenged the status of university and academia as the sole possessors of information and knowledge. University, as a public forum has to frequently contest and confront the knowledge claims emerging from the other quarters of society. For instance, it has to validate and scrutinize traditional 'non-scientific' and ethnological claims of knowledge in terms of their 'scientific temper'. In this context, university has to be more vigilant about its connection with the society to avoid redundancy and complacency to maintain academic standards. No university can be an ivory tower insulating itself from the swirls of social and political currents around it.<sup>45</sup> It has to engage with the public and maintain dialogue with power centres to (re)gain people's trust. This necessitates university to be a public knowledge forum.

The connection between knowledge and society has been expanding in knowledge societies. The role of university in the present society has become more complex. Modern society is viewed as saturated with information, but lacking purpose and social wisdom. Unfortunately, the societal expectation on

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<sup>44</sup>UNESCO, "Towards Knowledge Societies," 59.

<sup>45</sup>Beteille, "Universities as Public Institutions," 3377-3381.

university is limited to the supply of trained people with skills and technical capacities.<sup>46</sup>

Changes in social aspirations, expectations, and the role of university in knowledge societies outlined above have impacted the visibility and deference accorded to intellectuals from universities, and academia in the public domain. On occasions, university teachers are condemned for their silence on vital issues and are criticized for seeking the patronage and support of power centres and political parties. On other occasions, their voices are not given attention amidst the noise of mass culture and politics.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, in the present knowledge societies, the gap between university and public is found to be increasing for two major reasons. Firstly, because of the separation of the intellectual activities of university from the public domain by making the knowledge output from university a specialized one understandable and accessible only to a few highly educated. Knowledge claims from the nooks and corners of the society are mostly equated with common sense and ignored by the university faculty. Higher order thought process is considered alien to the general masses and can be appreciated only by the people belonging to the same community of intellectuals. Universities seldom reach out to the common people. For instance, researchers from university hardly ever write in newspaper columns, which have much wider reach to the general public, as it would not bring them academic credit or recognition for career advancement in the present system. Academicians usually seek recognition from higher scientific bodies and peer groups than from the common public limiting their reach only to a few.

Secondly, unlike the past, people in knowledge societies need not depend upon university for their knowledge needs. There are many fragmented domains in a society, such as R&D

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<sup>46</sup>Barnett, "Knowledge, Higher Education and Society," 33-46.

<sup>47</sup>Barbara A. Misztal, "Public Intellectuals and Think Tanks: A Free Market in Ideas," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 25, no. 4 (December 2012): 127-141.

centres of private companies, news forums, public discussion forums, etc. from which new knowledges emerge and are validated by the public. Information technology and new media facilitate this process of validation by getting public opinions on knowledge claims from these alternate sources of knowledge. The coming of alternate sources of knowledge has decreased the dependency of the public on university for their knowledge needs. In order to overcome it, university in knowledge societies has to increase its networking with the other sources of knowledge and make itself more accessible to the needs of the general public.

### **7. Blockades of Excellence**

Notwithstanding the above mentioned challenges and transformations in terms of knowledge production and diffusion, university in India has to play a pivotal role in promoting knowledge in the present knowledge societies. Although, there is a lack in public funding for higher education, many of the Indian universities, especially a few private ones, developed as entrepreneurial type of organizations attempting to be competitive at the international level. Competition among entrepreneurial type of universities is fierce and positive to outbid each other in terms of facilities, quality of faculty and student friendly ambience. This is not completely without drawbacks. One of the drawbacks is the tendency to consider students as customers and the urge on the part of university to provide education commensurate to the high cost that the students have to bear. In such a model, in order to tally the 'customer' (student) expectations with the high cost of education, there is a danger of formulating skewed policy and curriculum considering the aspirations of students for immediate employment in the market by imparting necessary skills at the expense of quality, knowledge and ethical standards. For instance, professional courses in many universities are designed to directly cater to only the market expectations, and aspirations of students to get immediate employment.

Complexity involved in quality control is another major challenge that the higher education in general and university in particular would face in knowledge societies. In fact, quality control and supervision of higher education institutions in Asia is relatively mediocre leading to the mushrooming growth of teaching institutions.<sup>48</sup> Also, the budge in youth population in India has led to the higher demand for more number of higher education institutions. Government's intervention through regulating agencies like UGC and AICTE is mostly lamented by the academic community as an infringement on their autonomy. It is necessary to evolve a liberal regulating framework with more autonomy for self-regulation.

One cannot expect same standards of infrastructure, research and education in universities across the globe or even within a country. Material and intellectual resources also vary between universities. For instance, one can imagine the difference between a small university in a remote village in India and the wealthy universities like Oxford or Stanford in a developed country.<sup>49</sup> Yes, the issue here is that the vast diversity and quality standards among universities in India in terms of their rural or urban location, source of funding, and history is huge that no single approach or regulating mechanism can accommodate. There comes the need for autonomy which will allow concerned institutions to decide upon their policies and regulate themselves suiting to their contextual requirements. At the same time, a comprehensive and liberal overall regulating framework is also necessary to ensure quality.

One of the major transformations in knowledge societies is the use of new learning tools. Today, most of the learning materials are digitized. Though there is much value for face-to-face education in India with a gross enrolment ratio of 25.8

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<sup>48</sup>Bert van der Zwaan, "How will the Comprehensive Research University Survive?," in *Higher Education in 2040*, ed. Bert van der Zwaan, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

<sup>49</sup>Beteille, "Universities as Public Institutions," 3377-3381.

per cent<sup>50</sup> for higher education during 2017-18, the trend is that more numbers of students are seeking the digital learning and blended learning platforms for their education. In the future, teaching universities may increase the use of digital medium for teaching.<sup>51</sup> In this context, the prospects of universities in South Asian countries including India seems bleak if they fail to adapt to the digital era. For instance, courses offered by Indian universities in the digital learning platforms like Coursera, edX, etc. is negligible in terms of numbers and familiarity comparing to the courses offered by their western counterparts. As a matter of fact, it is known that the academic resources are distributed unequally in the present world. The Anglo-American universities are considered at the centre of knowledge production as they mostly control the means and resources whereas the universities in the developing world are the consumers of knowledge and swept to the periphery.<sup>52</sup> The perceptual understanding of the above scenario by the student seekers of digital learning platforms would also motivate them to enrol for those courses offered by universities in developed countries, especially in the US and Europe. It is high time for the Indian universities to raise to the situation through sustained efforts for quality enhancement and address this digital divide.

Considering the complexity of issues that university face today in knowledge societies, Barnett advocated the following path towards sustenance and excellence. According to him, first of all, university must produce epistemological revolutions to face the challenge today; university must change from mere knowledge endorsing machines to the ones to produce radically new frameworks and perspectives. He

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<sup>50</sup>Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2018, <<http://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1541358>> (9 October 2018).

<sup>51</sup>Zwaan, "How will the Comprehensive Research University Survive?" 218.

<sup>52</sup>P. G. Altbach, *Higher Education in the Third World: Themes and Variation*, New Delhi: Sangam Books, 1987.

claims that university must revive itself by a) revolutionary reframing of perspectives and frameworks; b) critically examining all claims and claimants of knowledge; c) helping the people to stay at ease in this world of super-complexity and d) capacitating the people for critical action.<sup>53</sup> But, Barnett could not comprehend the embeddedness of university to the located society. It is, in fact, not possible to develop an overarching framework for the understanding and development of universities across the globe. For instance, one has to look at the socio-political conduciveness of a region for a university to perform. In the Indian context, plurality in terms of caste, community, language and culture influences the expectations of concerned society from a university in a given region. It is a responsibility of university to cater to those regional needs. At the same time, in a centrally administered/regulated system like the one in India, catering to the regional needs is not an easy task. It is time for universities in India to strive in the direction advocated by Barnett towards excellence at the global level simultaneously giving serious attention to local needs and aspirations.

## 8. Conclusion

The idea of 'knowledge societies' has many dimensions to it. Its effect on university in India is complex and uneven. The discussion in the previous sections may not have provided a comprehensive roadmap that the Indian universities must follow to excel. But, the viewpoints and frameworks provided have located Indian universities in knowledge societies both globally and locally, as well as, problematized the status of universities in India in terms of their expected roles in knowledge societies. This paper has indicated that the emergence of knowledge societies has challenged the present system of university in India at its root in terms of its methods of production, dissemination, and consumption of knowledge. Although one cannot ignore the merits of knowledge societies,

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<sup>53</sup>Barnett, "University Knowledge in an Age of Supercomplexity," 409-422.

it would place university in India in a disadvantageous position, comparing to its western counterparts. Therefore, universities in India must be prepared to face challenges posed by the emerging knowledge societies from within and without.

Nevertheless, in knowledge societies, the many sources from which knowledge is taken and the numerous possible ways in which it can be processed and applied have put a lot of stress on university as a producer of knowledge. Perhaps, it is a postmodern condition wherein all knowledge is valid irrespective of its source as postmodernism believes in multiplicity of facts and plurality of methods. A paradox is that knowledge societies, in their earlier notion emphasised science as the only legitimate form of knowledge, whereas in its new form, validate all forms of knowledge as legitimate. This is a welcoming development in the direction to instil democracy and egalitarianism in knowledge production. At the same time, it might put additional strain on the university system which subscribes only to the 'scientific' form of reasoning so far. Such a strain is felt widespread in Indian universities. We hope that this is a liminal strain wherein university is transforming its basis from one epoch making epistemic position to that of another to weigh different knowledge claims and positions evenly. Such a transformation will become complete only when university adapt itself to the knowledge needs of society and places itself amidst the conflicting knowledge claims.

The UNESCO world report on knowledge societies begins with a relevant question that if it makes sense to build knowledge societies when all hitherto existing societies, since ancient times, are in their own ways knowledge societies.<sup>54</sup> In fact, though all societies in the past are knowledge societies in their own ways, the present knowledge societies are marked by their difference from the past knowledge societies in terms of: (i). science as the epistemic base of all knowledges; (ii).

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<sup>54</sup>UNESCO, "Towards Knowledge Societies," 17.

information technology as a tool for organising and disseminating information; and (iii). networking between knowledge organisations as a precondition for the production of new knowledge. University as a significant player in knowledge societies has to adhere to the above conditions. Knowledge societies have created an enabling situation for competition, on the one hand, between university and other sources of knowledge, and, on the other hand, between universities across regions. Competitive location of Indian universities in knowledge societies is, and will be, determined by the extent to which universities in India would adapt themselves to match with the requirements of knowledge societies in the global arena.