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REFLECTIONS ON INTEGRITY AND ITS COUNTERPARTS FOR ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE IN OUR UNIVERSITIES

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REFLECTIONS ON INTEGRITY AND ITS COUNTERPARTS FOR ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE IN OUR UNIVERSITIES

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I belong to a small genre of academics working on the fringes of more than any one discipline. My disciplines of interest are economics and education, rolled into a singular branch called "economics of education" and a specialized area of research in that common hybrid space I take interest in is international migration and diaspora studies. In reminiscing my explorations to find a precursor to the idea of 'human capital' at the time of commencing my doctoral research more than four decades ago - the concept central to the discipline of economics of education, I had stumbled upon a speech by Swami Vivekanand that I thought carried its essence. It might be relevant to reflect on the relevance of that speech of Swami Vivekanand which is not as well-known as his celebrated "My dear sisters and brothers …" speech at the World Congress of religions at Chicago over 125 years ago, to the very idea of an "optimum university" if I may call it that. The essay is based on the other speech of Swami Vivekanand.

Before I share that speech, let me state what the pioneer of economics of education in India and my late professor, Tapas Majumdar, had taught me and my batch of doctoral students at JNU, as a tool for scientifically approaching a subject of academic inquiry. It involved two simple steps: First, of Identification of the variables – both the Independent or Determining Variables, and the Dependent or Determined ones. The second step involved Measurement of the dimension or intensity of the relationship between the two types of variables. Accordingly, let me delimit my universe of discourse here to that of a single identified thought of Swami Vivekanand that was immersed in the speech I had stumbled upon, as the determining variable, and a single identified aspect of the 21st century, as the determined variable, and then try to measure the relevance of the former to the latter.

Having spelled out this methodology as a prelude, let me briefly come back to economics of education as an interdisciplinary space that had emerged in the early 1960s. Theodore W. Schultz, then yet to be a Nobel Laureate in Economics (1979), and a Professor at the University of Chicago, coincidentally in the city associated with Swami Vivekanand's most celebrated 1893 address at the World Parliament of Religions, had given the argument that skilled labour was a "man-made" produced means of production and, unlike plain untrained labour, not a "gift of nature". He thus gave the concept of "human capital", and wrote: "The economic value of education

rests on the proposition that people enhance their capabilities as producers and as consumers by investing in themselves and that schooling is the largest investment in human capital. This implies that most of the economic capabilities of people are not given at birth…. There are long standing puzzles about economic growth that can be substantially resolved by taking account of investment in human capital" (Schultz, 1963 pp. 10-11)

This proposition of Schultz is supposed to have ushered in what was later called "the human investment revolution in economic thought". The proposition however evolved further over time. The framework of human capital paradigm has been expanded to incorporate the analyses of not only returns to education and training, but also to health and fitness, and to migration, both internal and international. It is because of these researches in education, health, and migration that our knowledge today has become more definitive and conclusive about how these investments in human capital determine labour productivity, the growth rates and the levels of development of nations. This knowledge of course took its own time to establish. Since Theodore Schultz, and later on Gary Becker, Jacob Mincer, Mary Jean Bowman and so on, the later stalwarts in economics of education found the role of human capital even more at the centre of the development process. Since then, the revolutionary transformations in the demand for goods and services and the ways of their production have impacted long-term growth trajectories, have impacted the relationship between the governments and their national economies, and that between nations by effecting the mobility of highly skilled "knowledge workers" and students across borders.

With the advent and growth of information and communication technologies leading the way for liberalization, privatization and globalization, human capital embodied in the scientists, technologists, IT professionals, doctors, nurses, teachers and so on – all products of colleges and universities - has been moving over the transnational space, and the barriers to immigration and return migration have been either relaxed or re-built at shortening intervals.[1] Apparently, the 1960s' proposition of Schultz and others was correct in underlining that human capital is an important input into the production process. Presently, modern day behavioral economists stress that we need to go past the existing econometric and mathematical modelling to unravel the complete role of human capital in the process of future growth of economies and development of nations. It is in this context I would venture to say that the one thought of Swami Vivekanand that I had stumbled upon more than four decades ago, seems to have anticipated the concept of "human capital" six decades prior to Schultz.[2]

It was way back in 1897 when Swami Vivekanand had emphasized the centrality of what he called "strong men" in his address titled "My Plan of Campaign" and delivered at Victoria Public Hall, Madras on 9th February. He was on his way back from the United States and Europe, and had said: "*Men, men – these are wanted: everything else will be ready; but strong, vigorous, believing young men, sincere to the backbone, are wanted. A hundred such and the world becomes revolutionized.*" It is this quote of Vivekanand that I had stumbled upon while starting my doctoral research in the late 1970s, casting

an everlasting impression on my young mind then. Today, I would like to think back that it reflects one thought of the Swami which is of great relevance in the 21st century university system in India and the world, although the context in which he had expressed his plan "to start institutions in India to train our young men…" was a little different. It is this thought which incorporates my well-identified determining variable, the Swami's "hundred strong men".

India's first Census of the 21st Century was carried out in 2001. It revealed what we all know by the so-called catchphrase "demographic dividend" to be in the offing, lasting at least half a century till 2050. This dividend is embedded in the world's youngest workforce that India has been projected to have. What has not been well spelled out is that the advantage of demographic dividend would be arising from three things happening together (Khadria 2009a): The lower average age of the population thereby giving a better dependency ratio; the lower wages-bill due to lower wages on younger workforce and hence lower costs of production of goods and services that India would produce and export to the world; and the advantage arising from the fact that frontier scientific knowledge of the latest vintages would be embodied in the younger and younger generations of students, thus leading to the application of most cost-effective and environment-friendly latest technologies, continuously. This triple-advantage of the demographic dividend then is my well-identified determined variable.

This triple-advantage would provide us the '*sufficient condition*' for establishing the relevance of Swami Vivekanand's "hundred young men" thought in the 21st Century India in a significant measure. But then what about the '*necessary condition*'? Until and unless the necessary condition - that the country's education and health systems are revamped and migration policy is revolutionized in significant measure – to turn our younger generations of men (and women) into "strong" and "sincere" human capital, and see them "happily settled" within the country, the sufficient condition would be infructuous, and the demographic dividend would turn into a "demographic burden".

Instead, it would be the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South-east Asian countries that would attract our young "semi-finished human capital" the late Professor Tapas Majumdar had called them, to immigrate and then to turn them into "strong" and "sincere" finished human capital by provisioning for the necessary condition of study and work (Majumdar 1994; Khadria 1999, 2009b, 2012). Thus, these countries would reap the benefits of our demographic dividend as the sufficient condition for the global relevance of Swami Vivekanand's "hundred strong men" thought in a significant measure. This begs the significant question as to why so many Indian students emigrate to these developed countries in the Global North for further studies rather than studying in our own universities and other institutions of higher education.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs, of the approximately 750,000 Indian students studying abroad, over 200,000 are pursuing higher education in the United States.[3] Apart from the fact that there is a quantitative mismatch between supply and

demand in seats available for higher education admissions within India that drives Indian students abroad, qualitatively it is usually the best and the brightest of Indian students who do the self-selection for becoming international students in the United States, "the home to some of the best higher education institutions."[4] Answering the question, " Why do so many international students choose to study in America?", Bertman Gallant, the Director of the Academic Integrity Office at University of California San Diego (UCSD) has been quoted to say, "…Because the market value of American university degrees is high, *and the reason it is high is because of integrity*." (emphasis added). International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI), defines academic integrity as "commitment, even in the face of adversity, to six fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage." ICAI is a consortium of learning institutions in the US, founded to fight against cheating, plagiarism and academic dishonesty in higher education. It also helps cultivate cultures of integrity in academic communities across the world, stating, "Promoting the fundamental values of academic integrity in education requires balancing high standards of integrity with the educational mission, as well as compassion and concern." The UCSD has a rigorous programme for promoting and implementing academic integrity through educational means rather than by punitive measures: Most students reported for cheating are directed into an "Integrity Mentorship Program" which requires the students to write essays explaining why they cheated and then complete a number of additional assignments – with the objective to turn their bad practices into positive and communicable good experience. Its objectives stretch far beyond the time students spend on campus because universities develop professionals and leaders who ought to continue to behave with integrity and become fair, respectful, responsible, honest and trustworthy leaders in society, including as come-back teachers, scholars and professors in the universities. "A true democratic society can only exist if the majority of people … act with integrity."

As a counterpart to the integrity of the students, scholars and faculty of the university, I see that there are requirements on the part of society and university too. The activities of preserving, pursuing, disseminating, and creating knowledge and understanding require societies and universities to respect the autonomy and academic freedom of the scholars who research and teach in them, and of the students who come to them to become knowledgeable citizens and responsible leaders. The universities need to be the "guarantor of academic freedom" in the performance of their scholarly functions.

At the International Conference by UNESCO in 1950, the universities of the world had articulated the principles for which every university should stand.[5] These principles reflect the central role that university-based research and education play in the cultural, social, political, and economic development of societies. They apply to all universities: state-funded, state-regulated, and private. The principles upon which universities and academic activities they embody stand are widely recognized to be morally, legally, and politically grounded in the values that define academic freedom for their scholars across all academic disciplines spanning the humanities, social sciences, the arts, the natural, biological sciences, engineering, law, medicine,

etc. Academic freedom is thus distinct from - and "not merely an extension of the freedom of thought, conscience, opinion, expression, assembly, and association that has been promised to all human beings under Article 18, 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". In layman's terms, academic freedom would be defined as the freedom to conduct research, write, lecture, teach, and publish, subject to the norms and standards of scholarly inquiry "without interference or penalty, wherever the search for truth and understanding may lead".

The value of this academic freedom derives from the basic objective and mission of the modern university. The proliferating role universities assume in the Information Age only raises the significance of that value. The emergence of a worldwide knowledge economy, the growing number of higher education institutions, and the unparalleled transnational flow of information and ideas embodied as human capital in globally mobile knowledge workers - all call for ongoing re-examination and re-articulation of the nature and necessity of academic freedom. Indeed, across the globe, the defense of academic freedom remains at the heart of ongoing debates over the role, autonomy and duties of the universities.

According to the *First Global Colloquium of University Presidents* (GCUP, 2005) convened by Kaufi Annan at Columbia University that I was invited to attend as a migration scholar representing my university, academic freedom benefits society in two fundamental ways: It benefits society directly, and usually immediately, through the impact and benefits of applied knowledge, the training of skilled professionals, and the education of future leaders and citizens. Secondly, it benefits society indirectly, and usually over longer periods of time, through the creation, preservation, and transmission of knowledge and understanding for their own sake, irrespective of immediate application. Thus, academic freedom has both practical usage and intrinsic value. Above all, by facilitating academic freedom laced with autonomy, it puts the onus on the teachers and students to be self-accountable for their conduct including to uphold integrity. Without self-accountability, neither academic freedom nor integrity would yield the desired results. "Academic freedom" here is bounded by what is "academic" in it that calls for optimum level of self-regulation. All of the relevant governance bodies and administration within the university must provide scope for such self-regulation by various constituencies of the university rather than pre-empting it through regulation that is thrusted upon. This would contribute positively not only to an environment of academic freedom, but in helping people to learn to differentiate between their preferences and judgements, and choose to go with their judgement whenever there is a conflict of interest between the two. These must be reflected in their freedom of inquiry and speech, without which neither faculty nor students can be seen to have acted with integrity.

Scholars and students must be able to study, learn, talk, teach, research, and publish without fear of intimidation or reprisal, in an environment that allows for engagement with divergent opinions, free from institutional censorship or discipline: "Academic institutions bear a heavy responsibility to protect the scholars and students who work within them from improper pressures….Universities must maintain and

encourage freedom of inquiry, discourse, teaching, research, and publication, and they must protect all members of the academic staff and student body against external and internal influences that might restrict the exercise of these freedoms." (GCUP, 2005) A major long-term casualty likely to happen in the absence of such freedom would be the optimum level of integrity. Civil society institutions and their common practices may also erode the integrity of faculty and students. For example, the pressures and lures of commercial initiatives and alliances, or attacks by outside groups may undermine their academic freedom which forms the basis of integrity. Universities must be free of obligation to external groups, alumni, community leaders, the media, or other elements of civil society. Among the most important mechanisms for maintaining and protecting academic integrity, one is peer-review system that determines how research is funded, conducted, and results published. However, because conflicts of interest are involved, peer-review systems must never be allowed to be driven by blind adherence to dominant viewpoints or motive to marginalise those perspectives that do not adhere to the reviewers' own or are likely to be superior than those of the reviewers. Not only should written declaration of possible conflict of interest be the norm wherever integrity of judgements is involved – be it membership of screening committees, selection committees, panel of examiners, panel of reviewers and so on; there should be strict monitoring and penalties for misrepresentation and violations because these have been rampant in our education system when relatives, friends or own students happen to be the candidates.

All this brings me back to ask who all would meet the characteristics of Swami Vivekanand's "strong men" (and women) that our universities in India and the world need the most today. Without trying to answer the question, I would like to reiterate what I have said at the beginning of this article: That in terms of identification as the first step in an academic inquiry, the concept of "strong men" was the precursor of the concept of "human capital" that Theodore Schultz was to coin six decades later in Chicago. Coincidentally, it was in the same city where Swami Vivekanand had mesmerized his audience by his well-known opening words at the Parliament of World Religions and from where he had returned to Madras and delivered the "My Plan of Campaign" address where he for the first time talked about "strong men" (which included "strong women" too) being wanted. In terms of the numbers needed, Vivekanand's scale then was limited to "hundred strong men" who would have revolutionized the world, in 1897. Almost a century and quarter later in the 21st century today, the United States Bureau of the Census and the Indian government had both expected this magic number to be 54.5 million in 2020![6] In terms of the second step in academic inquiry and research, that of measurement of the relevance of Swami Vivekanand's thought, I would consider this difference in numbers to be only of degree, not of kind.

Footnotes

1 See IOM (2019). See also, Inglis et al (2019).

2 My talk delivered at the Panel Discussion on "Swami Vivekanand's Thoughts", held at India

International Centre, New Delhi on 14 February 2012, to commemorate the year of his 150th Birth Anniversary.

3 https://www.mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/30181/QUESTION+NO964+DATA+BANK+OF+STUDENTS+GOING+ABROAD. Visited on 29 Feb., 2020

4 See Fox (2019, pp.36-37).

5 See, GCUP (2005, p.11).

6 In 2016, I, jointly with N. Thakur and R. Asraf, constructed an Index of Service Production in Education in India for the purpose of comparable quantification of India's production in the education sector for Trade in Services under the GATS negotiations of WTO. See, Khadria, B., N. Thakur and R. Asraf (2016).

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