

What is the Mandate of North-Eastern Hill University?

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*Apologia pro vita sua*¹ – John Henry Newman, 1864

It is important to remember the mandate of a university given by the Parliament or State Assembly, as the case may be, as it gives direction for its present and future development. North-Eastern Hill University (henceforth NEHU), one of the central universities located in India's Northeast, has witnessed considerable growth as well as development during the past 35 years or so. It is therefore worthwhile to look back at its mandate and see if it is developing according to its mandate.

In Clause 4 of the NEHU Act, 1973 the mandate of NEHU is spelt out as follows:

The objects of the University shall be to disseminate and advance knowledge by providing instructional and research facilities in such branches of learning as it may deem fit; to pay special attention to the improvement of the social and economic conditions and welfare of the people of the hill areas of the North-Eastern region, and, in particular their intellectual, academic and cultural advancement.

I

One of the objectives of NEHU is thus “the intellectual, academic and cultural advancement” of “the people of the hill areas of the North-Eastern region”. Let us understand first the phrase “cultural advancement”. Culture here is to be understood as something of value. History tells us that culture as an independent concept of value occurs for the first time during Enlightenment; culture can lift one up above the rawness of nature toward complete humanity, to progress to become a perfect “policy maker.” In culture there resides

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cultura animi, cultivation of mind, as Cicero spoke², and in the word “culture” and in the essence of culture we are presented not just the pleasure of free play, but also the toil of sowing and harvesting of the spirit, i.e., cultivation toward humanity. Hence culture is, to quote Gadamer, “all that stops men from assaulting one another, and from being worse than any animal. For animals, unlike men, know no war: no other species fights with its own kind to the point of annihilation.”³ Culture is the domain of all that becomes more by sharing it.⁴ Talking and communication is sharing in its pure form.⁵ It is interesting to note that ‘ethos’ means a self-conduct and a bearing that can give an account of itself and answer for itself in discourse.⁶ Even ‘tradition’ rests on discourse.⁷ What we immediately understand by ‘tradition’ is the written information that has come to us through writing, copying, and reproduction.⁸ There is also oral tradition.⁹ Discourse can be art not only through the medium of writing but also through *mneme*, through *memoria*, and through memory.¹⁰ We are cultured because we talk to each other to give an account of ourselves and answer for ourselves, and preserve it in writing and memory to hand it down to next generation, so much so that we undertake our whole life on the basis of *prohairesis* or on the basis of our own choice, i.e., we lift ourselves above nature. This understanding of culture, where culture is open, universalistic, inclusive and it is a value, is implicit in NEHU mandate when it speaks of cultural advancement.

The mandate does not speak of culture in anthropological sense. Even the aborigines of Andaman and Nicobar islands who live in forests in primitive conditions through hunting and gathering have a culture in anthropological sense.¹¹ If someone were to speak of cultural advancement of such people he will mean to bring modern culture to them. When a university as a modern institution aims at cultural advancement of people of the Northeast region it means that there should be attempt at inculcating the commensurate modern values of openness, universality and inclusivism required by modern consumption culture and to promote modern institutions. The very existence of a modern university militates against the traditional institutions of learning like Morungs of Nagas and other youth dormitories as traditional institutions of learning of various tribes of the region.

What is intellectual advancement as an objective? Why should this be an objective? Why is bodily development or physical development not an objective? All health is inner harmony against the background of possible disharmony. Only in disharmony and degeneration do both the intellect and the body become sensitive to their inner division. But the analogy between

bodily and intellectual health has an obvious limitation. As nature takes care of itself, a body with a good constitution has the greatest capacity for repairing itself naturally, and any doctor only assists in the natural process of self-reparation, as does the individual person who takes care of himself and protects his health.¹² In contrast to the body the healthy intellect is not simply in the hands of some 'nature' which takes care of it; it does not possess a natural good constitution which could be said to govern it. The intellect is always required to be aware of the danger of disharmony because it must *knowingly* aim at being in unison with itself.¹³ It must pay constant attention to ensure that it maintains its accord with itself as its self-accord is endangered at every moment. In preserving *reason*, in existing *knowing*, the intellect attains lasting governance of itself. Thus in the case of the intellect it is not sufficient to have merely characterized its healthy state. The real concern is to preserve it from being led astray. Hence universities have the responsibility of development and advancement of intellect so that it exists *knowing* and with *reason*.

The mandate speaks of intellectual advancement and not advancement of intelligence. So we need to understand the distinction between intellect and intelligence. Intelligence is a concept of very recent origin while intellect goes as far back as the *nous* of ancient Greeks, which includes highest form of insight, superior even to Roman *ratio*, the rational use of concepts and forms of thought. *Nous* primarily denotes the ability to recognize and identify the highest principles. In contrast intelligence does not refer to the capacity to know principles, rather it means general ability to recognize things, facts, relations etc. and places man on essentially the same plane as intelligent animals.¹⁴ Intellect not only refers to *nous* (insight), but also to *synesis* (understanding), and *phronesis* (practical reason). Intellect is bound with the totality of what it is to be human, with our *humanitas*.¹⁵ But intelligence expresses a general ability which is not determined by any particular capacity or by its relation to any particular objects of thought. Intelligence is just a measure of performance. Concept of intelligence is not related to principles, rather it is just a generalized instrumental ability. Anyone who possesses this ability is capable of anything and is able, where it is exercised without reservation or any sense of responsibility, to win from every situation a practical advantage and to profit from it.¹⁶ But in contrast intellect, being bound with *humanitas*, has substantial content and refers primarily to social sense, to that public spiritedness which contains certain commonly shared and undisputed principles as substantial assumptions; it is in no way merely the formal ability to make use of faculty of reason.¹⁷ So, the mandate of the university is to develop public spirited citizens of the modern world.

Academic advancement also takes us back to the roots of the concept 'academic' in Plato's Academy¹⁸ which designed a course on education against the philosophy of education of sophists which required development of skill only.¹⁹ Academic advancement therefore does not refer to development of skill or what in modern terminology we call professional education. Rather it refers to development of *theoria*, the theoretical attitude, which is a fundamental form of human behaviour.²⁰ But what is *theoria*? It involves distance from oneself in the form of total self-forgetfulness. Hence it also involves freedom from ends.²¹ It is also the ability to think from the other person's point of view.²² *Theoria* is a basic human possibility²³ not limited to some but available to all and it manifests itself in the fact that all men by nature strive after knowledge. Hence, *theoria*, as a primordial anthropological possibility, is what is sought by all cultivation and culture. A cultivated person or a cultured person is he who knowing about the insufficiency of the particularity of his own experiences rises to the universal by participating in the linguistic communication of all with all.²⁴ Whoever is able to achieve distance from himself, who gains insight into limitedness of his sphere of life, and so opens to others, experiences constant correction by reality, i.e., "what is" to which *theoria* attends.

Freedom from ends, which characterizes *theoria*, is also something that characterizes play which is the life of the child. And hence our 'pedagogy', derived from the name by which the Greeks referred to education, 'paideia,' retains a reference to the child's playful stage of life, to *pais*, and play (*paidia*).²⁵ The word 'theoria' already tells us something about the thing it refers to, about the concept itself: its proximity to mere play, to mere attending to and wondering at something, far removed from all use, profit, and serious business of practice of politics. History of culture gives us a hint that we have to continue the struggle over the ideal of a theoretical life that has been a part of western culture since the Greeks²⁶ and in Indian culture theoretical life in the form of *darshan* has always been a matter of eulogy since the time of the *Vedas*, i.e. *sruti*. The struggle has become necessary now. The present practice of the market and the state, and the thinking that it can prove itself only in serving the practice of the market and the state, lay claim to a superior legitimacy.²⁷ In such a scenario there can be no place for *theoria* unless there is a struggle for it. *Theoria*, i.e., attending to 'what is' involves research leading to discovery. For 'what is' is not apparent. As Heraclitus says, 'Nature loves to hide'²⁸ or as Indian Vedic sages were aware that the face of truth is covered by a golden cover.²⁹ In this research we need to approach the thing

to be known in a way appropriate to it and the criterion of appropriateness comes from the individual character of the subject under study.

Skills serve some purpose external to them. For example skill in carpentry is for making wood work which is distinct and separate from the skill itself. But academic advancement is not for some external purpose. It does not admit of the question: What is its use? Not because it is useless but because its value is so apparent in itself. It embodies its value such self-evidently that for its value it need not refer to any thing other than itself. During Middle Ages also academic advancement had this meaning and was distinguished from training in skill which was not a business of university. Even during renaissance universities were meant for what one called at that time liberal arts or *humanitas*, distinguished from useful arts and industrial arts. This understanding of academic development is clearly articulated recently by Drew Gilpin Faust, the first woman President of Harvard University:

The essence of a university is that it is uniquely accountable to the past and to the future – not simply or even primarily to the present. A university is not about results in the next quarter. It is not even about who a student has become by graduation. It is about learning that moulds a lifetime, learning that transmits the heritage of millennia; learning that shapes future. Hence we need to seize the initiative in defining what we are accountable for. Education is not to make men carpenters, so much as to make carpenters men. Traditional role of universities as ‘Stewards of living traditions’, as places for ‘Philosophers as well as scientists’, where learning and knowledge are pursued in part because they define what has over centuries made us human, not because they can enhance our global competitiveness. Those who long for a lost golden age of higher education should think about the very limited population that alleged utopia actually served. Colleges used to be restricted to tiny elite; now it serves the many, not just the few.

Mark the words, “Education is not to make men carpenters, so much as to make carpenters men.” What it means is that the primary purpose of education in universities is not merely to impart vocational training; rather it is to teach humanities to teach good citizenship. This public function of universities is a common thread running from Plato’s Academy to one of the most advanced universities today, i.e., Harvard University. When North-Eastern Hill University mandates academic advancement of the people of the region it mandates education in citizenship of the human world and not mere imparting

of vocational skill. Imparting of vocational skill under the name of professional education has only a private value and has acquired legitimacy for a place in university education very recently compared to the task of academic development of people.

II

The NEHU Act, 1973 mentions that it is established and incorporated “for the benefit of the people of the hill areas of the North-eastern region” and the objective makes it clear in what way the university is to give benefit, i.e., “to pay special attention to the improvement of the social and economic conditions and welfare of the people of the hill areas of the North-Eastern region.”

Here the important question is: What are the instrumentalities of the university through which it is to benefit people of the region? What are the instrumentalities of the university through which it is to pay special attention to the improvement of the social and economic conditions and welfare of the people of the region? The instrumentalities are also made clear in the mandate. In the beginning the Act speaks of North-Eastern Hill University being a “teaching and affiliating” university and the objectives further mandate the university “to disseminate and advance knowledge by providing instructional and research facilities in such branches of learning as it may deem fit.” So the instrumentalities through which the university is to benefit the people of the region are (a) dissemination (i.e., teaching and extension activities) and advancement of knowledge (research), (b) providing instructional (classrooms) and research (laboratories, seminar rooms, libraries etc.) facilities, and (c) affiliating colleges in the region. It is in this context of determining “such branches of learning as it may deem fit” that the “benefit” of the people of the region is to be the guide.

Let me quickly discuss the issue of benefiting the people of the region through affiliating colleges. One can understand how the university benefits people in a region by affiliating colleges in that region but it defies logic how the university benefits the people of the region by affiliating colleges from outside the region.

Formal instruction in the classroom is an important instrumentality of the university as a teaching institution. A university is also a place for interchange of ideas on every conceivable subject among teachers and students. That interchange of ideas, to be effective, requires long and continuous interaction through research activity. No doubt those who are driven by the passion for

ideas will make a room for their expression in any condition. But we are here concerned with institutions and not a few focussed individuals, and the task of the university is precisely to provide its ordinary members with a setting that they find both physically and socially congenial for research. A university which is physically congenial is likely to keep its ordinary members longer than is minimally required by the rules of attendance, which has always been remarkably elastic for both students and teachers. So a conglomerate of buildings is required for universities.

According to the Act the university is incorporated. And hence for a university corporate existence and the sense of corporation are essential instrumentalities. Due to rapid expansion NEHU has emerged as a large and sprawling institution with at least two campuses and many parts that neither fit together nor appear to fit together harmoniously. The two principal component parts of NEHU as an academic institution are the diverse affiliating colleges, which are situated as near as Mawlai in Shillong and as far as Gujarat, and the postgraduate departments in two campuses, in Shillong and Tura. There are, in addition, undergraduate departments, halls of residences, library, computer centre, laboratories, statutory bodies such as the executive and the academic councils, and separate departments dealing with administration, examinations, finance, and so on. The different parts of the university have grown unevenly, some very rapidly, and NEHU is not in a position to foster unity and coherence desirable of a corporate body. An important aspect of the university as an institution is that its individual members - whether students or teachers - should have some sense of it as a corporation. Hardly any member of the university has such a sense about NEHU. Great and rapid expansion of the university has not helped in fostering its corporate identity, even though the corporate existence and the sense of corporation in a university is the most important thing.

A university is also established. An established university functioning as modern institution imparts modern ideals to improve a culture through its mere functioning. Young men and women unrelated by ties of kinship and community can interact more freely in a university than perhaps in any other domain of society. If NEHU has done nothing else, it has at the very least created a new basis for the relationship between men and women in the Northeast hill region. The university has provided a corporate life where one meets people cutting across tribal and ethnic groups and has provided a new ideal of womanhood and manhood and some are able to give that ideal a concrete shape in the region. The admission policies followed by NEHU

needs to be widened so that there is more diversity in the composition of students and so that the instrumentality under consideration is successful.

Here what the mandate says “for the benefit of the people of the hill areas of the North-eastern region” is clarified in the objective as “to pay special attention to the improvement of the social and economic conditions and welfare of the people of the hill areas of the North-Eastern region” and through what instrumentality this “special attention” is to be paid is further mentioned in the NEHU Act, 1973, Clause 5 (2) which empowers the university “to take such academic steps as would contribute to the improvement of the economic conditions and welfare of the people of the hill areas of the North-Eastern region.” “Academic steps” here does not mean admission-related steps but relates to the content of teaching and research and related matters as explained above. Hence the mandate does not say that the university is to admit students exclusively or predominantly from the region. The jurisdiction is only with respect to affiliation of colleges. The jurisdiction does not mean that it is the only catchment area for selection of students for admission as it has been heard from some quarters. In fact, for all-round development of the people of the region, as envisaged in the mandate, the university needs to follow more inclusive admission policy.

III

Does the university have any other instrumentality? There are incidental instrumentalities. A conglomerate of buildings, equipment and furniture is required for universities. Hence, the idea that every university must have its own well-equipped and well-furnished campus has now come to be generally accepted. In Northeastern hill region the establishment of a new university has generally been associated with much building and spending activity.

When much building and spending activity goes on in the campus the society at large starts seeing the university as an institution through which funds flow into it. With rapid expansion of the university come new jobs of teachers, officers and other supporting staff. The larger society starts taking interest in it as an employment agency. This gives rise to two new instrumentalities for benefiting the people of the region: (i) flow of funds into the region through the university, and (ii) giving employment to people in the region. Now the question emerges: Are these two instrumentalities mentioned in the mandate? To the best of my understanding the mandate does not cover these two instrumentalities. There are laws of finance and appointment which cover how these instrumentalities are to be utilized.

Here we must remember Mahatma Gandhi's dictum that ends do not justify means. The means have to be clean in themselves.³⁰ So even if "improvement of the social and economic conditions and welfare of the people of the hill areas of the North-Eastern region" is the objective NEHU cannot justify the two incidental instrumental means for the mandate makes it clear that the objective is to be achieved by other instrumentalities and not through these two incidental instrumentalities, which have to be clean in themselves or at least appear to be clean in themselves following the relevant laws.

No doubt there are socio-political pressures on the universities to benefit the people of the region through these two incidental instrumentalities. Pragmatism may require that the universities give in some times to such pressures. Andre Beteille, the former Chancellor of NEHU, has correctly observed, "Every living institution has to accommodate some corruption and some injustice as a part of its ordinary existence."³¹ Corruption, injustice and bad politics cannot be expelled with a magic wand from the university. The real challenge for an academician in a university is to remain loyal to its legitimate instrumentalities. Hence it is expected that the universities do not give a cloak of legitimacy to these incidental instrumentalities by directly justifying them as part of the mandate. At least they are expected to keep appearances of following the laws made under the mandate of the university. The flow of funds and employment generation are bound to slow down in times to come unlike the generation and dissemination of knowledge. If the larger society gives legitimacy to a university only in its capacity as an institution through which funds flow or as employment agency then, when flow of funds and employment generation slow down the university faces problems of legitimacy. Hence it is always wise not to justify these two incidental instrumentalities as mandates of the university even if university is benefiting the society through these two incidental instrumentalities.

References

¹ This Latin phrase means "a defense of one's life" as meant by John Henry Newman. But nowadays this phrase has acquired a pejorative meaning "a lame excuse for one's infelicitous life and action".

² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 2.5.13.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, translated by Chris Dawson, Yale. University press, New Have and London, 1998, p.10.

⁴ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.6.

⁵ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.7.

⁶ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.8.

⁷ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.11.

⁸ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.11.

⁹ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.11.

¹⁰ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.11.

¹¹ I am maintaining a strong contrast between the modern enlightenment value concept of culture and anthropological understanding of culture. Even a fully modern society can fail in sticking to the former concept of culture and still have a culture in the latter sense. This contrast is not well understood so far because the same word 'culture' is used for both. German language distinguishes two terms 'Bildung' and 'Kultur'. The former is always a value term while the later is a descriptive term. Germans never speak of 'Bildungskampf' but some of them in Bismark's era talked of 'Kulturkampf.' But in English language there is currency only of one term 'culture,' used indiscriminately both for value concept of culture and descriptive concept of culture. In 1990s American leaders gave currency to term 'culture war', beginning with Patrick Buchanan, but the term 'culture war' had by 2004 become commonly used in the United States by both liberals and conservatives. It was a result of conscious or unconscious substitution of the descriptive term 'culture' for the value term 'culture,' whose ground was already prepared by Anglo-American anthropologists by their appropriation of value term 'culture' for the object of their study to designate which they needed a descriptive term. It was a confusion confounded by the English speaking Anglo-American anthropologists, who the Indian scholars interested in philosophy of culture followed blindly, which led to substitution of cultural anthropology, which deals with some object designated by the value neutral descriptive objective 'culture' [German 'Kultur'], by philosophy of culture, which is expected to deal with the value called 'culture' [German 'Bildung'] that had emerged as a principle of humanism in Enlightenment. One can see this confusion in the course content of philosophy of culture in the academia in the Northeastern region. This confusion can also be seen in the evolution of the theories of culture in anthropology and sociology. In the beginning of nineteenth century even while giving an explicit descriptive meaning to culture, implicitly the normative sense of culture was operative as manifested in the evolutionary classification of anthropological cultures. James George Frazer, a Scottish social anthropologist influential in the early stages of the modern studies of mythology and comparative religion, in his most famous work, *The Golden Bough* (1890), documents and details similar magical and religious beliefs across the globe and posits that human belief progressed through three stages: primitive magic, replaced by religion, in turn replaced by science. But subsequently all influence of normative understanding of culture was removed from cultural anthropology. Questioning and criticizing cultural evolution, which posited that human societies progressed through stages of savagery to barbarism to civilization, Franz Boas established the principle of cultural relativism and trained students to conduct rigorous field research in different societies. All subsequent cultural anthropologists in spite of their differences have accepted some kind of descriptive sense of culture. Appropriation of a philosophical term like 'culture,' which was a value term, for the object of study of anthropologists, no doubt gave legitimacy to anthropological enterprise, but it led to confusion of philosophical normative sense of culture with the descriptive sense of

culture. This confusion not only led to cultural relativism but also led to celebration of all cultures as equal but divergent adaptation to different environments. This has led to romanticisation and eulogization of all descriptive anthropological cultures irrespective of the culture wars (Kulturkampf) and conflicts of cultural identity it has spawned.

¹² Hans Georg Gadamer, Plato's Educational State *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, tr. P. Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1980, p. 88.

¹³ Plato's Educational State, pp. 88-89.

¹⁴ Hans Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, Translated by Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1996, p.46.

¹⁵ *The Enigma of Health*, p.47f.

¹⁶ *The Enigma of Health*, p.49f.

¹⁷ *The Enigma of Health*, p.48.

¹⁸ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2009.

¹⁹ Hans Georg Gadamer, Plato and the Poets, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, tr. P. Christopher Smith, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1980, p. 57.

²⁰ Hans Georg Gadamer, Science and the Public Sphere, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, Translated by Chris Dawson, Yale University press, New Have and London, 1998, p.67.

²¹ Science and the Public Sphere, p.68.

²² Science and the Public Sphere, p.68.

²³ Science and the Public Sphere, p.67.

²⁴ Science and the Public Sphere, p.67f.

²⁵ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.16f.

²⁶ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.19.

²⁷ *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, p.19.

²⁸ Heraclitus B123 DK

²⁹ Yajurveda XL.17 declares: "The mouth of the truth is hidden by a golden pot." *Iæa Upanisòad*, 15. On the basis of this declaration describes the process of *daræana* thus: "The mouth of truth is covered with a golden pot. Pusanna that you must uncover to see the truth." Similarly *Bâr Up.* 5, 15, 1 "unveil it, O Pusan, so that I who love the truth may see it," *Mait. Up.* 6, 35 "Do thou, O Pusan, uncover that unto the truly Real, the pervader."

³⁰ M. K. Gandhi, "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree: and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the

tree." *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, New York, Schocken Books, 1961, p.10. "If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself," Gandhi is reported to have said. Quoted in Howard Ryan, *Critique of Nonviolent Politics*: <http://www.netwood.net/~hryan>. Gandhi wrote: "They say, 'means are, after all, means'. I would say, 'means are, after all, everything'. As the means so the end..." R. K. Prabhu & U. R. Rao, editors; from section The Gospel Of Sarvodaya, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, India, Revised Edition, 1967.

³¹ Andre Beteille, Universities as Institutions, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 11, Mar. 18, 1995, p.568.