

## Colleges, univs should be exciting places to teach, be taught

- **Abhijit Banerjee**
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Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the America's Declaration of Independence and its third president, believed his greatest achievement was perhaps the establishment of the University of Virginia in 1819.

In an age where universities were centred around religious and moral education, Jefferson set up a university with the declared aim of educating leaders in practical affairs and public service, where chemistry and mathematics had pride of place, and religion was not taught at all as a separate subject. Instead of the chapel being the centre of the campus, UVA (as it is often called) is built around a library.

This was no oversight: Jefferson wrote to a friend that 'a professorship of theology should have no place in our institution'.

Indeed while there are still debates among historians about whether Jefferson intended UVA to be a purely secular institution in the modern sense, there is no doubt that what he did was a radical shift in the context of its time.

Two years before UVA, in 1817, a rather similar institution was set up some 8,000 miles to the east, in a city then on the map as Calcutta.

Initially financed by the city's indigenous elites and some of their British supporters like David Hare, it was called Hindu College not because of its religious agenda, but because it was originally intended to provide 'a liberal education to the children of the members of the Hindu Community'.

The community identity, thankfully, was lost very quickly; the college soon started admitting Muslims, Christians and Jews, and as far as I can tell, Hinduism or any other religion was never taught as a core subject. It makes sense that the name was eventually changed to Presidency College; much more recently, it became a university on its own — it's now called Presidency University.

It's hard to overestimate the sheer audacity of this project; Jefferson was a great leader in an emerging great nation, still jubilant from having upended its colonial masters.

The sponsors of Hindu College, by contrast, were just recovering from their first encounter with a new kind of colonial power, with its unabashed sense of its own cultural superiority and often unconcealed contempt

for Indians. They were second-class citizens in their own land — facing a colonising population who were becoming increasingly more racist as their hold on the country became more secure.

How did they come to think of setting up such an institution? Where did they get the confidence to imagine something that was so unlike any educational institutional within 3,000 miles of them? If they were trying to model it on Oxford and Cambridge — which they probably knew about — it was hardly a slavish imitation that they went for.

Greek, Latin and theology, central to Oxbridge teaching of that period, were replaced by courses in the natural sciences, English and Bangla. How did they dare?

The same daring must have inspired the many students and faculty who, sitting at Presidency, took on to do world-class research and actually pulled it off. Jagadish Chandra Bose, Prafulla Chandra Ray, Meghnad Saha, Satyen Bose and Prashanto Chandra Mahalanobis are just some of a long line of remarkable scholars who did some of their most important work at Presidency.

We need some more of this audacity today. It's well-known that higher education in India is falling behind the rest of Asia, but at this point the best we seem to be able to do is to replicate the current system at increasingly lower levels of quality when we need to be able to think of ways to make our institutions of higher learning exciting places to teach and be taught, as Presidency was at some point in its history.

We do see some green shoots of hope — at Presidency the state government and the Infosys Foundation have funded some new chairs intended to attract gifted researchers, and new universities like Shiv Nadar University and Ashoka are trying to reinvent liberal arts education in the Indian context — but the problem demands an effort at an entirely different scale, and it's not clear where that is coming from.

We also need to celebrate this remarkably progressive moment in our history. As Kolkatans, as Indians, as South Asians (a president of Bangladesh and a prime minister of Pakistan, as well as Dr Rajendra Prasad, our first president, went to Presidency).

Celebrate creativity and confidence in the face of adversity. Celebrate the excitement of trying build something new and wonderful. 2017 will mark 200 years of the founding of Hindu College; it is just round the corner. Let's do something to make it memorable.

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