ABSTRACT

The existing diagnoses of the crisis in the institution of the university in India share a peculiar, puzzling feature: while all of them refer to a crisis in higher education, they do not talk about education at all. Instead, they are about a crisis in politics, the social fabric of the land or institutional faults. This is in striking contrast to the West where the crisis is discussed in terms of the conception of education and the formation of the student. Why do we find this conspicuous difference?

As part of the genealogical diagnosis of the problem, I turn to the Humboldtian moment to examine the specific conception of education as Bildung (self-formation) that led to the emergence of the modern university. I show how the conception of education as the actualization of the self or one’s will derives from a theological background and is not easily accessible in the Indian context. When this conception of education comes to us through British colonialism, the emphasis is on the “moral lack” in the natives articulated in terms of a “lapse” from a normative moral order. Hence, initiating the natives into this normative framework such that they learn to respond to moral norms/principles takes priority over nurturing learning, self-understanding and genuine reflection on experience.

How do the natives receive the learning goals? I examine the issue of translation of concepts as well as the heightened debate on the moral and cognitive goals that are half-learnt, not understood, left unlearnt or are differently learnt that comes to haunt the late nineteenth-century debates on education.

It would be the nationalist problematization of education that would once again reopen the question of education and formation. It is Gandhi and Tagore, I argue, who provide us with a diagnosis that the contemporary scholars completely miss – that it is a crisis in education and
learning. Both Gandhi and Tagore’s diagnoses converge in locating the problem in culturally
different ways of going about the world and the impact of Western structures of thought on a
practical form of life. I also show how Europeans, in their account of indigenous education,
completely miss the practical forms of knowledge and ethical know-how that Gandhi
foregrounds. In the conclusion, I raise the question of our life with concepts and what it
means to take Gandhi and Tagore on education seriously in today’s context.