

Academic Conversation on NEP & DU

-Prof. PC Joshi, VC



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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2021

14 IDEA EXCHANGE NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

(On Mahasweta Devi, Dalit authors being removed from syllabus) I am not a dictator. The panels, which also had the head of English, gave recommendations... To project DU is anti-Dalit overnight, is not right



WHY P C JOSHI
After over a year-and-a-half, Delhi University is set to reopen next week in a "slow, phased manner" beginning with its libraries. Prof Joshi was appointed acting V-C last October, and under him the University has seen a slew of changes, including exams being held online for the first time. The professor of social anthropology has also been at

the centre of plans to implement the New Education Policy and the four-year undergraduate programme at DU. The University was also mulling a format of giving equal weightage to students' marks and scores of Central Universities Common Entrance Test (CUCET) before the second wave of Covid-19 struck



Universities are places where students come for overall development. Teaching is one part of it. People debate... Students should learn not just books, but about life in general. To the extent no destruction of property...

ARANYA SHANKAR: Cut-offs for admission to Delhi University (DU) courses have been increasing every year. Many people, including you, have pointed out the need for an alternative system for admitting students. Why hasn't the change been implemented?

For professional courses, we already have entrance tests. This year, with the National Education Policy (NEP), it was decided by the Government of India that let's get 42 universities to come together. It was not that Central Universities Common Entrance Test (CUCET) was not there before, it was limited in its scope with only a few new Central universities. They (the government) wanted to bring within its scope DU, Banaras Hindu University (BHU) etc. We had reached a kind of consensus as well, but then the second wave came in the way. So we were forced to go back to the merit-based system. The disadvantage is that we may have very high cut-offs, even 100%, but then there is no other way. The CUCET was one way. We were thinking of giving half weightage to the CUCET and half to the students' percentage. But that will have to wait for another one year.

SUKRITA BARUAH: Are the high cut-offs also the result of how the CBSE and other state boards grade the performance of students?

When I was a school student, the topper would get 70-71%. At the time, 100% was unthinkable. Earlier there were more essay kind of questions, now there are shorter formats with the possibility of getting full marks. Today if you get 70-75% marks, I don't think you have any chance of getting admission into DU. We are facing problems because our colleges have to decide a cut-off, and if there are so many people with 100% marks, then 100% becomes the cut-off. Once a cut-off is decided, we have to admit anyone who falls within that category, and that becomes a problem as well. So we over-admit students every year.

ARANYA SHANKAR: You say students scoring 70-75% marks don't get admission to DU. So does that make DU an elite institution catering to a certain section of people who might all come from a particular economic class?

I believe that talent is randomly distributed. It is not based on caste, class, gender. DU admits students from Economically Weaker Sections, OBCs, SC, ST... The rider is that even if we are admitting students from EWS category, we will go by merit because we have to give a fair chance to every student. Merit is that fair chance... DU cut-offs are high... Not 75% but students with 90% get admission to the university. Plus, we also have the School of Open Learning, where nearly four lakh students are enrolled. We have got the Non-Collegiate Women's Education Board (NCWEB) which is again catering to a certain section of girl students. I think students get a fair chance, including those with lower scores.

MALLICA JOSHI: DU has had entrance tests for courses such as English and Journalism for years now. But the fear regarding entrance tests is that students with means such as access to good coaching can end up benefiting. How do you plan to address this?

There are two issues here. One is the issue of certain Boards being liberal in their marking. For that we have the CUCET, which will set one standard for everyone... My idea is we should not leave it entirely to the CUCET because that will encourage coaching centres. Students will then not be concerned with their Board exams... Therefore, a blend of Board exams and the CUCET was what DU came up with. We said we will give both equal weightage.

RITIKA CHOPRA: About 35-40% of teachers' posts are vacant in DU. What holds institutions back from filling up these vacancies? The Centre has been sending constant reminders to DU, specifically during former V-C Yogesh Tyagi's time.

I think it is a major concern for DU. You are right in saying that at least 50% of the spots are vacant in different university departments; in colleges, many more positions are vacant. When I came, I immediately took action. The problem is that appointments is a very lengthy process. I wanted to recruit assistant professors for economics. It took me seven days to just interview the candidates. There were around 400 candidates and you have to give each one at least 10 minutes. I could only recruit 44 faculty members. By that time, nearly 30 other people had retired. So we were back to square one. So it has to be considered seriously. In fact, if I am given a chance again, I would like to have two boards independently recruiting teachers.

There is undoubtedly a backlog in DU.

'With every new idea, there are fears. We've held talks on NEP with all stakeholders. Fully geared to adopt it'

Delhi University's Acting V-C Prof PC Joshi talks of the problem of high cut-offs and finding a balance with the plan to have entrance exams, feels ranking systems give a sense of goal, and says while he prefers physical classes, going online has been a learning experience



Prof PC Joshi with Special Correspondent Aranya Shankar and Correspondent Sukrita Baruah in The Indian Express newsroom. Abhinav Saha

The reasons are not only that we don't get nominees... Sometimes UGC comes up with regulations and we have to adhere to them. It is not only inaction on the part of the head of the institution. There are other reasons as well. Now we have a big backlog and we are compensating for that with guest teachers. Permanent teachers of course have better salaries and their dedication is more.

ARANYA SHANKAR: On July 26, the Education Minister said that there are only 58 ad-hoc teachers in DU...

When you talk of DU, there are two elements. One is the University of Delhi and its departments. There are 91 colleges. So what the Minister said was not wrong. In the University of Delhi, that is in its departments, there are 58 (ad-hoc) teachers. In colleges there are more than 4,000 (ad-hoc) teachers. So you can say he was both right and wrong. We had given the Ministry the data that they asked for.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: The capacity of DU's colleges hasn't increased in the way, say, students scoring 95% marks have increased. Does the issue come up in your discussion with college principals and the government?

If students increase, then definitely we have to increase the capacity too. We had expansion in the OBC segment. There were grants given by the government, by the UGC, for it, and many colleges and University departments created more space and infrastructure for the increased seats. The government is sensitive about it, that with an increase in seats, the infrastructure should also increase.

Of course you need more colleges in Delhi. DU is the higher education hub... We have two stretches of land - in Fatehpur Beri and Najafgarh. We are looking at two colleges in these places which can cater to the rural areas. DU is not only catering to Delhi's needs, it is catering to the entire country, Kashmir to Kerala to Nagaland, students want to come to DU from everywhere. So we have a national responsibility and we are trying our best to fulfil that.

MALLICA JOSHI: Delhi University's Academic Council has cleared the implementation of the New Education Policy (NEP) from the next academic year. So, from 2022, DU will shift to a Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP). Why was this necessary?

DU had come up with FYUP in 2013. Thereafter we had choice-based credit system, which is a part of the NEP. So the NEP is not something new that has been imposed over DU. I am not in favour of comparing FYUP and the NEP. They are two dif-

ferent things. The NEP has been thoroughly debated by us. It is a four-year programme, but there is a chance for students to exit any time they want and then re-join. So, for the first time there is a possibility of lateral exit and lateral entry, and it's the first time that such a flexible system has been made available in any kind of higher education system in India... The NEP is an innovative, new idea, and with any new idea there are apprehensions. But at DU we have discussed it thoroughly with all the stakeholders and we are fully geared to adopt the NEP from next year.

UNNI RAJEN SHANKER: With cut-offs, colleges are forced to take on more students than their capacity. In such a situation, with the existing infrastructure and teachers, how do you ensure quality education?

Let me tell you the reality of what happens. While 100-150 students are admitted, many of them leave for engineering, other colleges etc. So it is always good to have over-admission... we need to over-admit. It is a better strategy; things balance out eventually.

RITIKA CHOPRA: DU has slipped by a few spots in the QS World University Rankings. Why do you think that has happened? Also, the IITs oppose these rankings. What is DU's stand on them?

I feel ranking gives you a sense of direction, for defining goals. For example, we have a mission called Mission 500. We are at 510 in the QS ranking, and we have a mission of getting to under 500. To achieve that goal we need to create strong alumni associations... We are going to have adjunct faculty. We will have more foreign students. These are areas where we can improve. So rankings give us a goal. On the national level, our ranking is 11, and we would like to come under 10. At least 40 of our colleges have na-

tional rankings, which is a prestigious thing for DU... So ultimately this improves academic standards. So I may not agree with my friends at the IITs.

Our ranking has slightly dipped, and it is a matter of concern for us. The major reason is that there is a decline in teacher-student ratio because we did not hire teachers. Then, we had no foreign faculty and students. So we are trying to improve. We will not be able to hire foreign faculty because obviously there are limitations. But we can have adjunct faculty or Indians who are teaching in eminent institutions (abroad) and when they come back, they can hold some lectures. That is possible... In other places you can hire foreign nationals as faculty, we can't do that. But we do attract assistant professors who are working in foreign universities. But most of them are Indians... I don't think there are any foreign nationals being hired as faculty. I think there are limitations there.

ARANYA SHANKAR: Under your tenure, admissions have gone completely online and for the first time examinations were also held online. Is this a temporary arrangement or do you see this continuing in the future? Do you think physical classes can be replaced with online learning?

I am not in favour of replacing physical classes with online classes. The physical presence of a teacher, giving lectures physically, and getting students to ask questions, that is the perfect way of teaching and learning. It should not be replaced by online learning. But yes, online teaching can supplement physical teaching. At DU, we had Open Book Examination (OBE) last year and we faced lot of problems and we also faced lot of court cases... Now we have perfected it and the credit goes to our examination department that worked day and night.

Given a chance, I would like to have two boards independently recruiting teachers... Due to the big backlog, we make do with guest teachers. Permanent teachers have better salaries, and their dedication is more

After the pandemic, I am sure we will again come back to (physical classes). But since we have gained some knowledge (of online learning) with OBE, for some exams we might opt for it as well. But it will not replace the physical examination system.

ABHINAV RAJPUT: Before the pandemic we saw protests at Jamia Millia Islamia over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens. At DU also we have seen allegations of anti-India slogans being raised at Ramjas College. Should students get involved in issues concerning national politics?

Universities are places where students come for their overall development. Teaching is one part of it. People debate... Many parliamentarians are from DU. Anun Jaitley was a student leader when I was a student. In our colleges we have debating, drama societies and they add flavour to the development of personality. So universities are places where the student should learn, not just what is written in books, but also life in general. To the extent that they are not destroying public property...

RITIKA CHOPRA: Phasing out the university affiliation system is among the recommendations of the NEP. What do you make of it?

This affiliation bit is not in the immediate agenda... Delhi University is a brand also, people very proudly say they are from DU. So these suggestions are for the future...

MALLICA JOSHI: There is a lot of talk about giving autonomy to colleges such as Sri Ram College of Commerce, Lady Sri Ram College, St Stephen's College. But there has been a lot of resistance from teachers. What is your position?

I am in constant touch with my principals and I don't think they have expressed such a desire to me. They are very happy to be part of Delhi University and we are not forcing them... I think it is a matter of prestige for them also to be part of DU... In fact we give them a lot of autonomy as far as running of the college is concerned. Like St Stephen's College is a minority college and we don't try to encroach upon their minority status. Whatever privileges they enjoy as a minority institution, we give them... So in the near future, I don't see a possibility of it (phasing out affiliation).

SUKRITA BARUAH: Will the challenge of providing hostel accommodation to outstation students be amplified in the future because of the pandemic? Hostel accommodation has always been a problem, let me admit that. We have

been opening new hostels. We have a 1,000-bed hostel for students from the Northeast now... But looking at the number of students coming from outside Delhi, it's always a challenge. So now that we have decided to open, we are keeping things voluntary. We are not making it mandatory that every student has to come. Of course all students cannot be accommodated, because hostels have to again maintain the SOP of one student per room (because of Covid). So capacity is also going to be less.

ARANYA SHANKAR: So when can we expect the University to open?

Very soon... We are cautious about a possible third wave. We will be starting with libraries, then laboratories. We will monitor the situation and then open other areas... So this month, of course (DU will open), but it will be in a slow and phased manner.

RITIKA CHOPRA: How has the pandemic affected research work?

... There is one indicator of research work, that is the H-Index. Our H-Index has improved by 20 points. So there has been no impact on research at DU. We granted record number of PhDs in the pandemic.

ARANYA SHANKAR: Delhi University recently faced criticism after the Oversight Committee (OC) removed Mahasweta Devi's short story and two Dalit authors from the English syllabus. The Registrar said the texts were not in sync with our culture and that students must not end up hating the military reading these stories. Do you agree?

I am not a dictator sitting at the top. I go by the advice of the courses committee and the Oversight Committee. In their wisdom they have come up with some recommendations. The head of department of English was part of it. There was something being taught for the past 19 years and there were some people who had objections, who felt that this is going to hurt the sentiments of a particular group... But the way in which people are projecting things, like DU has become anti-Dalit overnight, is not right. I don't think that is DU's intention.

RAJ KAMAL JHA: The pandemic's toll on students' mental health has been severe. Given DU's large and diverse student population, how has it managed counselling services?

We realised this during the pandemic. If you go to our website, you will find numbers of psychiatrists, psychologists. Lot of counselling was done. It is a free service. Most of our colleges also have counselling centres.

