

G. K. Gokhale's
speech

Indian Universities Bill, 1903

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THE INDIAN UNIVERSITIES BILL

(*Delivered in the Supreme Legislative Council
of India on the 18th December, 1903*)



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The Hon'ble Mr. G. K. Gokhale's Speech

on

The Universities Bill

(Delivered in the Imperial Legislative Council)

“My Lord, as this is the occasion on which the principle of the Bill may be usefully discussed, I cannot give a silent vote on the motion now before us, especially in view of the great attention which this subject has received during the last three years at the hands of both the Government and the public, and the angry controversy which has raged round it for most of the time. In the course of the Budget Debate of last year, Your Lordship, while referring to the attitude of the educated classes of this country towards University Reform, was pleased to observe— ‘Surely there are enough of us on both sides, who care for education for education’s sake, who are thinking, not of party-triumphs, but of the future of unborn generations, to combine together and carry the requisite changes through.’ My Lord, I do not know if my claim to be regarded as one of such persons will pass unchallenged. But this I venture to say for myself: I hope I have given, in my own humble way, some little proof in the past of my interest in the cause of higher education; and that in the observations which I propose to offer to-day, the only consideration by which I am animated is an anxious regard for the future of Western education in this land, with the wide diffusion of which are bound up in large measure the best interests of both the Government and the people. My Lord, in your Budget speech

of last year, Your Lordship complained of the unnecessary distrust with which the educated classes regarded the attitude of the present Government towards higher education. I can assure Your Lordship that even among those who have not been able to take the same view of this question as Your Lordship's Government, there are men who regret that the difficulties, which already surround a complicated problem, should be aggravated by any unnecessary or unjustifiable misapprehension about motives. But is it quite clear that the Government itself has been free from all responsibility in this matter, and that it has given no cause whatever for any misapprehension in regard to its object? Let the Council for a moment glance at the circumstances which have preceded the introduction of this Bill. More than two years ago, Your Lordship summoned at Simla a Conference of men engaged in the work of education in the different Provinces of India. Had the Conference been confined to the educational officers of Government, one would have thought that Government was taking counsel with its own officers only, and of course there would have been no misunderstanding in the matter. But the presence of Dr. Miller at the Conference at once destroyed its official character, and gave room for the complaint that the deliberations were confined to European educationists in India only. The fact that the proceedings of the Conference were kept confidential deepened the feeling of uneasiness already created in the public mind by the exclusion of Indians from its deliberations. Later on, when the Universities Commission was first appointed, its composition, as is well known, afforded much ground for complaint; and though, to meet public opinion half way,

Your Lordship took the unusual step of offering a seat on the Commission, almost at the last moment, to Mr. Justice Guru Das Banerjee, the objection remained that, while missionary enterprise was represented on the Commission in the person of Dr. Mackichan, indigenous enterprise in the field of education was again left unrepresented. The hurried manner in which the Commission went about the country and took evidence and submitted its report was not calculated to reassure the public mind. Finally, the holding back of the evidence, recorded by the Commission, on the plea that its publication would involve unnecessary expense, was very unfortunate, as other Commissions had in the past published evidence ten times as voluminous and the question of economy had never been suggested. Now, my Lord, every one of these causes of complaint was avoidable and I cannot help thinking that a good deal of the misapprehension, which every right-minded person must deplore, would have been avoided, if Government had been from the beginning more careful in this matter. The task of reforming the University system in India was, in any case, bound to be formidable, and it was much to be wished that it had been possible to examine the proposals of Government on their own merits, in the clear light of reason, unobscured by passion or prejudice or misapprehension of any kind, on one side or the other.

“A misapprehension of the motives of the Government cannot, however, by itself, explain the undoubted hostility of the educated classes of this country to the present measure. And it seems to me to be clear that this sharp conflict of opinion arises from the different standpoints from which the question of higher education is regarded

by the Government and the people. In introducing this Bill the other day at Simla, the Hon'ble Mr. Raleigh asked at the outset the question 'whether English education has been a blessing or a curse to the people of India' and he proceeded to give the following reply :—'In point of fact it has been both, but much more, I believe, a blessing than a curse. We note every day the disturbing effects of a new culture, imposed upon learners who are not always prepared to receive it; but still it is a great achievement to have opened the mind of the East to the discoveries of western science, and the spirit of English law. To the Schools and Colleges under our administration we owe some of the best of our fellow workers—able Judges, useful officials, and teachers who pass on to others the benefit which they have received. To them also we owe the discontented B.A., who has carried away from his College a scant modicum of learning and an entirely exaggerated estimate of his own capacities, and the great army of failed candidates, who beset all the avenues to subordinate employment.' Here then we have the principal objection to the present system of University education authoritatively stated, *namely*, that it produces the discontented B.A., and a great army of failed candidates. The Hon'ble Member describes these classes as a curse to the country, and he claims that his proposals are intended to abate this evil. Now, my Lord, I would in the first place like to know why 'the army of failed candidates, who beset the avenues to subordinate employment' should be regarded as a curse by the Government any more than any other employer of labour regards as a curse an excess of the supply of labour over the demand. These men do no

harm to anyone by the mere fact that they have failed to pass an examination or that they seek to enter the service of Government. Moreover, unless my Hon'ble friend is prepared to abolish examinations altogether, or to lay down that not less than a certain percentage of candidates shall necessarily be passed, I do not see how he expects to be able to reduce the evil of failed candidates. The Colleges on the Bombay side satisfy most of the conditions that the Hon'ble Member insists upon, and yet the problem of the failed candidates is as much with us there as it is here. As regards the discontented B.A., assuming that he is really discontented, will the Hon'ble Member tell me how his proposed reconstitution of the Universities will make him any more contented? Does he not know that Indians, educated at Oxford or Cambridge, who bring away from their Universities more than a 'scant modicum of learning' and a by no means 'exaggerated estimate of their own capacities' are found on their return to India to be even more 'discontented' than the graduates of the Indian Universities? The truth is that this so-called discontent is no more than a natural feeling of dissatisfaction with things as they are, when you have on one side a large and steadily growing educated class of the children of the soil, and on the other a close and jealously-guarded monopoly of political power and high administrative office. This position was clearly perceived and frankly acknowledged by one of the greatest of Indian Viceroys—Lord Ripon—who, in addressing the University of Bombay in 1894, expressed himself as follows:—"I am very strongly impressed with the conviction that the spread of education and especially of Western culture, carried on as it is under the auspices of

this and the other Indian Universities, imposes new and special difficulties upon the Government of this country. It seems to me, I must confess, that it is little short of folly that we should throw open to increasing numbers the rich stores of Western learning; that we should inspire them with European ideas, and bring them into the closest contact with English thought; and that then we should, as it were, pay no heed to the growth of those aspirations which we have ourselves created, and the pride of those ambitions we have ourselves called forth. To my mind one of the most important, if it be also one of the most difficult, problems of the Indian Government in these days is how to afford such satisfaction to those aspirations and to those ambitions as may render the men who are animated by them the hearty advocates and the loyal supporters of the British Government.' My Lord, I think it is in the power of Government to convert these 'discontented B.A.'s,' from cold critics into active allies steadily associating them more and more with the administration of the country, and by making its tone more friendly to them and its tendencies more liberal. This, I think, is the only remedy for the evil complained of, and I am sure there is none other.

"My Lord, in the speech of the Hon'ble Member, to which I have already referred, he has argued as follows:— The evils of the discontented B.A.'s and the great army of failed candidates cannot be combated without improving the methods of teaching and examination which produce these results. Such improvement cannot, however, be secured without reconstituting the Senates of the different Universities. Therefore it is that the Government has thought it necessary to come forward with the proposals

embodied in the present Bill. Now, my Lord, I do not think the discontented B.A.'s will grow rarer or that the ranks of the army of failed candidates will become thinner, after this Bill becomes law. But even if this object of the Hon'ble Member be not likely to be achieved, I am willing to admit that it would be a great and worthy end to attempt an improvement for its own sake in the methods of teaching and examination, and if any one will make it clear to me that this end is likely to be attained by the adoption of the proposals embodied in this Bill, I shall be prepared to give my most cordial support to this measure. For, my Lord, I have long felt that our present methods of both teaching and examination are very imperfect and call for a reform. But as far as I can see, there is little in this Bill which will in any way secure that object. It is true that the Hon'ble Sir Denzil Ibbetson, in his brief but eloquent speech at the first reading, spoke of the necessity of raising the character of the teaching at present imparted in Colleges and he announced that Government had decided 'to make for five years special grants in aid of Universities and Colleges, whose claims to special assistance in carrying out the reforms which we have in view are established, subject to an annual limit of five lakhs of rupees.' The announcement is a most welcome one, but it is difficult to see what reforms the Government has in view, and until further details about the Government scheme are forthcoming, no definite opinion can be pronounced on it. Moreover, we are just now considering the Bill, and so far as its provisions are concerned, there need not be the least change in the present state of things, so far as the Colleges in the Bombay Presidency are concerned. But, my Lord, while it is difficult to allow the claim of the

Hon'ble Mr. Releigh that this Bill will lead to an improvement in the methods of teaching and examination, there can be no room for doubt that the first and most obvious effect of the passing of this measure will be to increase enormously the control of Government over University matters, and to make the University virtually a Department of the State. This increase of control is sought to be secured both directly and indirectly—directly by means of the new provisions about the acceptance of endowments and the appointment of University Professors and Lecturers, the affiliation of Colleges and the making of regulations—and indirectly by the proposed reconstruction of the Senate and the power of censorship in regard to its composition, which Government will now be able to exercise every five years. My Lord, if Government cannot trust the Senate even to accept endowments without its own previous sanction, or to make appointments to endowed Professorships or Lectureships, if Government is to have the power to affiliate or disaffiliate any institution against the unanimous opinion of both the Senate and the Syndicate, if it may make any additions it pleases to the regulations submitted by the Senate for its sanction and may even in some cases make the regulations itself without consulting the Senate, I do not see that much dignity or independence is left to the Senate under such circumstances. And when in addition to so much direct control Government takes to itself the power of not only nominating practically nine-tenths of the Fellows but also of revising their lists every five years, I think no exception can be taken to the description that the Senate under the circumstances becomes a Department of the State. My Lord, much was said during the last

three years about the necessity of giving a preponderant voice to men actually engaged in the work of education in the deliberations of the University; very little, on the other hand, was heard about the necessity of increased Government control. In the proposals, however, with which Government has now come forward, while no statutory provision has been made for a due representation of Professors and teachers in the composition of the Senate, Government has virtually absorbed nearly all real power and made everything dependent upon its own discretion. The spirit in which the Government has chosen to deal with the Universities in this Bill appears to me to be more French than English. Was it really necessary to revolutionize their position so completely in the interests of education alone? After all, Government itself is responsible for the composition of existing Senates, and what guarantee is there that the power of nomination, which has been admittedly exercised with considerable carelessness in the past, will be used any better in the future? Moreover, there are men on the existing Senates who have all along taken great interest in the affairs of the Universities, but who have perhaps made themselves disagreeable to those who are regarded as the special representatives of Government in those bodies. And it is very probable that these men may not be included among those who will now form the reconstructed Senates. If this happens, will it be just? My Lord, I am personally not opposed to the idea of a limited Senate, and were the question not complicated by fears of probable injustice in the first reconstruction, I should even be disposed to support the idea strongly. I also recognize that if we are to have a limited Senate, it is necessary to provide for a

certain number of seats falling vacant every year, so that there should be room for a continuous introduction of qualified new men; and if these vacancies cannot be expected to arise in the natural course of things—by retirement or death—it is necessary to make the Fellowships terminable. But one essential condition in a scheme of a limited Senate with terminable Fellowships is that a large proportion of seats should be thrown open to election, so that those, who do not see eye to eye with the special representatives of Government, may not be deterred from taking an independent line by the fear of displeasing Government. But to make the Fellowships terminable in five years and to keep practically nine-tenths of the nominations in the hands of Government will, in my humble opinion, seriously impair all real independence in the deliberations of the University. My Lord, there are, in the special circumstances of this country, three different interests which really require to be adequately represented in the University Senate. There is first the Government which is of course vitally concerned in the character of the education imparted; then there are the Professors and teachers who are actually engaged in the work of instruction; and last, but not least, there are the people of this country, whose children have to receive this education and whose whole future is bound up with the nature of the educational policy pursued. These three interests are not—at any rate, are not always thought to be—identical, and I think it is necessary to secure an adequate representation to each one of them. My Lord, I feel that it is only reasonable to ask that, as far as possible, each interest may be represented by about a third of the whole Senate. Thus, taking the case of Bombay, I

would fix the number of ordinary Fellows at 150, and of these, I would have 50 nominated by Government, 50 either elected by or assigned to different Colleges, and the remaining 50 thrown open to election by the graduates of different Faculties of more than ten years' standing. In giving representation to Colleges, I would take into consideration all those points which the Government wants to be considered in affiliating an institution. Of course a majority of the representatives of Colleges will as a rule vote with Government nominees, and Government will thus have a standing majority in favour of its views. I would make these Fellowships terminable at the end of ten years, which would provide for 15 vacancies every year. I venture to think, my Lord, such a plan will duly safeguard all the different interests. I may mention that in the new Constitution of the London University, out of 54 Fellows, 17 are elected by graduates, 17 by Professors and teachers, 4 are appointed by the Crown, and the rest are nominated by certain bodies and institutions. Failing the plan which I have suggested, I would support the scheme proposed by the Hon'ble Mr. Justice Guru Das Benerji in his minute of dissent. It is impossible for me to support the proposals put forward on this point by Government in the Bill.

"My Lord, I must not discuss any of the details of the Bill at this meeting, though I have a good deal to say about many of them. But one or two remarks I will offer on two other points, which in my opinion are points of principle. The first is the provision in the Bill to give at least half the number of seats on the Syndicate for the different Faculties to Professors and teachers. My Lord, I am opposed to this provision. I would give a large represen-

tation to these men on the Senate, but having done that, I would leave the Syndicate to be composed of those whom the Senate considers to be best qualified. How would the proposed provision work in the case of the Bombay University? In the Faculty of Arts, the provision will not cause any inconvenience, and, as a matter of fact, the present practice is to have half the men in this Faculty from the ranks of Professors. But in the Faculty of Law, what will be the result? There is only one Law School in Bombay, which is a Government Institution. The Professors are generally junior barristers, who stick to their posts, till they get on better in their profession. They are generally not Fellows of the University. And yet, if this provision is adopted, they will first have to be appointed Fellows and then straightway one of them will have to be put on the Syndicate, in place of a High Court Judge or a senior barrister, who represents the Faculty at present on the Syndicate. Again, in the Faculty of Engineering, the present practice is to elect eminent Engineers in the service of Government. The Engineering College of the Presidency is at Poona, and it will be a matter of serious inconvenience to insist on one of the Professors of that College being necessarily elected a Syndic. Moreover, my Lord, I really think it is not desirable to prop thus by means of the statute men whom the Senate—and especially the reconstructed Senate—does not care to put on the Syndicate. Another point on which I would like to say a word is the provision in this Bill that henceforth all institutions applying for affiliation must satisfy the Syndicate that they have provided themselves with residential quarters. In the first place, what is to happen, if they build the quarters and then find that affiliation

is refused? And secondly, I submit that such a condition will practically prevent the springing into existence of new Colleges and will, if made applicable to old Colleges, as the Syndicate is empowered to do, wipe out of existence many of those institutions—especially on this side of India—which in the past have been encouraged by the Government and the University to undertake the work of higher education. I freely recognize the great advantages of residence at a College, but if I have to choose between having no College and having a College without residential quarters, I would unhesitatingly prefer the latter alternative. My Lord, the people of this country are proverbially poor, and to impose on them a system of University education, which even a country like Scotland does not afford, is practically to shut the door of higher education against large numbers of very promising young men.

“My Lord, I have spoken at so much length at this stage of the Bill, because the issues involved in this attempt at reform are truly momentous. I confess that there is a good deal in this Bill with which I am in hearty sympathy. But the main provisions of the Bill are so retrograde in character that it is impossible for me to support the measure. My Lord, I have already admitted and I admit again that there are serious defects in the methods of teaching and of examination pursued at present in this country. But the present Bill in my opinion offers no remedy calculated to cure the evil. I really think, my Lord, that the Government has begun the work of University reform at the wrong end. It is not by merely revolutionizing the constitution of the Universities that the object, which all well-wishers of

education in this land have equally at heart, will be attained. It seems to me that the first step in the work of real reform is for Government to make its own Colleges model Colleges. Bring out from England the best men available for this work. I would place them on a level with members of the Civil Service, as regards pay and promotion. When I think of the great responsibilities of these men—of how much of the future of this country and of British rule depends upon the influence they succeed in exercising on the young minds committed to their care—and when I think of the more or less stereotyped character of the work which a majority of the Civilians have at present to perform, I am astonished that Government does not see how necessary it is to secure even a better type of men for its Colleges than for the administration of the country. If Government will bring out only the best men available—men who know how to combine sympathy with authority and who, for their learning and character, will continue to be looked up to by their pupils all their life,—there will, in a few years, be a marked change in the tone of Government Colleges in India. And the private Colleges will find themselves driven to work up to the level of Government institutions. One word more on this subject and I have done. Let not Government imagine that, unless the education imparted by Colleges is the highest which is at the present day possible, it is likely to prove useless and even pernicious; and secondly, let not the achievements of our graduates in the intellectual field be accepted as the sole or even the most important test to determine the utility of this education. I think, my Lord— and this is a matter of deep conviction with me—that in the

present circumstances of India, *all* Western education is valuable and useful. If it is the highest that under the circumstances is possible, so much the better. But even if it is not the highest, it must not on that account be rejected. I believe the life of a people—whether in the political or social or industrial or intellectual field—is an organic whole, and no striking progress in any particular field is to be looked for, unless there be room for the free movement of the energies of the people in all fields. To my mind, the greatest work of Western education in the present state of India is not so much the encouragement of learning as the liberation of the Indian mind from the thralldom of old-world ideas, and the assimilation of all that is highest and best in the life and thought and character of the West. For this purpose not only the highest but *all* Western education is useful. I think Englishmen should have more faith in the influence of their history and their literature. And whenever they are inclined to feel annoyed at the utterances of a discontented B. A., let them realize that he is but an incident of the present period of transition in India, and that they should no more lose faith in the results of Western education on this account than should my countrymen question the ultimate aim of British rule in this land, because not every Englishman who comes out to India realizes the true character of England's mission here."

