I am writing this article sitting in my office in Cambridge, England. Last year the University of Cambridge celebrated its 800th anniversary. For many institutions in India, the first landmark to celebrate is the decennial. For us, today to imagine an educational institution maintaining continuous existence over eight centuries is very hard, although in the distant past, our own country could boast of the universities of Takshashila and Nalanda which had flourished for several centuries.

A long life for a university is creditable if it has produced distinguished alumni. Walking through this (still small) town one comes across roads named after Tennyson, Chaucer, Barrow, Newton, Herschel, Adams, etc. These names leave you in no doubt that a veritable cultural “Who’s Who” is in place here. Traditionally, Cambridge is known for the sciences and Oxford (referred to as “the other place” by Cambridge alumni) for the humanities; although both universities have produced distinguished exceptions to this rule.

By and large the cultural heritage of a city is reflected in how its streets are named. Take Delhi for example. Its major streets are named after kings and emperors of the past and their standard bearers of today, the politicians. I am not a historian, but as a layman my perception of Delhi is of a city obsessed with power and one-upmanship. It is as if everybody who aspires to be anybody, has to be aware of his or her standing. If X, Y, Z are three rising rungs in a hierarchy, then according to some hidden or explicit protocol, one on rung X cannot talk to one on rung Z without the knowledge and consent of the person on Y.

This may be necessary in a service like the Army or administration where the internal discipline counts for a lot. But I get dismayed when I see this atmosphere in a scientific institution. Science progresses more through arguments and controversies than through yes-man ship. It is a field where freshness and independence of thinking has helped. And these traits are more common amongst younger rather than older scientists. But if a hierarchy-based protocol prevents the juniors from opening their minds to the seniors, the quality of research in the institution is bound to suffer.

I encountered an interesting and illuminating example in the following episode. I had called on the director of a leading laboratory with a request for allotment of some lecture rooms for holding a national meet of astronomers. The deputy director had gone over the details with me and we had come to the conclusion that for holding plenary sessions none of the lecture theatres would be adequate as their capacity of 120 just fell short of the typical attendance of 135 that we expected at these sessions. The deputy director therefore suggested that I request the director to make the 300-seater auditorium available. When we met the director and I begged him to do so, he immediately said: “But why do you need the auditorium? The bigger lecture theatres should be adequate”. He turned to the deputy director for concurrence, adding that “I think the capacity is 140 and we can add a few chairs on the side”. Now the deputy director was in difficulty. He knew for sure that there was no way that the capacity of the lecture theatres could be increased by as much as the director had asserted. Yet how could he contradict his boss? So he muttered something like “Very good sir... I think we will somehow manage”. The director beamed, well satisfied that he had solved a problem that his subordinate could not handle.

Later when the meeting did take place, the inade quacy of the lecture rooms was realised and the plenary session had to be shifted to the auditorium. The last minute change caused the inevitable confusion that could have been avoided if the deputy director had been bold enough to contradict his superior. Science, they say, runs on facts; but here was the second seniormost scientist in the institution unwilling to tell his boss that he had got his facts wrong.

I find that Mumbai has the image of a city of commerce. The “money god” must bless you if you are to do well here. This despite the fact that Mumbai had one of the three oldest universities of British India, has eminent research institutes like the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, has a record of encouraging Marathi theatre, etc. Kolkata does convey to me the image of a cultural city just as, Bengaluru is for information technology.

Again, the streets of the city may hold clues as to its culture.

The readers may form their own opinion as to whether the city they know supports science and technology, through research and development, whether it encourages the performing arts, provides opportunities for artists to display their talents, hosts literary meets or whether it regales in political manoeuvres or delights in its bureaucratic structure. For that will determine its culture.

In the present age of transition many cities are losing their special touch as old heritage gives way to malls and multi-storey buildings. We need to take guidance from the cities of Europe. They have managed to combine the old with the new in a very successful way. We, on the other hand, are very ruthless with the old: from a short term commercial point of view we destroy our heritage and take delight in having got the most cash out of the transaction. This way our much boasted heritage will remain only on paper, as some of the existing past photographs of our cities.

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