CURRENT SCIENCE—50 YEARS AGO

UNIVERSITY REFORM—I

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WE hoped to be able to offer our observations on the Report of the Punjab University Committee in this month's issue of *Current Science* but though we applied to more than one agency for a copy of that undoubtedly interesting document, we were unable to procure one in time. Anticipating its arrival we propose to record here a few general reflections on the lines of reform along which the universities might develop their resources and extend their sphere of usefulness.

Broadly speaking, the character of a modern university is moulded by three well-defined influences. The first of these is the type of knowledge which it seeks to promote. This obviously has an important bearing on the organization of research and the curricula of studies. The second influence is that of the quality and type of citizen which it intends to produce. The power of a university to raise a body of leaders in thought and action depends on its cultural traditions, its reputation and atmosphere built up by its ideals. The third kind of influence which affects the complexion of a university is the nature of the political, social and economic environment in which it is situated. Theoretically it is true that the higher interests of the universities should not be subordinated to the obligations of financial assistance which they receive from the governing authorities. There is bound to be difference of opinion as regards the extent to which the vital forces of the country can be permitted to impinge on the legitimate functions of the universities, but there can, however, be little doubt about their attitude towards national problems.

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It seems to us that we should be taking a narrow view of the functions and responsibilities of the university if they are confined to the preparation of students to be scientific researchers, good doctors, lawyers, administrators, engineers, financiers, industrialists and politicians. The empire of the university is the whole range of the human mind and by virtue of the academic prestige it enjoys and the mass of knowledge it possesses, it has acquired virtually the competence to offer solutions to world problems. The policy of non-intervention in affairs lying outside the academic sphere has tended to preserve the freedom of learning and thought and its abandonment may be desired only if it does not involve the sacrifice of liberty. Frequently the universities become involuntarily incorporated into the political, social and economic structure of the State. In countries like Italy and Russia the universities have become subordinate branches of the State which prescribes their policy, directs and controls their academic functions. Though the German universities are practically all of them State institutions they enjoy greater freedom, but it is not unlikely that the Nazi idea of the Nordic Superman may soon supplant their old ideal of humanism. It is only natural that the tendency to concentrate on matters and activities outside the university should be strongest in countries which have broken loose from the pre-war academic traditions. In France and England the continuity of educational ideas is still maintained because the social and political facts of these countries have not undergone such a radical transformation as has overtaken the Central European States. 'Plans of reform in France and England have been confined to adjustment of the universities to the increasing demands of an enlightened democracy' and questions such as access to the university and the selection of students for higher training have claimed greater attention. In the United States learning is made subservient to the immediate practical ends of the people and the tendency to give university education to the maximum body of students has admirably built up American democracy.

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