

Higher education: Old maladies and a line of treatment

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THE maladies of higher education in India have been told and retold many times. The 'Challenge to Education' 1985 is eloquent on its shortcomings. It refers to the preponderant majority of the University products who have little more than book learning and a degree and little capacity for self-study; poor communication skills; a limited world view and hardly any sense of national or social responsibility. It goes on to state that the gifted who get into institutions of excellence in medicine, technology and management, at low cost to themselves, have not fared any better in discharging their social responsibility. The examination system not only perpetuates rote learning but also degrades the entire educational system and breeds a variety of evils ranging from leakage of question papers and mass copying to the bribing of examiners. The document does not mince words and claims that 'the whole process of higher education has become warped, disoriented and dysfunctional, producing a number of unemployable young men and women'. No indictment could be more damaging.

Many symptoms, two maladies

This dismal picture contrasts sharply with the recommendations for educational reform that emerged from National Committees over the years. It is a long story of missed opportunities and persistent inactivity. As far back as 1882, the Indian Education Commission recommended the introduction of practical subjects in secondary schools so as to divert them into different walks of life. A century later, the enrolment in vocational courses at the secondary stage is less than 20%, which must be the lowest in the world. In more recent times, the Kothari Commission of 1964 stipulated that the number of wholtime students to be admitted to a college or University department should be determined with reference to the laboratory, library and other facilities. They cautioned that new Universities should be started only after adequate provision of funds had

been made and that great care should be taken in organizing postgraduate courses. Increased support was specifically urged for research in the Universities. Above all, the Commission urged active efforts to promote national consciousness and character building. Three decades later, we find that the field of higher education has become warped and dysfunctional! We make a major effort to diagnose the illness and formulate an elaborate prescription, but run out of energy, if not interest, in carrying out the treatment! Half-hearted measures are the rule in spite of the Kothari Commission's warning that 'tinkering with the existing situation and moving forward with faltering steps and lack of faith can make things worse than before'. Various causes have been suggested for this phenomenon of operational fatigue. Prof. Kulandai Swami, for example, highlighted the helplessness of academics who had no say in the massive expansion in the number of colleges and Universities; he decried the lack of professionalism in the management of higher education in India. Others referred to inadequate funding, political interference and general indiscipline. The list could go on, but the findings are no more than the symptoms of two underlying maladies which are often intertwined. These are, the reluctance to act and the failure to count cost. The familiar noises that one cannot act because of inadequate funds and the counter, that support is denied because of poor performance are circular arguments which take us nowhere. As the stakes in education are no less than the moulding of the young generation of Indians, it is imperative that we come to grips with the two basic maladies.

From inaction to action

To recommend action is one thing, but to act is quite another. To caution that the transformation of higher education must precede its expansion or to recommend that six per cent of the gross domestic product should be spent on education are very different from putting them into practice. When action is taken, its success again will depend on the fulfilment of conditions which may not be predictable. Given the uncertainties of the course of action and greater uncertainties of the success in action, there is a tendency among us to lapse into inaction. This dates back at least to the time of Arjuna's

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dilemma at Kurukshetra. The habitual non-implementation of what is preached and recommended must be seen in this context.

There are many examples of our failure to act – past and present. The Calcutta University Commission recommended in 1916 that Intermediate education should be controlled by the Board of Secondary Education and not by the University. During these long years, the subject was studied and discussed in different fora, at different times; resolutions were passed: but the pre-degree programme is yet to be delinked from several Universities, a notable example being Kerala. The reason, as every one knows, was the opposition of the organizations of teachers, private college managements, students and University employees who disfavoured the reform for their own sectional interests. And timid governments, afraid of unpopularity, dithered in implementing what was clearly in the larger interests of higher education in the country.

The story of the affiliating Universities, is no better. Their origins reach back to the Wood's despatch of 1854, often described as the Magna Carta of English education in India. Disparaged even by Lord Curzon, the affiliating system, in fact, did more harm than good to the reputation of Indian Universities. The Radhakrishnan Commission wanted them to 'disappear from the Indian landscape at the earliest possible moment'. The Kothari Commission however recognized that affiliating Universities were indestructible and suggested a compromise – that no more than thirty colleges in close proximity should be affiliated to a University with a strong core of teaching departments. Thirty years later, affiliating universities continue to multiply, with many having more than 200 affiliating institutions.

Knowing what to do and not caring to do it has cast a shadow on other national endeavours as well. Consider, for example, rheumatic heart disease which cripples five out of one thousand children between the ages of 5- and 15 years in India. Beginning as a sorethroat, fever and joint pains, its initial episode may be ignored by parents and school teachers. But the immunological response to the infection may cripple the victim for life. This fearful disease can be readily prevented if the streptococcal infection is confirmed by a simple test and the child treated appropriately. Many countries controlled rheumatic heart disease successfully by adopting this method long ago. The cost for prevention is a fraction of the cost of treating patients, not to speak of the social and emotional burden of cardiac surgery. In spite of knowing the rationale, methodology and low cost, we characteristically failed to carry out a preventive programme for rheumatic heart disease in India. For good measure, we preferred cure to prevention not only in rheumatic heart disease but also in the overall working of our health care system. What appeal to the Indian mind are symposia, pilot studies and the grilling of medical students on prevention.

To carry out a programme of action successfully, a fundamental requirement is the unity of objectives. Every one involved in the enterprise must accept the objectives, understand the goals that are set and strive towards their fulfilment. The results achieved by an individual or group should be measured not by their individual performance but by their contribution to the overall objectives. Where such a unity of objectives is missing, the implementation of programmes will fail. A distinguished scholar and translator of Thirukkural, Mr Srinivasan, used to say that the basic cause for the defeat of the Kauravas in the Mahabharata war was the lack of the basic unity of objectives among the leaders of the Kaurava army. Bhishma did not subscribe to the cause of the Kauravas. Drona fought on the side of Kauravas not out of conviction, but out of a sense of duty. Karna refused to fight as long as Bhishma was in command. On the other hand, there was complete unity of objectives among the Pandavas who were determined to win. One might say that the Kaurava cause was lost even before the war began. No wonder, the recommendations on higher education do not progress beyond the written stage because those involved, for all the vaunted adherence to ideals, do not often share the objectives. Politicians, service organizations of teachers and students, private managements, bureaucrats and the University employees interpret the recommendations in terms of group interests, which is a far cry from the unity of objectives. If an educational scheme is important for national development, all the players of the team are enjoined to labour, no matter where they stand in the hierarchy or what their affiliations are. Subordination of group interests to the common good must be sought and obtained by consent if possible and by compulsion, if necessary. If a given scheme is cast in the 'mission mode' and specific tasks assigned to the members of the team – Government, UGC, University, teachers, students, management and University employees – it is, in my view, entirely possible to carry out a nationally important operation. Thanks to this approach, more complex missions have triumphed in India in fields as varied as agriculture and space. This does mean that no more than one or two programmes are chosen at a time – solely on the basis of societal relevance – and their professional analysis is done in terms of the roles of participants, time elements, resource requirements, incentives and disincentives, risk management and so on before the mission begins. I would go out on a limb to suggest that the time has come to launch a mission on autonomous colleges. They have been discussed threadbare for many years and form the subject of a report by the AIU. Twice blessed, the scheme will not only uplift the standards, facilities and academic climate of the colleges but will also spare the Universities of an enormous burden of administration including the conduct of examinations. As the colleges will mould the leaders of tomorrow in India, there can be no task more important,

or more demanding of attention, than the reconstruction of our collegiate network and function. I regard it as an act of high prudence to invest heavily in the improvement of our colleges.

Prior to independence very few Universities carried out teaching and research; their functions were the determination of course contents, conduct of examinations and the award of degrees. Most of the teaching at higher levels was done by the colleges, some of which were indeed outstanding. In those far-off-days, the relationship between the Universities and the small number of affiliated colleges posed few problems. Over the years, colleges grew unmanageably like our population and, at the last count, they numbered over seven thousand. The Affiliating camel's back was so close to the breaking point that the New Educational Policy of 1986 sought to develop autonomous colleges 'in large numbers until the affiliating system is replaced by a freer and more creative association of Universities with colleges'. The UGC decided to confer the autonomous status on 500 colleges during the 7th Plan and approved the payment of development grants to them for five years. Nevertheless autonomous colleges number less than 60 today. 'Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought' we continue to debate their future while precious decades go by. The revised guidelines of the UGC on the scheme can hardly be improved in so far as they deal with all there is to know about autonomous colleges. They include the need, University-college relationship, criteria for identification, mechanics of implementation, governance, monitoring and accountability and pattern of financial assistance. Nothing in the guidelines calls for amendment except the quantum of financial assistance which needs upward revision to match the increased cost of goods and services. If the grants suggested by the UGC at three levels are substantially enhanced and 1000 colleges with undergraduate and/or postgraduate programmes in arts, sciences and commerce are developed as autonomous colleges, the expenditure over a five-year period may not exceed 1000 crores. This must be seen against the total expenditure – Central and State – for education amounting to 21900 crores during 92–93. Long overdue, a technology mission for establishing 1000 autonomous colleges by 2000 AD is simply calling out to be done. It may invite scepticism and opposition, but a campaign to remove disinformation, the systematic operation of the mission and above all, its sheer topicality will ensure its success. In any case, those who hesitate to take the plunge because of possible set-backs are men of no consequence; those who matter get going regardless of obstacles. This was as true when Bhartrihari wrote the immortal lines as it is today.

Time was when Indians yearned to be led from darkness to light. In these days of spiritual famine, we may settle for less by seeking to move from inaction to action.

Higher education: costing; financial woes

Our reluctance to act is matched by our failure to count cost even when the bills begin coming in. Here again, education shares a hoary tradition with medicine. Economics which governs other enterprises have had no discernible influence on what we do in education or medicine. We do not set up a factory without knowing in advance, quite precisely, the cost of land and machinery, recurring expenditure, laws and regulations, market conditions and profitability. But we set up high-tech hospitals and educational establishments at the cost of many factories in the public sector without going through any kind of cost-benefit, logistic or even moral analysis of what we are bringing into existence. I am, of course, not referring to commercial establishments masquerading as hospitals and colleges.

To count the cost of educating a student or treating a patient is so foreign to our tradition that it might be regarded as sacrilegious. Our professional responsibility as teachers and physicians requires us to do whatever will benefit our students and patients even when the benefits may be questionable like unemployable graduates and brain-dead patients. The trouble with this approach is that it makes education and medicine far too expensive to be supported by public funds alone.

The financial fallout of neglecting cost is aggravated by many day-to-day events. The delay in the release of funds by the State Governments, a constant source of anxiety, may compel Universities to borrow from banks, use overdraft facilities or divert funds from development grants or pension funds. The grant-in-aid code may be so rigid as to require the prior approval of the Government on almost every item of expenditure; the code may not be sufficiently flexible to absorb the increase in expenditure on account of say, the rise in postal rates or railway fares. Block grants may be fixed and cut arbitrarily. In operating development schemes, the State Governments may fail to provide the matching component when the UGC grant is discontinued. The State Governments, on the other hand, view things differently. They will point out that Universities merrily appoint teaching and non-teaching staff without prior sanction; they do not carry out the instructions of the State Government, or even the Chancellor on occasion, and insist on incurring unauthorized expenditure. The disenchantment is mutual. In this climate, it is not surprising that the total expenditure on education fails to keep pace with the growth of educational institutions. It was, for example, only 2.97% and 3.55% of the GDP during the Sixth and Seventh Plans, Kothari Commission notwithstanding. This underlines as never before the need to take a careful look at the financing of higher education and the possible improvement in its efficiency. Lack of cost awareness in managing professional education has already caused a mess in relation to the self-financing

colleges. Worse may be in store unless we put our educational house in order.

Like my colleagues, I believe that financing higher education is essentially the responsibility of the government. No less an economist than Dr I. G. Patel shares this view because he sees scope for raising revenues and effecting economies elsewhere to meet the demands of higher education. Unlike developed countries, developing countries have not reached a stage when the share of education in the total national expenditure cannot increase. Less than 10% of our boys and girls receive University education which is much below that of other developing countries like Egypt and Thailand. For all the concern about the explosive growth in the number of Indian Universities, the fact remains that we need to expand the opportunities for higher education because the products of secondary school cannot meet the vast and varied job requirements of a growing economy. Primary, secondary and higher education are rightly said to form a pyramid, but if the apex turns out too narrow, we may run short of skilled manpower for industrial reconstruction and lose the path-finders for an evolving society. The case for enhancing the budgetary support for higher education cannot therefore be overstated. For a start, the Government of India could enhance financial support to the poor State Universities by reducing the enormous disparity in funding between the Central and State Universities. But, thanks to the gravity of the Indian economic crisis, enhanced funding by the governments alone cannot deliver the Universities from their deficit disease.

As a means to augment the resources for higher education, rationalization of the fee structure demands urgent attention. The cost of education and the returns due to higher education in individual earnings have risen to such high levels that a predetermined part of the cost of education – say 30–40% – must be met by the beneficiary who is the student. There must also be an inbuilt mechanism to permit the annual increase in fees as costs go up. The Universities and colleges in Maharashtra have already given a courageous lead in this direction. But much more remains to be done.

In computing the cost of higher education including technical education, costing must be rigorous to avert the problems of fee fixation which followed the judgement of the Supreme Court in the Unnikrishnan case. In so far as it concerns University income, certain general statements on fee fixation are in order. Meritorious students sponsored by industry and foreign students can afford to pay substantially higher fees than the rates computed on the basis of actual expenditure; they can cross-subsidise the low income students. But the new doctrine that requires 50% of students belonging mostly to the middle income group to cross-subsidise the remaining 50% raises many questions. Robbing Peter to pay Paul was always based on questionable ethics and, in this instance, may harm social relations in the long

run. The middle classes who flock to the Universities in the developing countries are not necessarily rich and they make great sacrifices to keep the children at the Universities. It is insensitive to classify them – including most University teachers – as privileged in countries like India where the ‘middle is only just above the minimum’. A better alternative would be to fix two rates of fees – one substantially higher for industry-sponsored and foreign students and another based on actual costs for all the other students. While the middle income groups will pay the fees, those with low income who are unable to pay will receive interest-free loans from a University Development Financial Corporation as suggested by Prof. Pylee on easy terms of repayment. If the recovery of loans is more trouble than worth it, outright grants to such students should also be considered. This can establish a rational fee structure which is fair to the student community and adequately supportive to the Universities.

The current financial crisis is such that every other source must be tapped for augmenting University income. In Buddha's India, the mercantile community virtually sustained the great centres of learning with liberal donations. The sooner the captains of our industry and commerce revive this tradition the stronger will be our University system. Endowments, higher education cess, one-time payment by employers who recruit University graduates, alumni contributions and other nontraditional sources can lighten the burden of the Universities provided we act with purpose and vigour. Vice-Chancellors must become fund-raisers and, to the extent they stoop, they will conquer. But the augmentation of income, however substantial, will fail to cure the ailments of our Universities if the expenditure is off the target.

Higher education – expenditure norms

To analyse the flow of expenditure in a University budget is the nearest thing to unscrambling an egg. But certain trends are visible and they apply to State Universities in general. Nearly eighty per cent of the entire expenditure of the Universities is met by the State Governments, development projects being financed in part by the UGC on a matching basis. Fees form a negligible part of the income. Of the Non-plan expenditure of a University, as much as 65–70% or more may be claimed by wages which may, in fact, encroach on the Plan account as well. In the wages bill, the claims of academic and nonacademic staff may be in the ratio 25:75. The bottom line is that very little – may be as little as 15% – is left for the laboratories, libraries, class rooms, student amenities and such other things which form the fabric of the University.

Long-time University watchers note that the increase in University income over the years was not accom-

panied so much by enhanced spending on libraries or laboratories as by the steadily rising percentage of expenditure on wages. This merely confirms a variant of Parkinson's law – privileged expenditure rises to meet available income. Rationalization of expenditure by measures such as streamlining of office procedures, tie-up with National laboratories and austerity measures in general are welcome; but they cannot, on their own, redress the present imbalance in the pattern of University expenditure. If the charade of spending as little as 15% on the core facilities is immutable, it is debatable whether additional funding will benefit higher education or whether it is even justifiable. At this point, I get a feeling of *déjà vu* because hospital economics poses identical questions in a different milieu.

Imagine a public hospital with five hundred beds spending three crores of rupees a year. This works out to sixty thousand rupees per bed a year and appears adequate to operate a bed in a general hospital. In reality, the hospital may be perpetually short of consumables, spares, drugs, and instruments; it may groan under erratic power supply with no generator stand-by. The answer to this paradox is not hidden inside an enigma. What has clearly happened in this hospital is that wages and utilities have claimed 75% and 10% of the annual expenditure and left no more than 15% for the patients. A scene in the 'Yes Minister' series where the administrator and employees of a newly set up hospital resent the admission of patients is not farfetched. One may save himself the illusion that raising the hospital budget from three to four crores will solve the problem because the percentage expenditure on wages and utilities will rise in proportion and leave the patients where they were. Vigilance on the pattern of expenditure is the price for attaining institutional goals.

We have learnt from experience that if the percentage expenditure on wages is kept below 55%, admittedly a difficult job, it is possible to offer reasonably good

service to patients, even in a speciality hospital. Unlike a hospital which demands manpower round-the-clock, the University system works more leisurely and needs less manpower. The financial health of the Universities can therefore improve to the extent they control the overgrowth in the percentage expenditure on wages. If I am not mistaken, norms do not exist for the percentage expenditure on wages or for the desirable ratio between the wages of the academic and non-academic staff in the Universities. So long as the norms are not fixed and adhered to over a measurable period of time, Universities have little chance of overcoming financial crises or for building first-rate laboratories, libraries, classrooms, playgrounds and hostels.

Conclusion

In suffering me on lethargy, action, cost and other earthly things, I have hoped that the forbearance of this distinguished audience may equal its accomplishments. My preference for mundane topics should cause no surprise because I belong to the surgical profession which handles tissues and reconstructs parts of the human body. The hewers of wood and drawers of water that surgeons are, surgery stands in relation to *Religio Medici* as earthly things do to the noble tree of learning. Though stricken the tree is alive, for never has it ceased to put forth flowers and fruits to meet the needs for talented men and women in our country. But trees, for all their outreach to the sky, are the daughters of earth, earthy. They need water and nutrients no less than protection from pests for survival. As celebrants of learning, no matter who we are and what we are, we are enjoined to tend the Kalpataru and gather in its shade 'where the young and the old, the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life'.