

forests to take over. The dry evergreen scrub-woodland and thickets of the Coromandel have been the most recent stage of succession, which according to him was more due to the subsequent climate changes than the eastern peninsula experienced.

While we tend to agree with Meher-Homji^{6,7}, we contend that the much celebrated tropical dry evergreen forests do not belong to a climax vegetation type. These are instead secondary stages of highly degraded coastal forests that were appropriately designated as 'paalai' by the early Tamil societies. To conclude we quote Meher-Homji⁷ who had described the tropical dry evergreen forests of Marakanam (north of Pondichery) as follows: 'this scrub may be classified under the category "tropical dry evergreen forest" of Champion⁸. However, it is not a forest in the true sense of the word but a tall thicket or scrub-woodland. Neither is it evergreen, as majority of its species are

deciduous, but different from those of the deciduous forest proper. The climate is not particularly dry, nor is the regime typically tropical. Therefore the term "tropical dry evergreen forest" is a misnomer and Meher-Homji⁶ designated this type as *A. amara* community. However, to distinguish this special vegetation of the Coromandel region from the deciduous forest, the physiognomic term "dry evergreen" is retained'.

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COMMENTARY

University education in India: Can the collapse be reversed?

Shri Singh

The higher education system in India is in a state of considerable disarray characterized by a total lack of motivation, vision, monitoring and commitment to implement the policies with purpose and firmness. The system is threatened, both from within and without. Some of the factors that have brought us to the present state, when the very existence of the system is in danger, have been identified and measures to be taken urgently on a priority basis are suggested.

The education system today requires a complete change in its perception, structure, emphasis and implementation. All the concerned people have to realize the urgency of the situation and participate in reorienting it in the right direction. But the question is can this be done? With an optimistic belief, I have tried to give a positive answer to this question. It is a reality that over the years many institutions in India have developed to be of world class with excellence. This shows that the

creativity, capability and motivation to achieve excellence are still alive in this country. What is required is a paradigm shift in our purpose and emphasis. However, no incremental change to bring improvement will be of any use. A quantum jump is required to reformulate the policies and implement them firmly. Unfortunately this is neither easy nor pleasant. However, if the country has to move forward and the collapse of higher education system has to be reversed, this difficult and unpleasant task must be taken up immediately with great urgency.

Education is the most effective instrument which can imbue people with the knowledge, skill, capability to observe and analyse the sense of purpose and confidence for building a dynamic, vibrant, just and cohesive nation able to take care of all its people. There are three stages of education – elementary, secondary and higher education (college and university level). Higher education occupies a place of special

importance because it can provide ideas and personnel to give shape to the future and also sustain all the other levels of education. For almost 25 years after independence there was strong political will and support at work to ensure that the Indian education system achieves a respectable position internationally and develops to cater to the needs of every class of people. Some things have been accomplished, but much of the effort is frustrating, our education system is one of the largest in the world, but the most chaotic¹. Here, I discuss the status and problems of higher education in India.

While formulating the policy of higher education in India a two-tier system was adopted: the Central universities under the responsibility of the Central Government and State Universities under the control of the State Governments. The gulf between the Central and State Universities is quite substantial and increasing day by day.

The lack of political will in successive governments, at the Centre and in the States, and the attitude of the teachers have over the last 35 years reduced India's once proud universities (and colleges) to a state of almost irreparable mediocrity. Public perception and attitude have also contributed to the overall scenario.

Time has come when people should realize the urgency of the situation and participate in reorienting the education system in the right direction. Can it be done? The silver lining in this dark firmament is the presence of an advanced educational system, spearheaded by the IITs, IIMs, IISc, many elite institutions, and a few Central and State Universities that have developed as world-class institutions of excellence. These institutions have several positive features – large, well-endowed campuses to provide a conducive academic environment, contemporary curricula, capable faculty, excellent infrastructural facilities (library, laboratories, etc.) and overall a robust internal governance mechanism capable of preventing dilution of the main mission of these institutions. This shows that the creativity, capability and curiosity to achieve excellence are still alive in India. What is required today is a paradigm shift in education policies and its firm implementation. Instead of incremental changes here and there, a total change in education policy and implementation strategy is the need of the present hour.

Indian universities were not in such a bad shape up to fifteen years after independence. In the 1950s and early 1960s, there were a few universities involved in both research and teaching. In these universities research grew around brilliant individual researchers. The research funding was meagre. The number of research papers also was small, but were full of new approaches and ideas. In all fields of national activities and challenges, the presence of these universities and their alumni was visible and effective. Then the declining period of higher education started in the late 1960s and 1970s and the trend continued at an accelerated rate. A large number of colleges and universities were opened, mostly under political pressure, with no trained and competent faculties and infrastructure. A number of institutes offering specialized education sprang up with competent faculty members and necessary infrastructure. The main concern of these institutes was to develop state-of-the-art infrastructure facilities and adopt

robust standards for recruitment, assessment of research and teaching with full accountability. As a result, most of these have become synonymous with quality and excellence. Why have universities failed to develop in the same way? Broadly, the following factors can be identified for the downward trend of the higher education system.

Except for a few Central Universities and institutes, the universities and colleges are under the direct responsibility of State Governments. There is no uniformity in the formulation and implementation of policies among different State Governments. In many States, every priority changes with the change of State Government. However, in most of the States educational institutions were opened to make money without bothering to develop infrastructure facilities and recruiting well-deserving faculties. The politicians have contributed to this situation perhaps the most, resulting in complete lack of political will and support to achieve academic excellence.

The UGC is vested with two responsibilities² – providing funds, and coordination, determination and maintenance of standards in institutions of higher education. Even a minimum common syllabus could not be implemented. The UGC has no way to control the quality of teaching, recruitment of teachers, ensuring minimum infrastructure to all the institutions, monitoring and promoting research activities. In my opinion the autonomy given to the universities, the scheme of recruitments and promotions, concerns, attitudes and priorities of State Governments have been detrimental in achieving the goals of education.

Several commissions and committees were appointed by the Government of India from time to time to recommend measures to be taken to achieve the goals. However, the analysis of developments makes it clear that desired results could not be obtained. Why is it so?

Education cannot achieve and maintain its excellence unless the policy makers, planners and those responsible for implementation are able to support its thrust in a positive direction. It is almost self-evident that the desired results are directly dependent on two factors: If those involved with the programme planning, resource allocation and actual operation of the teaching/research learning process do not understand their task or take them casually, no worthwhile result can accrue. The second aspect is more important. The honest inten-

tion and action-oriented firm implementation of any policy is the key to the success of the plan. The experience of past several decades makes it clear that those who are at the helm of affairs either are not capable or are hesitant to take firm decisions to implement the policies in the interest of institutions.

The single-most important factor which has affected higher education is the lack of well-deserving, sincere and motivated faculty members. The mechanism by and large for recruiting and promoting well-deserving faculty has failed. Many external perturbations have worked to see that right kind of person is not appointed.

The most frustrating aspect of this issue is that a teacher once appointed can continue in his position till retirement, even if his performance is unsatisfactory. Accountability is never demanded. The merit promotion scheme for teachers has served as the last nail in the coffin of the higher education system. Due to the trade union-like attitude of the Teacher Associations, the criterion was diluted and as practiced today, it is now a time-bound promotion scheme. A sizable fraction of faculty members in the universities are not actively involved in teaching and research; they are not aware of the changing academic scenario, and many do no research at all. As a bonus, everyone is being promoted and several of them are heading various departments and faculties. The most serious and frustrating feature is the negligible importance given to academic performance of the faculty members who are the backbone of the academic world.

In universities, since work revolves round the Vice-Chancellors, it is important to appoint a person whose honesty, sincerity, commitment and integrity are unquestionable. The robust system of appointment of Vice-Chancellors has failed to appoint deserving persons because of the lack of political will and honest intention.

There is little scope for a Vice-Chancellor to be actively involved in contributing to increase academic standards. In the name of autonomy of colleges, especially in State Universities, the college affairs are supervised by ill-designed and ill-motivated management committees. Under these circumstances the number of Vice-Chancellors who struggle to create better academic atmosphere and vigorously pursue to achieve academic excellence is small. So the situation either remains as it is or worsens further.

The various awards/recognitions often appear inversely correlated with the academic excellence of the recipients. It also seems to follow the principle of a cooperative phenomenon so that the same person continues to receive one award after another, even though during the interim period no outstanding contribution may have actually been made by him. It is even more distressing when this happens by ignoring someone who even under harsh working conditions has made excellent contributions.

In our university system the commodity which is in greatest shortage seems to be intellectual appreciation by fellow-workers. In my experience it generates apathy in the working group and destroys the academic fabric.

Accountability is necessary in any autonomous system. No effective procedure in the structure of the higher education system has yet been formulated for monitoring and evaluation, together with the visible checks and balances for ensuring accountability.

Policy planners are aware of the above-mentioned distressing features of our education system. Unfortunately, a few of them believe that the damage is beyond repair, and instead of struggling to improve the situation, it is better to open new institutions with the focused aim of imparting quality education. However, in the opinion of many of us, only a few world-class universities cannot survive and make an impact to change the education scenario in a country of this size and empower the world's largest population of the young³. So the need of the hour is to adopt drastic measures to bring the desired change in the prevailing situation.

The governments (both Central and State) need to create a policy framework that can guide the development of this crucial sector. In opinion all the State Governments should realize the role and importance of education and act decisively to work out a time-bound action plan and implementation strategies for quality education. In this task, the Central Government should work with the States to improve their funding and develop an appropriate governance structure, so that they can move away from their present role as mere degree-granting ma-

chines. Another way is that education could be listed as a subject of the Central Government. However, under the resource constraints of the Central Government, it may not be possible to move in this direction which involves a step-function change. All the above suggested measures require a strong political will and firmness in action to make available quality education to all young people of the country.

Efforts must be concentrated to develop a uniform course structure, and teaching and examination patterns and then to evolve a method to implement all these strictly. This will change the education scenario and provide an opportunity for all to get quality education in the country.

Even a highly deserving person would fail to produce results if the appropriate infrastructure and a stimulating academic atmosphere are not available. Therefore, to get the best out of the faculty and to involve a large cross-section in academics, it is necessary to gear our institutions to develop a mechanism for acquisition, maintenance and optimal and equitable use of sophisticated research facilities. Since the entire funding for such facilities cannot be provided by the government agencies, the universities need to generate more local resources. Another feasible option is that a few institutions can jointly develop these facilities and a mechanism to make use of these. This will require bringing about a change in our work culture and philosophy of working together by helping each other.

Any improvement in infrastructure is meaningless unless there is competent faculty in the universities and colleges. Security of tenure breeds complacency and inertia⁴. In India a few universities, IITs, IIMs, TIFR, IISc and many more elite institutes have developed and adopted new modalities for admission of talented students, recruitment of well-deserving faculties, evaluation of faculty performance for promotion, and have created an excellent infrastructure and stimulating atmosphere. In my opinion the modalities adopted by these institutions should be taken by the concerned government departments and all the universities, and other institutions must be asked to implement it. No relaxation of any kind should be granted.

For academic excellence and vibrant academic atmosphere, the promotion procedure adopted by an institution should be selective in recognizing and rewarding on the basis of a fair system of performance appraisal. If the higher education system has to survive the 'time-bound promotion scheme' needs to be stopped immediately at all cost. The provisions of assessment and review have to be implemented strictly. Only those teachers should be promoted whose performance in teaching and research is excellent.

The appointment of Vice-Chancellors should be an academic activity, free of political and other kinds of interference. Those who are appointed to such high positions must be persons with clear academic vision, administrative capability and high academic excellence. Only such persons can give academic leadership and run the system efficiently and plan the future on long-term basis. The term of appointment of Vice-Chancellors must be for five years, so that he/she can execute developmental and other plans effectively.

The universities must do away with provisions of appointing Heads of Departments and Deans on seniority. A procedure must be adopted to entrust these responsibilities to an academician who has demonstrated his own academic excellence and possesses the capability of academic leadership.

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