

What emaciated higher education

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 08 April 2015 05:43



Another academic year is all set to begin. The 'gup-shup' during the morning walks in parks these days is focused on the concern of the parents whose children are about to move from secondary level to the universities. The air is rife with speculation whether Delhi University would have a cut-off which could make it impossible for several bright and meritorious students to get an admission; there are also discussions on the possibility of finding credible educational avenues outside the national Capital or even abroad. "Why not, if one can afford it, why not," is the common refrain; which I wonder whether to welcome or to be worried about. A few days back at a workshop of principals organised by the Academic Staff College of Jamia Millia Islamia, I ended up ruffling quite a few feathers when I tried to put forth the point that the academic monoliths under the government's patronage were facing a serious threat from the universities coming up in the private sector. I could see an instant closing of ranks under the tutelage of a top honcho of the University Grants Commission (UGC), who found me propounding something which they thought, was absolute blasphemy. It's another matter that a few days later a former chairman of the UGC Professor Hari Gautam came out with the report declaring the commission-where this gentleman was a long time secretary-as an utter failure. While there is a general consensus over the fact that the major universities in our country have degenerated over the years, there is a need to examine what has brought higher education under government patronage to a stage where a radical overhaul is being called for.

The setting-up of universities by the British from 1857 onwards, is denounced by a large section of scholars, though with superficial arguments, as being responsible for bringing an education system which trained clerks for the empire. However, many seasoned and respected social scientists do not agree with this line of thought. Sociologist Andre Beteille says these universities opened up new horizons both intellectually and institutionally.

Another celebrated historian Ramchandra Guha argues that while prejudices relating to caste and gender did not immediately disappear here (on the university campuses) but they came to be questioned and gradually the logic of British rule was also examined here. There is enough evidence on record that in the colonial period the Indian universities were not just promoted as centres of higher education but also those of research.

Another high point of the pre-Independence era was the effort of educationists like Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee and Madan Mohan Malviya to make these aforementioned universities a diverse social amalgam. If pragmatism and pluralism were hallmark of the pre-Independence era, post-1947 the campuses slowly got overtaken by parochial concerns. Even the once prestigious Delhi University has failed to escape from this scourge.

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The other major challenge which was faced by the universities in the post-Independence period was the erosion of their research base with the creation of institutions like Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and similar establishments in the humanities and commerce streams of learning. The creation of parallel centres of higher education like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) emaciated the universities both in the matter of human and financial resources. The university teaching levels further came to suffer from what Max Weber had deplored and warned against, with the professors trying to inculcate their belief and ideology in their students and discouraging critical free thinking in their pupils.

The maladies enumerated above left university campuses across the country weakened. A significant part of the blame can be apportioned to various teacher movements, which produced, promoted and protected mediocrity. I know this would invite a fusillade of barbs but the fact remains that today chairs in several staff rooms of the Delhi university colleges are occupied by people who would fail an ordinary test in the very subject they claim to teach.

Last month when I visited a private university for a seminar in Noida, I was surprised to meet very bright and articulate students, who said that the academic drill on their campus was very hard and they had no time “for fun” all through the day. I am sure no Delhi University teacher can say the same for his or her college. Both the students and the teachers have all the time for fun. This has brought the traditional universities face to face with private universities in competing for the best and the brightest.

Courted with the challenges of the market and lack of employability of the pupil and with a caste system among the universities and colleges, have left campuses patronized by the government in a Catch-22 situation: whether to seek catharsis or continue with the status quo. The Hari Gautam committee report on functioning of the UGC states that the commission “failed to fulfil its mandate and was not able to deal with emerging diverse complexities.”

It further adds, UGC is “plagued in the main by reductionism in its functioning.” The report states, “It (UGC) has side-stepped its function of being a sentinel of excellence in education and embraced the relatively easier function of funding education.” Down the line, the universities and colleges have imbibed these “qualities” of reducing themselves to be mere disbursing counters for teacher salaries.

Attempts at ending absenteeism among teachers have been repeatedly stonewalled. Everybody from the UGC downwards knows that tutorial classes are not held in colleges but they still find mention in the timetables to create the requisite workload to justify salary for teachers. For the resurrection of Indian universities as centres of excellence, commitment and innovation; research has to find a place of primacy. Sustainability of the university system can be achieved

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by encouraging investment in terms of both human and financial resources, and also insure an effective system of monitoring progress. India can achieve a consistency in growth rate only by resurrecting its centres of higher education, which is not an impossible job.

(The author is Consulting Editor,
[Millennium Post](#)
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