

Divide and Educate

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Indian education is becoming increasingly divisive. Cuts in public funding for primary education and child welfare are laying the basis for new inequities in higher education. The funding of public universities is grossly unequal; the expansion of private universities is causing further imbalance. The class profile of the academic community is being redrawn. Social and human factors apart, these trends threaten the prospects of adequate human resource development for India's economic growth.

This is an article on India's higher education policy. But for a proper perspective, I must start by looking at primary education. Let me begin with an anecdote.

I had taken a taxi to my place of work, Jadavpur University. The cab driver had never been inside the campus, never conceived of such a large space devoted to education. He said he would like his young son to study there so that he might learn to repair mobile phones. I suggested that their local Industrial Training Institute might suffice for that; if he could fund his son through university, the young man might work for a telecom firm, or set up a business himself. I left this dutiful father, with some schooling and experience of city life, more confused than encouraged by the prospect.

I was reminded of this encounter by a newspaper report that the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) would conduct a nationwide survey to assess whether vocational training can be introduced in upper primary schools (*Statesman* 2016). One would have to be exceptionally naïve to imagine that children of the privileged classes would number among the "beneficiaries" of such a provision. The demographic profile of high-school vocational students speaks for itself. We cannot foretell the findings of the NCERT survey; but to conduct such a survey at all is to accept the fallacy of confusing aptitude with social and familial conditioning, particularly in terms of class, caste, gender and economic status. The fallacy is being garbed as painstaking scientific method: even "regions and climates" will be taken into account. In other words, children from Delhi and Bastar, or Gujarat and Arunachal, will be profiled in radically different terms. Their plans and ambitions, or even their parents, might be grossly unreal. My taxi driver would have said he wanted his son to repair mobile phones.

We have heard nothing about the project since;¹ but if only at a symbolic level, it offers a telling clue to the union government's education policy. India has finally achieved near-universal enrolment in primary education with a balanced gender ratio (UNESCO 2015: 21). But even in 2014–15, the drop-out rate was 4.3%, rising to over 10% in five north-eastern states (*India Today* 2016).² Surveys consistently report alarming under-performance in children's attainments. Child labour, in "family enterprises" fancifully definable, was legalised in 2016. This was the situation after seven years of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, passed 62 years after independence.

Underfunding of primary education and child development is virtually being implemented as a policy. Allocation for the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) or *anganwadi* scheme fell by 6.5% in 2015–16 and a further 6.6% in 2016–17. From this low base, it has risen by 15% in 2017–18 to its highest ever amount, but only marginally higher than in 2014–15 even before adjusting for inflation. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) budget fell by 9.5% in 2015–16, rose 2.2% from this base in 2016–17 and a further 4.4% in 2017–18, but is still nearly 12% below the 2013–14 level, again before adjusting for inflation. It also marks the lowest point (42%) in the steadily declining allocation-to-outlay ratio for SSA (CBGA 2017: 22). The 2015–16 budget for the Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS) was 16.4% below 2014–15, with fewer children benefiting; the number of beneficiaries had dropped still more sharply the previous year (PIB 2016). The allocation rose 5% in 2016–17 and another 3.1% in 2017–18; but again, this is nearly 18% less than in 2013–14 before adjusting for inflation. (All figures in this paragraph are based on Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) (2017: 45) unless otherwise noted.)

The centre has also reduced its share in the SSA from 65% to 60% (PIB 2015), and in the MDMS from 75% to 60% (PIB 2016). These cuts (added to those in other sectors) are hardly compensated by the additional 10% of central tax revenue that the states now receive. A symbolic factoid says it all: the United Progressive Alliance government withdrew the LPG subsidy for MDMS, and its successor has not

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restored it (Singh 2012). Of the education cesses levied on all taxes, ₹13,298 crore for basic education and no less than ₹64,288 crore for secondary and tertiary education lay unspent on 31 March 2015 (Hindu 2015). Since then, these cesses have been merged in an enhanced service tax whose proceeds need not be spent on education. That reduces accountability but does not solve the challenge of human resource development.

Neither Need Nor Merit

The centre has now found a way to reduce the cess mountain. It will set up 20 “world-class” universities, 10 state-run and 10 private, and feed the former ₹500 crore each over the next five years—that is, a total of ₹5,000 crore (UGC 2016b: 7). Place this against the ₹4,692 crore allocated to the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2017–18 (CBGA 2017: 23) for the entire public university system, including full running costs for 46 central universities and virtually all development grants for 360 state universities.³ In 2015–16, roughly 56% of the UGC Plan grants and 88% of non-Plan grants went to central universities; state universities received 19% and 4.3% respectively. The figures for 2014–15 were still more skewed: 70% and 89% to central universities and 15% and 3.6% to state universities of Plan and non-Plan grants respectively. For colleges, over 85% of Plan grants in 2015–16 (83% in 2014–15) went to state institutions, but virtually 100% of non-Plan grants to central ones in both years (UGC 2015: 235, 240, 244–45; UGC 2016a: 69, 73, 76–77).

States might be expected to meet the non-Plan expenses of their own establishments, though they cannot possibly match the mounting salary levels of central universities. For development funds, all universities in India can reasonably expect major support from the UGC. As the figures I have quoted earlier show, this is just not happening. The Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) provides additional funds to state universities, but in a 65:35 ratio (90:10 for hill states and Jammu and Kashmir: RUSA (2013: 87)). Another body under formation, the Higher Education Financing Agency, will actually lend money at interest. It is assumed that only institutions like the Indian

Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) will constitute its clients.

The “world-class” bonanza for 20 institutions—of which some private ones may not exist as yet—seems part of an unspoken agenda to dismantle the current higher education system as a whole. Social justice aside, in terms of sheer educational strategy, this subversive policy will leave the nation’s human resource pool permanently depleted. The outcome is almost arithmetically predictable.

We need not waste breath on the crassness of a scheme to conjure up “world-class” universities by government fiat. If throwing money at new or reinvented campuses could ensure “international” quality, King Saud University in Riyadh would be the world’s leading institution. India itself hosts two formally international universities whose budgets are dramatically above Indian norms, taxpayer-funded through the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) rather than the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). In 2017–18, the MEA allocated ₹260 crore to South Asian University (up from ₹79 crore revised to ₹184 crore in 2016–17: OBI 2017: 99), with 522 students in 2015⁴ and 56 faculty members. India is committed to \$300 million (approximately ₹1,930 crore at current rates) to meet its entire capital costs, not to mention a 100 acre plot in South Delhi (SAU 2015: 6). Nalanda University was allocated ₹200 crore by the MEA in both 2016–17 and 2017–18 (revised down to ₹100 crore in 2016–17: OBI 2017: 99). The MEA is committed to ₹1,750 crore towards its capital expenditure (MEA 2016: 14), besides contributions from other nations. The scale of Nalanda’s targeted expenditure might be gauged from the fact that the university budgeted for ₹367 crore in 2014–15 (Nalanda 2013: 48). That was over two-thirds the 2014–15 budget estimate of ₹510 crore of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU 2014), a central university with some 8,000 students and nearly 600 faculty in place against some 150 students and 25 faculty at Nalanda today (15 students in 2014).⁵ JNU has headed the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) list among “universities” so named⁶ since the NIRF’s inception. The state-government-run Jadavpur

University (10,000+ students, some 600 faculty in place), which has topped all Indian universities (so named) in the Times Higher Education (THE) table two years running, had budget actuals of ₹226 crore in 2015–16 (Jadavpur 2016: i).⁷

Clearly, the quantum of funds is not determined even remotely by either need or merit: the mismatch is almost grotesque. I have already noted the gross disparity in levels of UGC support to the central and the state universities. The UGC’s actual expenditure declined from a high of ₹4,967 crore in 2013–14 (MHRD 2016: 128) to ₹4,186 crore in 2015–16. It has thereafter climbed to a budget estimate of ₹4,692 crore in 2017–18 (CBGA 2017: 23), but the actual expenditure remains to be seen. And most unsettling of all, disbursement of sanctioned funds can be indefinitely delayed as never before. Needless to say, all this does not affect the MEA-funded Nalanda and South Asian Universities.

There is also glaring variance between the assessments of various agencies: international rankings like THE or Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), or the MHRD’s own separate assessments through NIRF and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). Not all universities participate in all the ranking exercises; the lists do not cover the same range of institutions or apply the same criteria. The bizarre result is that there is not a single name common to all four of the QS, THE, NAAC and NIRF choices of India’s top 10 universities (top six for QS).

It is uncertain whether the authorities will identify the 20 institutions marked for “world-class” status on the basis of the grossly incomplete 2016 NIRF, as first announced, or the fuller (though not comprehensive) list of 2017, or any other ranking. Nor is it clear how this proposal will mesh with the earlier plan (still featured on the MHRD website) for world-class “innovation universities.” Maybe it does not matter, for no institutions have been identified nor any funds disbursed.

Public and Private, Rich and Poor

No less bizarre is the specification of 10 private to 10 public universities for “world-class” status. As of now, there would not be 10 or even five private universities

among India's top 20, judged by any criteria. The "world-class" private institutions can even be greenfield, qualifying solely by the quantum of funds invested (or perhaps merely pledged). The "world-class" tag would be gifted on the strength of future claims, not past performance. In exchange, these universities would be free from all external regulation, academic or financial; have no set criteria for appointments; and effectively charge what fees they liked, provided no meritorious student was turned away.

That last stipulation is almost impossible to enforce. It might create the situation threatening the IITs, that steeply enhanced fees might actually lower revenues (*Economic Times* 2016). But the real problem lies elsewhere. Given the downscaling of schooling for the poor, as I described at the outset, very few indigent students could qualify for entry in the first place. There is a seamless and mischievous consistency between the unfolding policies for primary and tertiary education.

It cannot be denied—in fact, it should be strongly asserted—that an effective university system fosters an elitism of merit. But for merit to prevail, two other factors are imperative. The first is an equitable system of schooling irrespective of gender, economic or social status. The other is a pyramidal structure of tertiary education—the top rung of institutions supported by many more of only slightly less merit, and so down, tier by tier. There can be peaks of excellence rising from the foothills, but not looming islands in a sea of under-performance. Our favoured policy seeks to invert this structure by lavishing funds, freedom and attention on a handful of institutions to the detriment of the rest. Social justice apart, such a scenario is pedagogically untenable. It can only undermine the educational edifice as a whole.

Two matters call for special thought. One is the feasible extent of private-sector tertiary education. Twenty years ago, there were virtually no private universities in India, except hole-in-the-corner outfits in a few "rogue" states. Today, two-thirds of students at tertiary level study at private universities (in the full sense, excluding private colleges affiliated to public universities). Though the demand

for private education seems inexhaustible, sooner or later there will be a shortage of students both able and willing to pay: the market may end up outpricing itself. In the deplorable absence of educational philanthropy in India, funding constraints prevent private campuses from developing into truly full-fledged universities with a wide range of faculties, above all in the basic sciences (as opposed to lucrative branches of technology). Even prohibitive fees cannot suffice to fund the infrastructure. Hence, the few private universities run on relatively enlightened lines offer a curious mix of technology and the humanities (in one case the latter alone), with a yawning gap in the intervening space of basic science and other fundamental studies.

The other disquieting prospect is that the coming dispensation virtually debars our poorer youths from a higher education worth the name. They will continue by default to populate state-run universities, whose funding has sunk to unviable levels. These universities are also plagued by a host of home-grown problems. Almost without exception, state governments have played a discreditable role in corrupting the universities in their care, turning them into local satrapies. Even if the centre were to offer lavish funds, many state governments might decline them for fear of losing political control over the campuses. If a handful of state universities still figure among the nation's best—seven of THE's best 10 and four of QS's best six, though curiously only three of NIRF's best 10—it is through a heroic effort by the faculty, sometimes virtually fighting their political overlords.

Power and the Perpetuation of Inequality

In effect, the centre and the states are either competing or conspiring to curb campus freedom and academic confidence. In the past three years, they have engaged as never before to crush not only dissent but the unregulated pursuit of knowledge. There can be nothing more perverse than to imagine that "world-class" institutions, or even "centres of excellence," can be created by thought control on set lines; yet more and more, our rulers seem intent on confining

higher education to the rote learning of advanced employment skills. This—apart from the obvious financial benefits—is a major reason for the advocacy of private universities. The latter's clientele, keen to extract full career advantage from the hefty sums they invest, is unlikely to disrupt the establishment. (This is also true of high-profile, increasingly costly public-sector professional institutions like the IITs and IIMs.) Hence any sign of free thought, let alone dissent, in a private institution causes special alarm in the ruling establishment, as witnessed last year in India's only private university devoted solely to the liberal arts. Meanwhile, the aggressive student outfits of all major parties play havoc in the public campuses on their respective turfs. Their aggression should not be construed as an excess of youthful freedom: the apparent license is the instrument of a deadening control over the academic community, stifling all freedom, let alone dissent.

This is the very reverse of a viable ambience for higher learning. The institutions (chiefly in the West) held up as models have many insidious restrictions in place, most often through class and economic preconditions; but they project the image, and in good measure the reality, of an arena for free thought and debate. It is folly to think that research initiative and original thought in any sphere of knowledge, even the supposedly value-neutral realm of science and technology, can flourish if its exponents are barred from exercising their minds freely in all other directions. Our higher education system has long been geared to employment skills masquerading as scientific education. We need not contest this purpose by touting a lofty ideal of pure knowledge. Let us, by all means, view the pursuit of knowledge as an economic end. Our current policies will not achieve that end. Rather, such intellectual subservience will perpetuate our economic and political subservience within the global order.

Despite innumerable faults, independent India's public universities held the potential for a genuine knowledge delivery system that could and did engage with the West on an honourable footing and might, in time, have matched it in stature. That prospect has faded with

the West on an honourable footing and might, in time, have matched it in stature. That prospect has faded with the incursion of three factors: destructive politicisation (as opposed to a responsible political culture); misapplication of the principles of free economy; and the insistence of the Indian middle class on reducing education to an employment machine for their young. In the process, the academic profession has allowed itself to be part compromised, part demoralised and disempowered.

More and more, India's higher education system is cosy up to the people already lodged in its bosom, with no call to look further. Incursions from outside the circle are seen as a burden and, worse, a threat. Hence the energetic moves, outlined at my start, to frustrate whatever reformative potential might remain in the state school system. Till now, the public universities had provided some corrective to the inequities faced by the nation's youth earlier at school or later in the job market. Current policy would divest the universities of that function. We are moving towards a system whereby the most ambitious and privileged students—if they do not head abroad straight after school—will attend expensive private institutions where they might possibly obtain a rich and liberating education, but probably no more than efficient professional training and added social cachet. Something of these benefits will accrue to other such students, plus the luckiest and most ambitious of the underprivileged, in a sprinkling of central universities. The general run of students will proceed from a restrictive and impoverished school environment to equally impoverished state-government-run universities to nurse their faltering ambitions—or their growing anger, to the nation's detriment and their own.

The irony is that this should happen in the name of human resource creation for economic growth. The unacknowledged assumption is that we can afford to undertrain and under-employ the greater part of our population. For all our talk of demographic dividend, we have attention only for our Canada- or Australia-sized affluent and articulate population. Such an outlook might suit a vendor of consumer durables, but hardly the makers of a national

education policy. It begs two questions. One is that our best human resources reside exclusively within that Canada or Australia rather than the whole of India: a demented fantasy of class-based genetics to which, one suspects, many subscribe though few confess. The other is that even the privileged classes can best prosper, or prosper at all, by shouldering the burden of an immense band of their countrymen whom they have prevented from improving their own lot or the nation's.

It may be wrong to accuse our planners of a lack of vision. From the primary to the tertiary, each new step is synchronised to a single purpose. Sadly, that purpose seems directed to deprive and exclude rather than to develop and integrate. As a nation, we have decided to short-change ourselves drastically with respect to human resources. We may rue it if, to say nothing of other losses, we stint on this score and yet, or therefore, end up with empty coffers.

NOTES

- As on 5 June 2017, there was nothing on the subject traceable in the NCERT website or that of its subsidiary, the Pandit Sundarlal Sharma Central Institute of Vocational Education. The programmes featured on the latter's site related to the year 2015–16.
- The report cites a parliamentary reply by the then HRD Minister.
- Figures from the UGC website, accessed on 5 June 2017.
- The university has a goal of 7,000 students and 700 teachers (SAU 2017), but reached only the above enrolment in 2015, the latest year for which figures are accessible (SAU 2015: 11).
- Of course, Nalanda is a university under construction, and the proposed budget was no doubt chiefly for this purpose. Its actual expenditure for 2014–15 was under ₹21 crore (Nalanda 2014: 44), presumably for the same reason as in the previous year (Nalanda 2013: 48), delay in awarding contracts for capital works.
- With all ranking tables, the ranks cited are among "universities" so named, excluding IITs and research institutes like the Indian Institute of Science.
- One should add that Nalanda charges ₹1,24,000 as tuition for a two-year course, and a minimum of ₹70,000 per annum for board and lodging. South Asian University charges students from SAARC countries \$2,000 (=₹1,30,000) for a two-year course including hostel rent; non-SAARC students pay over 10 times this amount. JNU charges an average of ₹1,000 for a two-year postgraduate course, including hostel rent. Jadavpur University charges ₹900 per annum for an arts postgraduate course, rising to ₹4,800 for engineering, and under ₹4,000 over two years for hostel rent. In other words, the institutions receiving hugely more public funds per student are also charging hugely more fees from them.

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