

Higher education Ugly face of knowledge economy

With the basic issues of quality, equity and access to higher education in India still unresolved, the country is ill prepared to generate knowledge creators or workers of the highest quality largely due to government apathy. If the current trends are any indication, reliance on the market forces is further aggravating the crisis, writes **N. Raghuram**

Higher education in India is gasping for breath, at a time when India is aiming to be an important player in the emerging knowledge economy. With about 300 universities and deemed universities, over 15,000 colleges and hundreds of national and regional research institutes, Indian higher education and research sector ranks the third largest in the world, in terms of the number of students it caters to. However, not a single Indian university finds even a mention in a recent international ranking of the top 200 universities of the world, except an IIT ranked at 41, whereas there were three universities

each from China, Hong Kong and South Korea and one from Taiwan. On the other hand, it is also true that there is no company or institute in the world that has not benefited by graduates, post-graduates or Ph.D.s from India: be it NASA, IBM, Microsoft, Intel, Bell, Sun, Harvard, MIT, Caltech, Cambridge or Oxford, and not all those students are products of our IITs, IIMs IISc/TIFR or central universities, which cater to barely one per cent of the Indian student population. This is not to suggest that we should pat our backs for the achievements of our students abroad, but to point out that Indian higher educational institutions have not been able to achieve the same status for themselves as their students seem to achieve elsewhere with their education from here.

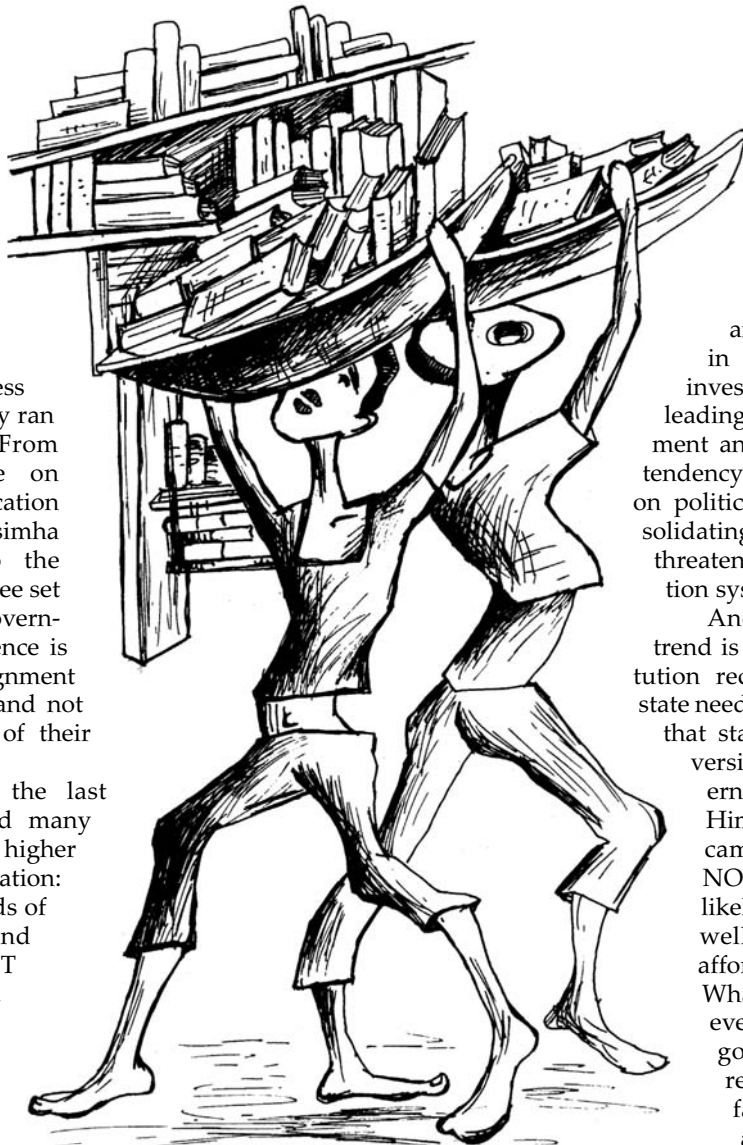
IN THE RUN UP TO THE ECONOMIC REFORMS IN 1991, THE IMF, WORLD BANK AND THE COUNTRIES THAT CONTROL THEM HAVE BEEN CRYING HOARSE OVER THE ALLEGED PAMPERING OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA AT THE COST OF SCHOOL EDUCATION. THE FACT OF THE MATTER WAS THAT SCHOOL EDUCATION WAS ALREADY PRIVATISED TO THE EXTENT THAT GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS BECAME AN OPTION ONLY TO THOSE WHO CANNOT AFFORD PRIVATE SCHOOLS MUSHROOMING IN EVERY STREET CORNER

While many reasons can be cited for this situation, they all boil down to decades of feudally managed, colonialy modelled institutions run with inadequate funding and excessive political interference. Only about 10 per cent of the total student population enters higher education in India, as compared to over 15 per cent in China and 50 per cent in the major industrialised countries. Higher education is largely funded by the state and central governments so far, but the situation is changing fast. Barring a few newly established private universities, the government funds most of the universities, whereas at the college level, the balance is increasingly being reversed. The experience over the last few decades has clearly shown that unlike school education,

privatisation has not led to any major improvements in the standards of higher education and professional education. Yet, in the run up to the economic reforms in 1991, the IMF, world bank and the countries that control them have been crying hoarse over the alleged pampering of higher education in India at the cost of school education. The fact of the matter was that school education was already privatised to the extent that government schools became an option only to those who cannot afford private schools mushrooming in every street corner, even in small towns and villages. On the other hand, in higher education and professional courses, relatively better quality teaching and infrastructure has been available only in government colleges and universities, while private institutions of higher education in

India capitalised on fashionable courses with minimum infrastructure. Nevertheless, the successive governments over the last two decades have only pursued a path of privatisation and deregulation of higher education, regardless of which political party ran the government. From Punnaiah committee on reforms in higher education set up by the Narasimha Rao government to the Birla-Ambani committee set up by the Vajpayee government, the only difference is in their degree of alignment to the market forces and not in the fundamentals of their recommendations.

With the result, the last decade has witnessed many sweeping changes in higher and professional education: For example, thousands of private colleges and institutes offering IT courses appeared all across the country by the late 1990s and disappeared in less than a decade, with devastating consequences for the students and teachers who depended on them for their careers. This situation is now repeating itself in management, biotechnology, bioinformatics and other emerging areas. No one asked any questions about opening or closing such institutions, or bothered about whether there were qualified teachers at all, much less worry about teacher-student ratio, floor area ratio, class rooms, labs, libraries etc. All these regulations that existed at one time (though not always enforced strictly as long as there were bribes to collect) have now been deregulated or softened under the self-financing scheme of higher and professional education adopted by the UGC in the 9th five-year plan and enthusiastically followed by the central and state governments. This situation reached its extreme recently in the



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new state of Chattisgarh, where over 150 private universities and colleges came up within a couple of years, till the scam got exposed by a public interest litigation and the courts ordered the state government in 2004 to derecognise and close most of these universities or merge them with the remaining recognized ones. A whole generation of students and teachers are suffering irreparable damage to their careers due to these trends, for no fault of theirs. Even government-funded colleges and universities in most states started many "self-financing" courses in IT, biotechnology etc., without qualified teachers, labs or infrastructure and charging huge fees from the students and are liberally giving them marks and degrees to hide their inadequacies.

It is not that the other well-

established departments and courses in government funded colleges and universities are doing any better. Decades of government neglect, poor funding, frequent ban on faculty recruitments and promotions, reduction in library budgets, lack of investments in modernization leading to obsolescence of equipment and infrastructure, and the tendency to start new universities on political grounds without consolidating the existing ones today threatens the entire higher education system.

Another corollary of this trend is that an educational institution recognized in a particular state need not limit its operations to that state. This meant that universities approved by the governments of Chattisgarh or Himachal Pradesh can set up campuses in Delhi or NOIDA, where they are more likely to get students from well off families who can afford their astronomical fees. What is more, they are not even accountable to the local governments, since their recognition comes from a far away state. Add to this a new culture of well-branded private educational institutions allowing franchisees at far away locations to run their courses, without being responsible to the students or teachers in any other way. This is not only true of NIITs and Aptechns, but is also increasingly becoming a trend with foreign universities, especially among those who do not want to set up their own shop here, but would like to benefit from the degree-purchasing power of the growing upwardly mobile economic class of India. Soon we might see private educational institutions getting themselves listed in the stock market and soliciting investments in the education business on the slogan that its demand will never see the sunset.

The economics of imparting higher education are such that, barring a few courses in arts and

humanities, imparting quality education in science, technology, engineering, medicine etc. requires huge investments in infrastructure, all of which cannot be recovered through student fees, without making higher education inaccessible to a large section of students. Unlike many better-known private educational institutions in Western countries that operate in the charity mode with tuition waivers and fellowships (which is why our students go there), most private colleges and universities in India are pursuing a profit motive. This is the basic reason for charging huge tuition fees, apart from forced donations, capitation fees and other charges. Despite huge public discontent, media interventions and many court cases, the governments have not been able to regulate the fee structure and donations in these institutions. Even the courts have only played with the terms such as payment seats, management quotas etc., without addressing the basic issue of fee structure.

It is not only students but also teachers who are at the receiving end of the ongoing transformation in higher education. The nation today witnesses the declining popularity of teaching as a profession, not only among the students that we produce, but also among parents, scientists, society and the government. The teaching profession today attracts only those who have missed all other "better" opportunities in life, and is increasingly mired in bureaucratic controls and anti-education concepts such as "hours" of teaching "load", "paid-by-the-hour", "contractual" teachers etc. With privatisation reducing education to a commodity, teachers are reduced to tutors and teaching is reduced to coaching. The consumerist boom and the growing salary differentials between teachers and other professionals and the value systems of the emerging free market economy have made teaching one of the least attractive professions that demands more work for less pay. Yet, the society expects teachers not only to be inspired but also to do an inspiring job!

Yet another worrisome trend in

higher education and research is the emerging government policy of according deemed university status to national labs and research institutes, so that these institutes can award their own Ph.D. degrees, without having to affiliate themselves to a university or fulfilling any other role of being a university. National laboratories include those under the Union government's Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Department of Space (DOS) etc. Some DAE institutions have already obtained deemed university status, and the UGC has already recommended the case of CSIR for the commission's approval. It is not clear whether all the national laboratories are under consideration for this status, but it is most likely that all of them would eventually like to seek such a status. The national laboratories were specifically established with the aim of making more direct contributions to the technological needs of the country in chosen areas such as medicine, agriculture, petroleum, metallurgy, energy, defence, space etc. It was expected that these national (or regional) laboratories would employ selected scientific manpower generated from the colleges/universities and nurture their talents towards specific applied goals. But this did not happen, as the national labs more sophisticated versions of university departments drawing better monetary and infrastructural support and publishing research papers, for which they need research students, who cannot be retained and tapped unless they are promised research degrees. The present demand for seeking deemed university status could therefore be an exercise to legitimise the current situation of the national labs and redefine their original goals. However, the country needs to decide whether it wants to develop glorified technicians and sycophants or make versatile scientists and conscious citizens. Barring a few exceptions, the monolithic

hierarchy of national labs does not provide enough opportunity to young researchers to relate their research to broader social and national values. The more open intellectual environment of universities, which include natural and social sciences, is essential for interdisciplinary learning, personality development, national values and better citizenship. Thus, the issue of deemed universities calls for an open national debate, as it has major implications for our higher education and research in science and technology.

With the basic issues of equity and access to higher education still unresolved, the country is ill prepared to generate knowledge creators or knowledge workers of high quality to tap the opportunities of the emerging knowledge economy. There was a time when the country debated passionately about external brain drain of students going abroad and not returning, and internal brain drain of students taking up careers in areas quite different from their academic backgrounds, and what a waste of national resource it was. This situation has only worsened with unemployment and underemployment in the era of liberalisation and globalisation, but we don't seem to even talk about it anymore.

Reforms may mean different things to different people, but for those students and teachers who are at the receiving end of their governments, reforms have come to mean withdrawal of government funding, no matter what happens. For those who believed (if at all anyone ever did) that reforms in higher education would reduce bureaucratic controls, attract better talent, provide more operational freedom, improve transparency, increase accountability, remove corruption, encourage self-financing, reward productivity and punish laxity, disappointment is an understatement of the state of affairs in our country.

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