Attacking Achievement

The Declining Image of Academia

By J V NARLIKAR

IN the fifth chapter of Raghuvansham, Kalidasa narrates the episode of Kautsa, a fresh graduate from the gurukul of Varatantu. After completing his education, Kautsa, as per the prevailing custom, asked his guru what he could offer him by way of appreciation. Varatantu declined any payment, saying that the selfless service offered by Kautsa was ample. Nevertheless, Kautsa kept on insisting to such an extent that in sheer annoyance Varatantu said: "Then bring me one crore gold coins for each of the fourteen subjects I taught you."

Selfless Act

The penniless graduate had no alternative but to approach a generous donor; and the only one he thought capable was Raghu, emperor at Ayodhya (the great grandfather of Rama). Raghu received the young man with great courtesy and asked for the reason of his visit. However, by then Kautsa had himself realised that he was too late in approaching Raghu. For, the great king had just completed a great yajna celebrating his conquest of the Earth, and had emptied his treasury in donations to the needy. So, having stated the reason for his visit, Kautsa said that since Raghu had given away his all, he will try to find some other donor.

But Raghu would not hear of turning away a needy person. Since he had just conquered the Earth he decided to raid the treasury of the Gods in the heavens. However, such was his reputation as a warrior that Kuber, the celestial treasurer, showered heaps of gold overnight. Raghu gave all of it to Kautsa, who, however, took only what he needed to fulfil his obligations to his Guru. The citizens of Ayodhya, wrote Kalidasa, admired both for their selflessness.

There is much else to be admired in this episode from the Tretayuga: Varatantu's lack of expectations of any payment from his impoverished student, the respect paid to Kautsa as a scholar by Raghu, Raghu's willingness to set out on a difficult campaign to satisfy the needs of a poor claimant and Kuber's respect for Raghu's valour. How would the same story read in today's Kaliyuga of governmental apathy to higher education and the general public's indifference to its quality and sanctity?

Today's Varatantu would find it more profitable to charge a huge capitation fee for entry to his college. Can you imagine a latter day Kautsa approaching Chief Minister Raghuji for financial help for his education? Even if he managed to bribe his way through to the CM's presence, would the latter say to him: "Sorry our treasury is empty, but tomorrow I will myself go to Delhi to get more money for higher education"? And even if he did say so, would his word command so much respect in Delhi that Finance Minister Kubernathji would immediately send a huge grant?

These questions show how far behind we have left the Tretayuga. Gone is the dignity that academia used to enjoy in society. Now that the 12th standard exam results are out, have a check on what proportion of the merit-listers are opting for academic careers: with a few exceptions, most will go to medical or engineering courses or into chartered accountancy or the administrative services.

It is wrong to conclude that the lure of mammon has been largely responsible for this drift away from the seats of learning. In the West, similar earning differentials exist between academia and the professions, but still, bright students opt for academic pursuits because other factors compensate for less earnings. The working conditions do still allow a relaxed lifestyle compared to that of a medical practitioner and academics can get additional money from writing, lecturing, consultancy, etc.

Ill-equipped Dons

The trouble is that a steady erosion of academic life in our campuses has seen most of these advantages disappear. Barring very few notable exceptions, students see no inspiring examples of brilliant scholars lecturing to them or of international quality research going on in their campuses. What they see are universities which have tied themselves in knots in litigation, internal politics, and a downward spiral in maintaining academic standards. The students have been to colleges where adequate infrastructure for training does not exist, where staff appointed is not on merit and many manifestly are ill equipped to lecture properly, where terminal examinations are held but the answer scripts are not even marked.

In this environment, if a few faculty members are engaged in good research this is an embarrassment to their colleagues and every attempt is made to hamper their work. Recently, I came across a senior faculty member from a college who was so harassed by the principal for carrying out genuine research that he wrote to his boss: 'Sir, I have been carrying out research without in any way compromising my teaching duties. If you want me to stop my research, please issue such an order."

It is not the case that society at large has lost respect for scholarship. One need not hark back to the Tretayuga; even today, the very few achievers in the academic field who survive the hostile environment of their institution do enjoy appreciation and honour outside.

Conscious Efforts

The society, unfortunately does not want to go further and demand that conditions change to where such cases become the norm rather than exceptions. What is needed is a conscious effort to build up confidence in our academia by encouraging achievement, by nurturing excellent teachers and researchers through special incentives, by helping those university departments and colleges that respect quality, at the cost of those that don't. This will send clear signals to the doers, the non-doers and the un-doers. I believe, that a pilot experiment of taking a few (not more than a dozen) university departments for such support will show results over a five year period that will go a long way towards restoring confidence in the university sector.

A silver lining is that respect for scholarship exists at the highest level in our subcontinent. I was touched to read a first person account given by a Pakistani scientist of a meeting between Nobel laureate Abdus Salam and Mr Nawaz Sharif, who was then (as now) the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Mr Sharif reportedly said to Salam: "Sir, because of you, there is much honour to Pakistan. Please give us any orders, and we shall be happy to carry them out..."

Not very different from what King Raghu would have said to Varatantu, had they met. The challenge lies in making such an attitude more widespread so that it becomes generic and is not confined to Nobel laureates only!