

The present century dawned when India was still shackled to imperialistic rule with no immediate possibility of living as a free nation, charting her own policies. As we approach the end of the century we will have lived more than half of it as a free nation. Naturally there will be considerable brain-storming on whether pre-Independence aspirations have been fulfilled.

We will deal here only with some aspects of higher education and outline a few outstanding problems, some inherited from the British and some of our own creation. We will also suggest some possible future course of action. Let us take the case of the universities which present a mixed picture today. On the one hand, the number of universities and students securing university education, the variety of courses offered, the support for expensive equipment—all these have gone up enormously since Independence. As a matter of fact, one is constantly presented such reassuring statistics. But the underlying feeling one has is that this growth has been at the expense of quality—an expensive choice.

True, the number of universities today is four times the number before 1947. But how does a typical university today compare with a pre-independence university in terms of the quality of its teachers, students, examinations or even the quality of its buildings...in short, quality per se? Compare any old university like Calcutta, Bombay, Allahabad or the B.H.U. with what it was 50 years ago, you have to be blind not to see the sharp decline in quality at all levels. The reasons are many and have been discussed ad nauseam. They can be summarized thus:

One, there is continuous external interference in the day-to-day running of a university with the result that it cannot enjoy autonomy even if it wants to.

Second, exercise of autonomy requires strength of conviction and courage to push forward the right policy. Today, neither the authorities in university administration nor the academic faculty are in a position to operate independently. One reason for this is that "intrinsic merit" that is necessarily the backbone of courage and conviction is lacking. The appointments of vice-chancellors are more often than not politically motivated rather than made on academic grounds. The reservations policy, a parochial son-of-the-soil syndrome, administrative inertia—all have contributed to a decline of the academic quality.

Next, the view that universities must only teach and that research is secondary has deprived them of a lively and fresh academic atmosphere that comes only when teaching and research go hand in hand. The growth of the culture of autonomous research institutes and national laboratories has shifted research activity largely out of the ambit of the university.

Above all, politicking amongst the faculty members and the obvious weakening of the merit criterion for advancement have brought about a general decline of discipline and academic values in the student body.

It is often said in nostalgia, why do

The decline of higher education

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we no longer have distinguished scientists, teachers, scholars the likes of which used to prosper in the pre-independence universities? Where are the intellectual giants that used to lead universities as vice-chancellors to whom the politicians would listen with respect rather than issue orders?

Although we sometimes boast about the large numbers that go in for higher education, the fact is that these large numbers are largely responsible for the decline in quality. We must ask the question: Why is a student opting for a course? It is because he/she is academically motivated to pursue that subject? Is it because the course is essential for the job market? Or because there is no other avenue open

conventional university courses can be considerably reduced by diverting students to "non-conventional" courses after an aptitude test. Students who have no motivation towards a conventional degree course and are studying it by default, as it were, would greatly benefit by the opening of additional channels which have the added stamp of respectability from a university.

In our computer centre we once advertised for a reserved post of an expert in systems management. We received very few applications—a common enough occurrence. As none of the candidates were even remotely suitable, we considered advertising the post again. Then somebody pointed

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for "value-addition"? (Like a consumer product passing through a factory, the individual too, is supposed to acquire added value through education.)

Most students go in for higher education in order to get degrees to be used as passports for seeking jobs. Yet there is a large highly educated but unemployed youth force which clearly indicates a mis-match of supply and demand. The word "university" has come from the word "universe" which encompasses everything. Consequently, the pre-sumption is that a university should provide all kinds of educational programmes. The question that arises from such an assumption is whether this universality has been properly used by the universities to adapt to the changing social needs of the country.

There are of course two sides to this. Universities may very well introduce vocational programmes to enable students to secure a useful livelihood. But society has to recognize those new courses as respectable and suitable. For example, a clerk's post today may require familiarity with the computer and good command over the relevant language. A conventional degree does not guarantee either. Yet, ironically, a diploma that ensures that these attributes are met with will not be recognized in the employment world.

The Government of India—the largest employer in the country—can bring about a change of attitudes by setting the trend. The pressure on

out that a young man appointed on a temporary project in the centre was eligible to apply but had not done so. As we knew the person to be very competent we asked him why he had not applied. Was he unaware of the advertisement? No, he replied; he was fully aware of its existence. He was also confident that he was qualified for the job. However, as the post was reserved, he felt his selection would not be seen as proof of his merit. Thus he did not want to get into a post which was reserved and where the criteria for selection are invariably relaxed. Instead he wanted to compete for an open post where he would be seriously tested.

This episode underscores the fallacy and failure of the present system of reservations. The system was originally introduced with the noble intention of righting the wrongs suffered by the backward classes for centuries. Indeed, affirmative action policies like this exist in advanced countries as well. In India, however, it has been singularly unsuccessful in righting the wrongs and eliminating the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in society. Ironically, politicization of the issue has only succeeded in widening, rather than bridging, the gap.

In my opinion, the best way of narrowing and sealing this gap is through education, not just at the primary level but at the higher levels as well. If the affirmative action had concentrated in special training programmes for the backward classes, with special provisions for scholar-

ships and stipends to encourage those doing well, by now we would have had a sizeable pool of proficient human-power from this group. Such persons would have competed for open posts and got in on merit, instead of under the so-called stigma of a reserved post.

Indeed, the creation of reserved posts has bolstered the impression that those getting in through this stream are less qualified, and would not have made it through open competition. Nothing can be more degrading to the human mind than such a patronizing view. Yet this not only persists but is actively encouraged by the government. This is why the computer scientist at our centre was reluctant to apply for a job under the reserved category. The devastating impact of the reservations policy on higher education over the years is all too apparent. Posts of lecturers to professors remain unfilled for lack of suitable candidates or, worse, they are filled willy nilly under the government directive "to fill up the quota within the prescribed deadline" thereby making a serious compromise with quality and merit.

Imagine a cricket team sent out to play international matches with five out of eleven players chosen compulsorily from the reserved category. If the performance of the team is below par who is then to be blamed? Fortunately, we have not yet reached this stage because the competitive state of the game requires that we send in our best players. Why should the same criterion not be applied to our universities and colleges of higher education which also have to be competitive, judged by an international yardstick?

Come now the question of funding higher education. The main funding body for our universities, the University Grants Commission (UGC), has to face two problems. First, it has to dish out the meagre funds granted by the government for higher education to a large number of claimants. Secondly, it is powerless to enforce that its funds are properly utilized. The first problem arises because the UGC tries to be democratic in its approach: if it were not, it would invite tremendous criticism from all quarters. The second problem comes from the autonomy claimed by the universities in managing their affairs. So what is the remedy?

An experiment has been initiated by the UGC by creating the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, for evaluating and ranking the performance, facilities and so on, of institutions in the university sector. If it is able to do its job properly, we should know which universities are excellent, which are ordinary; which department is reputed for work and which is not. This will be done against the backdrop of national and international standards.

It is too early to say how far this experiment, well-motivated though it is, will succeed. It is voluntary, in the sense that an institution is not obliged to get itself assessed. However, if the ranking is linked with grants of funds, the idea may catch on faster. This will also give the UGC a handle to decide where to invest its modest funds. The success of the entire operation depends on transparency, political will and a clear emphasis on merit.