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Educating India



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THE FOLLOWING story from a particular edition of the *Ramayana* sets the tone of this article. In the aftermath of the destruction of Ravan, Ram returned to Ayodhya to set up his rule. Ram Rajya, as his rule was called, became synonymous with good and just rule. Anyone demanding justice had full access to the king. So one day a dog with a ferocious appearance entered Ram's court asking for justice. Ram asked him to state the details of his complaint. "Sire", said the dog, "I was following a *sanyasi* as he went around begging for alms and with no provocation on my part, he kicked me. He is standing outside and I demand that he be suitably punished". Ram called the *sanyasi* who readily admitted to the act. But he gave a reason. He said: "Sire, I was begging for food to eat and wherever I went, the housewife who opened the door immediately shut it on seeing this ferocious dog. As a result I went hungry. Since it was all because of this dog, I took my anger out on him by kicking him. I agree that it was an unjust act on my part and the dog cannot be held responsible for how he looks. So I am willing to accept any just punishment". Then Ram turned to the dog and asked him what he thought would be a just punishment. The dog thought for a while and then said: "Sire, I suggest that you create a *vidyapeeth*, and make him its *kulapati*". "But that is an honour, not a punishment!" said Ram. "I beg to differ, Sire!" said the dog. "The responsibility of running a *vidyapeeth* will cause him enough mental anguish which would be a good punishment for what he did to me."

The situation prevailing today in the Indian universities is no different. The atmosphere in which a vice-chancellor (VC) has to function is volatile with pressures coming from students, faculty, the non-teaching staff, outside threats to him and to the security of the university et cetera. Although the university is autonomous, there is enough political interference from outside and the last word often rests not with the VC but with the babus in the secretariat. The days when VCs, like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan or Acharya Narendra Dev, were towering personalities commanding respect are long past. The post itself has been seriously devalued by the procedure of selection. Would you have expected the personalities just named applying for the post, being short-listed and interviewed?

It could be argued that this procedure followed in Maharashtra, a supposedly progressive state, is a necessity today because no other action involving selection for such an important post is credible enough. The procedure whereby the chancellor (or the appointing authority), after receiving expert advice, invites a distinguished academician to accept the post, would be viewed with suspicion. The fact that the system worked well in the old days of pre-Independence (and even for a few years post-Independence), speaks for the steep decline in moral values in our public life. For example, I was shocked to read about a VC of a very old university publicly thanking the state education minister for keeping his word by making him the VC.

The situation at the other end of the spectrum — in school education — is equally dismal. Government-aided schools are asked to admit more than 80 children per class because there is a shortage of schools. What can a teacher do with such a large number of pupils? Naturally, because of bad or no teaching in the school, students seek the help of coaching classes outside. In addition, there are government missives: fail no student until Class 8. If student is really weak in a particular subject, it is the responsibility of the teacher to stay after school hours and teach the student to the required level. Which teacher — who is already overworked and underpaid — is going to accept this extra responsibility? So all students are declared passed. The parents are blissful and satisfied that their wards are doing well, until they reach Class 8 when they discover with a shock that the kids cannot even add, subtract or read and write.

In 1980, when I was on a sabbatical visit to the University College, Cardiff, the headmaster of the primary school in our neighbourhood sent circulars to all the houses in the neighbourhood urging parents to send their children to his school stating that in order to increase the number of students the entry age had been reduced by six months to five years. He had done so because reduced birth rate had decreased the school student population and the government was threatening to close down schools with a low number of students. This example illustrates the economics of supply and demand for available schools versus students seeking admission.

Logic dictates that in India, where there is a grave shortage of schools, we reduce the number of students per class to half, and double the number of schools. The number of teachers needs to be increased even more since the present numbers are already inadequate and teachers are being hired on a contract basis at shamefully low "daily wages", barely above the legal lower limits. This will require huge increases in the budgetary provisions of the ministry of human resource and development. But whichever political party is in power, this department is always kept on the backburner. There may be innumerable discussions and reports on education but when it comes to the implementation of any recommendation the result can be summarised by the four letter word, "zero".

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, himself a distinguished academic, and our Nobel laureate Amartya Sen have stressed the need to empower our youth through education. If India aspires to be a developed nation by 2020, it needs to develop huge human resources and education is the most crucial qualification that adds value to the human being. Despite many declarations from the pulpit, politicians of all parties do not seem to appreciate the truth behind this dictum. Or, perhaps, they do, and see in the educated electorate a threat to their continuation in power!

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