

Weighing down the private unaided college teacher

As a survey in Tamil Nadu shows, the working conditions, welfare of teachers may have only worsened in the pandemic



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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every sector in the economy in India and across the globe as well. Relatively, the education sector has managed to maintain its revenue. Both schools and colleges have transitioned to the online education mode to serve their students. Under the pretext of providing online education, most private institutions have managed to collect fees in full.

Survey and findings

Though the revenue of private educational institutions has not taken a huge hit, the same cannot be said about the livelihoods of teachers in private unaided colleges. During the novel coronavirus pandemic, layoffs and pay cuts have forced several private-unaided college teachers to take up odd jobs to provide for their families. The example of an assistant professor in Tamil Nadu who suffered a pay cut in a private-unaided college following the pandemic and who died while climbing a palm tree — he had taken to cutting the leaves of palm trees to make a living — pushed us to survey private-unaided college teachers and to understand the impact of the pandemic on their working and living conditions. We surveyed 194 teachers

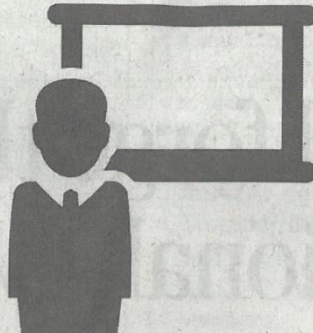
working in private-unaided colleges that are affiliated with the University of Madras, Chennai. The survey was conducted between June 13 and June 26, 2021.

The findings show that even before the pandemic, private-unaided college teachers received below-par salaries and many did not enjoy any social security benefits. Among 194 respondents, 137 fulfilled the University Grants Commission (UGC) qualifying criteria (has PhD or National Eligibility Test or State Eligibility Test) to be an assistant professor; 72% of these qualified teachers received less than ₹25,000 per month and 5.1% received less than ₹10,000 per month, while according to the Seventh Pay Commission entry-level consolidated monthly salary for an assistant professor is ₹76,809.

In our survey, we found that only 38% and 42% had Employee State Insurance and paid leave, respectively. This deplorable condition of private-unaided college teachers can be attributed to the absence of any State regulation of private higher educational institutions, including on matters relating to the working conditions of teachers and other employees.

Following neoliberal policies, the Indian state has withdrawn from providing higher education. This has resulted in the enormous growth of private higher educational institutions. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2020 report, at all India level, 65% of the total colleges are private unaided colleges. Tamil Nadu, which is one of

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the few States that privatised higher education in the early 1980s, has 77% private unaided colleges. This shows the dominance of profit-maximising private-unaided colleges in higher education.

Online education as burden

It is against this background that we must understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the livelihood of private-unaided college teachers. Private-unaided college teachers have made every effort to provide service to students in the online mode. In our survey, 88% of the respondents noted one or more of the following as the reason(s) for the difficulty they faced in online teaching — lack of Internet, lack of room/space, and lack of quality equipment. Further, every respondent had to incur an expenditure to purchase Internet service. Of the 194 teachers surveyed, 132 had to incur an expenditure to purchase one or more of the following items: a phone, computer, headphones. And, 107 respondents reported experiencing high emotional distress during this period linked to online teaching work. All

these show that these teachers had to physically, emotionally, and monetarily exert themselves to provide online education during this pandemic. Despite this valouring effort by private-unaided college teachers, they have not been rewarded by their management. Instead, they have been punished with severe pay cuts during the pandemic.

The survey data revealed that through the first half of 2020-21, less than a third of teachers received the full salary they were entitled to. Sadly, 10% of our respondents did not receive any salary during April to June 2020. As colleges have transitioned to online mode, one can argue that the operational costs of these colleges must have declined drastically. Further, it is a well-known fact that private colleges have collected fees from students. Therefore, there is no justification for reducing the salary of teachers during this pandemic. Private-unaided colleges have used the pandemic as an excuse to rob teachers who have worked hard to teach under very difficult conditions, incurring considerable monetary expenses and experiencing much stress during this period.

Making ends meet

The arbitrary pay cuts have forced several of our respondents to work in additional jobs and/or borrow money from informal sources to survive. These jobs were mostly manual informal jobs such as construction work, farm labour, mechanic work, food delivery, etc. While the pandemic may have

worsened the livelihood conditions of private-unaided college teachers, their working conditions were deplorable even in 'normal' times because of the complete absence of regulations by the State in this regard. The Government of Tamil Nadu should consider taking some immediate measures in this regard. Some of these are: pay complete arrears salary to private-unaided college teachers that have been siphoned off by the management; reinstate teachers laid off without any cause; reimburse the expenditure incurred by teachers for online teaching during the pandemic.

In 2018, Kerala fixed ₹1,750 per day and ₹43,750 per month as a standard salary for lecturers with UGC qualification and ₹1,600 per day and ₹40,000 per month for lecturers without UGC qualification in unaided private colleges. The Tamil Nadu government may consider implementing something along these lines. Further, the Tamil Nadu Private Colleges (Regulation) Act 1976 needs to be reviewed and amended to equip monitoring agencies such as the Directorate of Collegiate Education and the Regional Joint Directorate of Collegiate Education to safeguard the welfare of teachers and non-teaching staff in unaided private colleges.

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