

The challenge of education in India

Indian universities are seen today to be serving every conceivable purpose except the one that they were designed for: the cultivation of the intellect



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Amidst all the commotion about the focus on the agriculture sector and the seeming neglect of the middle classes, education did manage to get some attention of the Finance Minister this year. To enhance quality of higher education in India, the government plans to launch the "Revitalising Infrastructure and Systems in Education (RISE)" with a total investment of ₹1 trillion in next four years. The focus is on stepping up investments in research and related infrastructure in premier educational institutions in the country. The RISE initiative will be funded by a restructured Higher Education Financing Agency. Launching of the "Prime Minister's

Research Fellows" Scheme for 1,000 best B.Tech students each year from premier institutions being provided facilities to do PhD in IITs and IISc is also a welcome step to enhance the quality of technical research in the country.

It was satisfying to see some attention being given to the quality of teaching in India with an integrated B.Ed. programme for teachers being planned and amending of the Right to Education Act to enable more than 13 lakh untrained teachers to get trained. At the level of primary education level, the government is proposing an Ekalavya model residential schools on the lines of Navodaya schools for every block with more than 50 per cent ST population and at least 20,000 tribal persons.

The government has been highlighting the woeful state of education in the country for some time now. Last October, stressing on the need for universities to give more emphasis on "learning and innovation" and give up old teaching methods which focused on "cramming students' minds with information", Prime Minister Narendra Modi had underscored his government's intention to "unshackle" these institutions and provide ₹100 billion to 20 var-

sities to ensure that they are counted among the best in the world. Around one hundred institutions have applied for this process to be placed in the list of 20 "Institutions of Eminence."

While these are noble goals, it is instructive to point out that the focus seems largely to be on quantity and on science and technology education. This is understandable for a number of reasons. Knowledge is the key variable that will define the global distribution of power in the 21st century and India has also embarked on a path of economic success relying on its high-tech industries. While India's nearest competitor, China is re-orienting and investing in higher education to meet the challenges of the future, India continues to ignore the problem as if the absence of world-class research in Indian universities is something that will rectify itself on its own. True, India produces well-trained engineers and managers from its flagship IITs and IIMs, but their numbers are simply not enough. There is also a growing concern that while private engineering and management institutions are flourishing due to a rising demand, the students they produce are not of the quality that can help India compete

effectively in the global marketplace.

India has the third largest higher education system in the world, and is behind only the US and China in this area. Our higher educational institutions churn out around 2.5 million graduates every year. However, this caters to just about 10 per cent of India's youth and the quality of this output is considered below par. Apart from our premier institutions — the IITs, IIMs, AIIMS, the Indian Institute of Science, and Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, to name a few — our higher education sector is increasingly incapable of meeting the rising expectations of an emerging India. Indian universities, which should have been the centre of cutting edge research and a hub of intellectual activity, are more often in the news for political machinations than for research excellence. Years of low investment in higher education along with a mistaken belief that providing uniform support to all universities irrespective of their quality have led to a situation where neither our academics nor our students have any incentive to undertake cutting-edge research.

Matters have not been helped by the institutions we have created to administer our system of higher education. For

instance, the UGC has tried to increase its control over the Indian higher education system, making it impossible for universities to shape their own courses and determine their research agenda.

This top-down approach in the mistaken belief that homogenisation of institutions will produce greater pedagogic creativity leaves no room for competition among higher education institutions. Indian universities have become moribund institutions run by cloistered, change-resistant bureaucracies where curricula are not updated for years, teaching methods remain obsolete, and students are not exposed to cutting edge research and ideas. Political interference in selections, appointments and day-to-day administrative of universities has become common, eroding autonomy to such an extent that a university is now considered a sort of government department. Our universities are being held hostage to the imperatives of identity politics, encouraging parochialism rather than countering it. Indian universities are seen today to be serving every conceivable social, political and economic purpose except the one that they were designed for: the cultivation of the intellect.

Unless we recognise this and empower out students and faculty, we will continue to tinker with the superficialities while the foundations of India's education system will continue to get eroded.

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