

Access to Education

ANDRÉ BÉTEILLE

Indian universities face a difficult and uncertain future. They must expand and multiply, and they must be socially inclusive. But if they are to retain credibility as centres of science and scholarship, they must also be selective in appointments and admissions and in the award of degrees.

There have been large and significant changes in the scope and organisation of education throughout the world in the last 200 years. There are now more schools, colleges, universities and other institutions of learning than ever before, and more persons attend such institutions at present than at any time in the past. These changes first began in western countries such as Britain, France and the United States where they accompanied changes in the economic and political orders. It is now a truism that both democracy and development require a comprehensive and inclusive system of education.

Although the expansion of education began in those countries that first experienced the industrial and democratic revolutions, it is now taking place practically everywhere. There is hardly any country in the modern world that would not like to have a comprehensive and inclusive system of education. Yet the expansion of education has not followed the same course everywhere, and in some countries it has been highly uneven. Access to education is not easy under all circumstances and, where it is made easy, the quality of the education provided often leaves much to be desired.

The drive for the expansion of education comes from various sources. Idealists believe that the advancement of learning, which is the motto of the University of Calcutta, should be an end in itself. Planners and policymakers have more practical considerations in mind. Every modern or modernising society presents challenges and problems to its citizens that cannot be addressed without a minimum of schooling: filling forms, writing applications, reading notices, and so on. Such basic skills can of course be imparted and acquired in the family or the community. But most societies today find it more convenient to organise teaching and learning, even at the elementary level,

through institutions entrusted with specifically educational functions. The growth of specifically educational institutions has been both a cause and a consequence of changes in the family and the community.

In the early stages of economic and political advance, the gap between the lettered and the unlettered is large and conspicuous. It is no less significant than the gap between the propertied and the propertyless. Many people manage reasonably well without owning any land or capital, but life is severely circumscribed for those who are unlettered and unschooled. In the advanced industrial countries, where first elementary and then secondary education became universal, the economic, political and social significance of the disparity between the schooled and the unschooled has become greatly reduced. But this has not happened everywhere, and the proportion of children who have never been to school stands out today as an important indicator of a country's backwardness.

Indian society had a deeply hierarchical structure in which life chances were more unequally distributed than perhaps in any other society in the world. Even after the adoption of a modern system of education with its schools, colleges and universities in the middle of the 19th century, access to education remained highly restricted for a 100 years, not only on account of severe economic inequalities but also because of strong and deeply-rooted social prejudices against women and against disadvantaged castes and communities. Colonial rule served to ease some of the social prejudices but did little to address existing inequalities in the distribution of material resources.

The hierarchical structure of Indian society was such that inequalities between individuals and households were overshadowed by disparities between castes and communities. These disparities have not disappeared. Rather, democratic politics has brought them increasingly into public view in the last 60 years. Where access to education is concerned, the political leadership has given more attention in recent years to the redress of

Text of the Kamala Lecture delivered at the University of Calcutta on February 18, 2008. I am grateful to the authorities of the university for inviting me to deliver this very important lecture named after the daughter of the redoubtable Ashutosh Mukherji. Earlier versions of the lecture were presented at the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, IIT Madras, IIT Guwahati and the University of Mumbai. I have benefited much from the discussions generated by the lecture at these places.

Andre Beteille is a well known sociologist who recently completed his term as chairman of the Indian Council of Social Science Research.

social disparities between communities than to the reduction of economic inequalities between individuals.

The Indian leadership viewed the coming of independence as an opportunity for a new beginning in the field of education. Many of the leaders were critical of the colonial system for what it did – or failed to do – in the cause of education in the country. Some, like Gandhi, wanted the system then in operation to be replaced by one that would be more in tune with the Indian tradition and serve the needs of the common people instead of creating and fostering a socially competitive middle class. Others, like Nehru and Ambedkar, were modernists and wanted the educational system not only to serve the common people but also to produce scientists and scholars who could take their place among the best in the world.

Uneven Development

Schools, colleges and universities were already in existence at the time of independence, but they were very few and outside the reach of the vast majority of people. Well over half of the population was illiterate, and even elementary schools were too few to serve the needs of the population, not only in the villages but even in the towns and cities. The leaders of the nationalist movement were inclined to attribute this unsatisfactory state of affairs to colonial rule. While this may be partly true, the plain fact is that opportunities for schooling had been always restricted by the country's rigidly hierarchical social structure and, in particular, by the hierarchical attitudes to the pursuit of learning prevalent in it since time immemorial.

With independence, India adopted a republican constitution which was clearly designed to repudiate the principle of hierarchy and put "equality of status and of opportunity" in its place. The new constitution had a part on fundamental rights and a part on directive principles of state policy, and both had strong provisions for equality in them. Article 45 sought to provide for "free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years". It has more recently been decided to make elementary

education not just a matter of policy but also a matter of right.

The commitment to provide elementary education to all, made at the time of independence, has not been met until now. Other countries have moved ahead, but India has stayed behind. India's record of achievement is poor in comparison not only with the western countries but also with Japan, China and other Asian countries. What India has achieved in the field of elementary education appears in a very poor light when compared with the industrialised countries at comparable stages of economic development. The Indian experience shows that the failure to make elementary education universally available is a matter not only of material resources but also of social attitudes and orientations. Beneath the surface of public pronouncements, those attitudes and orientations continue to be deeply hierarchical, not least among those responsible for the operation of the educational system.

It is not that nothing has been achieved in the last 60 years. Literacy rates have gone up and, even though the rise has been slow, there is a secular trend of increase in literacy. Many new schools have come up, and there are many more children, both boys and girls, from an increasing range of castes and communities in school today. Official statistics mainly show the number of schools and the number of children enrolled in them. What they do not bring out are the disparities in the quality of education provided by schools of different kinds. These disparities are very large and probably increasing.

Those concerned at the time of independence with the advance of education did not confine their attention to only elementary and secondary education. They were, if anything, even more concerned with the creation and expansion of the institutions of higher education. India had made a reasonably good start with universities nearly a 100 years before independence [Béteille 2007a], but the Indian universities were too few in number to satisfy the needs of an aspiring and assertive middle class, not to speak of the population as a whole.

Independent India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru made no secret of

his partiality for the universities. In the very first year of the country's independence, he said "A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives" [Nehru 1949: 333]. Nehru actively promoted the establishment of new universities and other institutions for advanced study and research, particularly in the fields of science and technology soon after India's independence.

Levels of Education

The new government signalled its interest by setting up, almost immediately after independence, a University Education Commission under S Radhakrishnan who was to soon become the first vice-president of the republic and thereafter its second president. New universities and centres of excellence in study and research were planned and put in place. Among these were the Institutes of Technology and the Institutes of Management which now attract some of the best talent in the country. The number of universities has increased many times in the last 60 years, and to these we have to add the deemed universities such as the Tata Institute of Social Sciences as well as the institutes of national importance such as the Indian Statistical Institute.

It has often been pointed out that the universities in the pre-independence period were creatures of the colonial government. They were established by the government, funded directly by the government and regulated by it. Hence, even where they attracted scientists and scholars of great ability and talent, their autonomy as institutions was limited. Today, Ashutosh Mukherjee is still remembered for the way in which he protected and promoted the principle of autonomy in the University of Calcutta.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) was set up in 1956 to provide some cushion to the universities in their negotiation with the government for funding. The UGC was set up under an act of Parliament, and it was expected to function in such a manner as to protect the autonomy of the individual universities under its care. It was also expected to uphold and

promote excellence in teaching and research by overseeing the work of the universities through independent committees. Its success in these matters has been limited, and many now complain that it has become increasingly intrusive over the years.

Even while the universities were receiving public support, some began to feel that things were not going well with elementary and secondary education. Particularly in a large and populous country like India, the universities cannot stand on their own. They depend for their intake on what is produced by the schools. When the schools do not do their work adequately, teaching at an advanced level, not to speak of research, becomes hard to sustain. By the time students enter the universities, they are already young adults and disciplined habits of academic work are difficult to create at that age. Remedial education is useful for certain limited and specific purposes, but it cannot create afresh the general base for higher education if the schools have failed to create it through neglect or lack of direction.

A second commission, the Education Commission was set up in 1964 under D S Kothari. The Kothari Commission had the advantage of working with Indian as well as foreign experts of the highest standing. It produced a comprehensive report on all aspects of education. It dwelt on the linkages between the different levels of education, and on the connection between education and employment.

It is important to keep in mind the differentiation of the levels of education – primary, secondary and tertiary – in the context of pressures to make access to education more open and easy. In advocating a more inclusive educational system, many argue as if the problems of access are more or less the same at all levels of the system. This is a mistake. The conditions of access change as we move up from one level of education to the next. I will illustrate this by considering the two extremes of the system, primary education at one end and postgraduate education at the other. What I will say here will apply, with appropriate qualifications, to all the levels in between.

In a democratic and secular society, access to primary education should be

provided without consideration of race, caste, creed and gender. Whether it should be made compulsory is a separate question into which I do not wish to enter here. No child, whether boy or girl, should be denied admission to a primary school. To what extent we should have mixed schools or allow separate schools for boys and girls or for children of different religious faiths is again a separate question.

School and University

Access to primary school should be granted to children also without consideration of merit, ability or performance. Here I would like to point out that the two kinds of consideration for access to educational institutions, the first based on social and the second on scholastic grounds, are quite different. What I am trying to argue is that in the conditions under which we live today, restriction on neither kind of ground, social or scholastic, is justified at the point of entry into the educational system taken as a whole.

Some Indian schools, particularly in the major metropolitan cities, do indeed conduct tests of aptitude in order to sort out those they wish to admit from those they do not. This is an unhealthy practice and has become a bone of contention among many. No matter how much we deplore the practice, we have to examine the reasons for its prevalence. The number of applications in some schools is vastly in excess of the number of places available, whereas in other schools it is the opposite. Hence, schools that have a high reputation are constrained to deny admission to many, while at the other end, there are schools that have more places than they are able to fill. The way to reduce, if not eliminate, the unhealthy practice of testing for aptitude at the first point of entry is to set up more schools that provide primary education that will be to the satisfaction of most if not all parents. Society has an obligation to provide elementary education to all children, but whether it has the obligation to provide access in each case to an institution of the child's – or the parent's – choice is a different matter.

When we turn to the other end of the spectrum, ie, higher education, the problem changes its colour. To be sure, access

to universities and other centres of advanced study should not be denied on grounds of race, caste, creed or gender. But is it reasonable to expect such institutions to make admissions without consideration of ability and performance? The urge to make public institutions inclusive is understandable in a society that has practised exclusion so pervasively and so stringently over such a long span of time. But that urge cannot be allowed to subvert the very activities that particular institutions have been designed to perform.

To urge academic institutions to become more inclusive and at the same time to acknowledge that they need to impose restrictions on admissions (and appointments) appears self-contradictory to many who have little familiarity with the working of such institutions at different levels. But the contradiction is only apparent, and it dissolves when we recognise that educational institutions at different levels – the elementary school, the secondary school, the undergraduate college, the postgraduate department, and the centre of advanced study and research – though interlinked with each other, have different tasks to perform.

Social Stratification

The contradictions a country with an expanding educational system faces are clearly revealed in the Report of the Commission on University Education. These contradictions are particularly acute in India where a democratic political order based on the principle of equality was adopted in a country with a deeply hierarchical social order. In such a setting, divergent views are expressed by different persons, and sometimes by the same person in different contexts.

S Radhakrishnan's Commission said, "Education is a universal right, not a class privilege" [Commission on University Education 1950: 50]. But then it went on to say, "Intellectual work is not for all, it is only for the intellectually competent" (ibid: 98).

When the country became independent after a long period of colonial rule, its leaders looked forward to making education more widely, if not universally, available. The colonial administration had made a good beginning by creating new

types of educational institutions – schools, colleges and universities – but what it did was on a limited scale, and could hardly reach out to the entire population. I am aware that there are strong critics of the system of education designed for the Indians by the British. Many things went wrong with the institutions they established, just as many things have gone wrong with the institutions created and managed by us in the last 60 years. But we owe something – not everything, but something – to the colonial regime for the creation of such institutions as Presidency College, Calcutta University, the Calcutta Medical College, the Law College in Calcutta and the Bengal Engineering College. Even if they were created with the intention of serving the interests of colonial rule, their creation had momentous consequences for the regeneration of Indian society.

While we should not belittle the work done by the new schools, colleges and universities in the 100 years preceding independence, we must recognise the relatively modest scope of their achievements. The policy objectives of the colonial administration were different from those of the government of independent India. Education was viewed by the former as being at best a beneficent instrument of social reform rather than a means for the radical transformation of a hierarchical society into one based on the principle of equality.

Rightly or wrongly, the British in India took the view that Indian society was hierarchical at its core with ineradicable inequalities among castes and communities and between men and women. Few of them really believed that changes in the educational system or in any other system could bring into being a completely different kind of society from the one that had been in existence since time immemorial. Their aim was not the spread of education among the masses but the creation of a small and accommodating middle class that would provide some scope for individual mobility to the fortunate few. In any case, it is doubtful that a colonial government would undertake the task of creating a “casteless and classless society” anywhere in the world.

But the colonial government did sow the seeds of change in the Indian

educational system. If we are concerned over the fact that women, dalits and members of the backward castes and communities are inadequately represented in our educational institutions today, honesty obliges us to admit that they were hardly present even in elementary schools a 100 years ago. A change had to take place in peoples’ attitudes towards schooling, and that change began with the introduction of a modern educational system in the 19th century. The new system did not in fact provide equal opportunities for school admission to all, but its educational ideals were different from those of the past which were hierarchical and socially exclusive.

While the colonial administration set up schools, colleges and universities, it invested only limited resources for their establishment and maintenance. In a highly stratified society this meant that opportunities for education, including secondary and even elementary education, were limited largely to the upper strata. Until the time of independence, education beyond the elementary level was virtually a monopoly of the middle class, and that class comprised a very small section of the population.

The Middle Class

Although the new educational institutions were created at the initiative of the colonial administration, by the time the country became independent, their operation and management were in the hands of Indians. They had become the preserves of the upper strata of society in the provincial capitals and the district headquarters. There was some opening for individual mobility, but it was not very large. Because the medium of instruction at the higher levels was English, the division between the educated and the uneducated members of society became particularly marked.

The class composition of the educated sections changed, though not very radically, in the course of the 100 years prior to independence. When independence came, the high schools, the colleges and the universities were in the control of the educated, professional middle class. But that was not exactly so in the beginning when that class was still to acquire a distinct social identity. The funding for the

new educational institutions did not all come from the government. Wealthy Indians, particularly landowners and businessmen, made substantial contributions, and their offspring were prominent among the early beneficiaries of the new educational system.

The products of the new educational system found employment as schoolteachers, clerks, managers, officers, lawyers and doctors, and formed the core of the new middle class whose offspring in turn enlarged the ranks of school, college and university students. The sons of impoverished landowners sought employment in middle class occupations, and for them the credentials provided by the new educational system became a necessity. The pressure for the expansion of the educational system and the credentials it provided came mainly from the middle class or aspirants for entry into it, and, as I have said, in the early years of the 20th century they were still relatively small in number.

Thus, the new educational system was creating openings into the new middle class of white-collar employees and professionals, although by today’s standards, those openings were few. One of the first vice chancellors of the University of Calcutta, Henry Maine had said in a convocation address in 1866, “The fact is that the founders of the University of Calcutta thought to create an *aristocratic* institution; and in spite of themselves, they created a *popular* institution” [Banerjee et al 1957: 27]. By an “aristocratic institution” Maine meant one created for the landowning class, and by a “popular institution” he meant one which was open to the middle class. He could not have had peasants, artisans and labourers in mind when he spoke of the University of Calcutta as becoming a popular institution.

No middle class grows in size, no matter how limited the growth, without becoming internally differentiated and stratified. While a good secondary education was enough to secure a foothold in that class, it was not enough for entry into its higher ranks. For that higher education, including professional education, was indispensable. Hence pressure on the colleges and universities began to mount even before independence appeared in sight. Education and employment came to be closely linked.

While a few may have sought university education for the pleasure of it, most wanted it because it was necessary for remunerative and respectable employment. All these considerations were still somewhat remote for the vast majority of Indians who lived from hand to mouth by some kind of manual employment for which formal education was not a requirement.

Disparate Standards

As I have noted, independence was accompanied by a surge of enthusiasm for spreading the benefits of education at every level to all classes and communities instead of letting them remain confined to the middle class. There was a contradiction in this, for the hold of the middle class over public institutions became stronger and not weaker in the wake of independence. The leaders of all political parties came from this class and there was no alien government to hold its ambitions in check. No middle class anywhere has attended to the interests of the other social classes before attending to its own. The middle class entered a path of all-round expansion, first through the growth of the public sector and then through that of the private sector. Aspirants for entry into it were hungry for higher education and even secondary education, and for them the availability of primary education was taken for granted. The requirements of primary education were never denied, they were largely ignored.

After a phase of somewhat sluggish growth in the early decades of independence, elementary education has been growing at a faster rate in the last 10 or 15 years. It has begun to receive wider attention and support. Apart from the government, this support now comes from the corporate houses as well as the voluntary sector. There is also greater international interest in the development of elementary education in the country.

The enlargement of the provisions for education has been accompanied by the differentiation of educational institutions. This differentiation is a continuous and unremitting process and must receive serious consideration. I am not speaking now of the differentiation between the different levels of the educational system, such as primary, secondary and higher

education, but about the differentiation of quality and standard at each level of the system. What feeds into every higher level of the educational system by way of student intake is a highly differentiated product, flowing out of a great variety of institutions at the level immediately below it.

Differentiation in teaching and learning begins at the level of elementary education. There is an enormous variety of institutions providing or meant to provide elementary education, but we have very little systematic knowledge of the ways in which they work or do not work. No doubt we have quantitative data about enrolment, drop-out, years of schooling completed and so on, but these tell us little about what happens in the school by way of interaction between teachers and pupils [Béteille 2007b]. Educated middle class parents know a great deal about the kinds of schools to which they send their children or aspire to send them, but such schools are only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath that tip lies a vast submerged mass of institutions, driven by currents that often have little to do with education.

I would like to stress that middle class parents have become acutely conscious about the need to give their children a head start in the matter of education. The search for a good school begins very early, well before the child is of age to enter elementary school. Here, those who live in the metropolitan cities have an advantage because that is where the most desirable schools are available. The most desirable schools, even for elementary education, are not only expensive they are also exclusive, if for no other reason than that they are so much in demand. Such schools are materially well endowed and equipped, they have well-qualified teachers, and the regularity and routine of teaching and learning are more conscientiously observed in them than in many undergraduate colleges or postgraduate departments. Those who receive elementary education in such schools are generally well prepared for the next stage of education.

At the other end are primary schools in remote villages and city slums where hardly any teaching takes place, and what is learnt is quickly forgotten and of little value for the next level of education in secondary school. The material equipment

available for elementary education varies enormously between schools of different types. But there are other and more important disparities than the purely material ones. School management is often lax, and the regularity and routine of school work is treated lightly and negligently.

More serious than the shortage of buildings, blackboards and books is the negligence of teachers. On an average, on any working day 25 per cent of teachers in elementary schools remain absent from work [Kremer et al 2006]. This of course does not tell us what those who are present do while they are in the school. Apathy and indifference are widespread, and they are transmitted easily from teachers to pupils. Moreover, traditions of rote learning are very deeply rooted among both teachers and pupils, and rote learning can hardly be said to provide a sound basis for entry into a modern system of higher education.

The disparities which begin with primary school are carried forward to the level of secondary education and often magnified there. At the far end of the scale, in the metropolitan cities, there are very competitive institutions that provide education that is good enough to prepare their pupils for the best undergraduate education anywhere in the world. But these schools constitute a tiny minority, although they do provide some opportunities for upward mobility to talented pupils from the lower rungs of the middle class. As is well known, the ones most in demand among the middle classes are the English-medium schools, known for some odd reason as "convent schools". But even among such schools, there are wide variations in standards of teaching, including English teaching

Not all schools in the country are English-medium schools. Some schools provide very good education in the regional language, but they are few in number, and are losing out to the English-medium schools in the competition for the best pupils. The dynamic sections of the middle class that are driving forward India's economic growth want English-medium schools for their children. Elected political leaders and their intellectual camp followers may decry the fascination for English-medium schools in public, but they will not oppose their growth

seriously, seeking, instead, to find places in such schools for their own offspring.

Examination and Certification

In secondary school, as the pupil progresses from one class to another, the prospect of examinations begins to loom large. For pupils and their parents, board examinations are a trial, and for teachers and the school management, they are a perennial source of vexation. They distract seriously from the ordinary course of teaching and learning. Testing and examining are indispensable components of all modern educational systems, but in India they tend to displace the main functions of education which are learning and teaching. One important indication of this is the widespread suspicion and exposure of malpractices in examinations.

The pressure for successful performance in the board examinations is felt in every layer of the middle class, from the lowest to the highest, and the more the middle class expands, the more widely it will be felt. It is being felt increasingly in other social classes as well for board examinations are the gateway for entry into the middle class. Even self-employed persons, who do not need certification from the board, would like to have it if only for its social value. To be a member of the middle class without having passed the boards has become an anachronism, at least for the male members of society. Of course, those who have achieved exceptional success in commerce or in the arts may occasionally boast that they have never passed a single examination.

Successful performance in the board examinations does not depend only on what is taught and learnt in school. In many secondary schools very little teaching is done, and students have to rely perforce on external assistance. Even those who go to the best schools try to secure external assistance, not so much to clear the board examinations as to be able to secure admission in the most coveted institutions at the next higher level. Once begun, the competition for places in the most coveted educational institutions acquires its own momentum. It is difficult to see how this competition can be avoided without abolishing the middle class, as happened, although briefly, in China.

Various agencies outside the school are used for enhancing the pupil's competitive advantage. There is the coaching class, very familiar to me from my own school days in Calcutta nearly 60 years ago. These have multiplied and diversified enormously since those days and have spread to the small towns and even the larger villages. At least in Delhi, the best ones among them provide coaching not so much for success in the board examinations as for entry into the IITs and other coveted institutions of higher study. Somewhat more expensive than the coaching class is private tuition for the individual pupil, either in his home or in the home of the tutor.

An important source of competitive advantage in tests and examinations is the family. Indian parents are very actively involved in the prospects of their children even after they have reached adulthood, and in the growing middle class these prospects have much to do with education and employment. Intellectual capital is very unevenly distributed among families, and two families with the same amount of it may devote very unequal attention to the educational advancement of their children.

Thus, different factors contribute to success or failure in the educational system, all the way up from primary to higher education. These factors include natural ability and aptitude, individual initiative and effort, the family's economic, social and cultural capital, the pedagogic standards and practices of the school, and the care and attention the pupil receives from the school, the family and the community. They may operate against each other or reinforce each other. The resulting inequalities in educational performance may be mitigated to some extent by well designed policies, but they cannot be wished out of existence. Any policy that fails to take serious account of the disparities between different educational institutions and the inequalities in the wider society of which they are a part is bound to be infructuous.

Pressures on Universities

If we turn to the other end of the scale and look at the university as an institution of higher study and research, we will appreciate why the conditions of access to it

have to be different from those that are appropriate for the primary school. The conditions of access to higher education vary from one country to another and they have also changed over time. In some countries, such as the United States today, a very large proportion of the population is able to secure the benefits of higher education, although even there that was not the case until 50 or 60 years ago. In India the benefits of higher education remain outside the reach of the vast majority of people. However, no matter how wide the access to universities may be, in no country do they give admission without requiring some evidence of prior academic qualification. Even in the US, where access to higher education is wider than in any other country, no student can count on admission to the university of his choice unless he has the requisite test scores or the capacity to pay, or both.

In the modern world, education and employment are closely linked everywhere, even in the most affluent countries. The pressure on the universities, especially in countries like India, would not be so acute if a university degree did not come with the promise of employment in superior non-manual occupations. The fact that the promise is not always fulfilled is a different matter. No one can seriously expect to secure employment in a professional, managerial or administrative occupation without a university degree. One may of course live on rental income or start an independent business, but even there a university degree is a useful thing to have.

People say that university degrees have become steadily devalued in the last 60 years, and this is probably true to some extent. In the early decades of the last century and even until the time of independence, university graduates enjoyed a certain social standing whether or not they were able to secure remunerative employment. The mounting pressure on the colleges and universities to admit more students and produce more graduates has led to a certain loss of credibility in many institutions of higher education. They have been forced under pressure to relax their standards of examination, and, what is worse, reduce teaching to the bare minimum required for clearing examinations.

University graduates no longer enjoy the social standing they did in the past, partly because their ranks have become greatly swollen. This has happened also because it has become increasingly manifest that it is now possible to secure a university degree without receiving much by way of a university education. The fact that a person no longer needs to be properly educated in order to be a graduate is by now fairly well known, yet the pressure on the universities to produce more BAs, more MAs and, now, more PhDs continues unabated. A university degree by itself may be worth little economically, but no person is worth very much socially if he is without one.

Teaching and Examining

It is said that the university set up by Wilhelm von Humboldt in Berlin in 1812 was the first modern university. Humboldt's university was based on the principle of the unity of teaching and research. Until his time, the universities had concentrated mainly on teaching and undertook very little systematic research. The University of Berlin became a model for universities in Europe, America and elsewhere. Today all universities are expected to combine teaching with research although they do so in varying proportions and with varying degrees of success.

The Indian universities began differently. At the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, all established in 1857, hardly any research was done in the 19th century. Not much teaching was done in them either. The teaching was conducted in the colleges, a few of which were set up before the universities. The main functions of the universities, when they started, were to design courses of study, set up boards of examiners, conduct examinations and confer degrees. The first controllers of examinations were appointed before the first university professors. Even today the function of the controller of examinations remains crucial and his office is often like a fortress.

Teaching and research began to expand slowly, and some islands of excellence, as at the University of Calcutta in the second quarter of the last century, began to emerge. At least in the better universities, teaching and research held their ground

for some time against the rush for more and more degrees at any price. The rush has gained momentum in the last couple of decades under political pressure.

The pressure for the expansion of higher education comes from various quarters. The government wants more graduates to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding economy, and the growing middle class wants more places in the colleges and universities for its offspring. The number of colleges and universities has multiplied many times in the last 60 years. Apart from there being many more universities, new kinds of universities, with somewhat more specialised functions than the older ones, are now coming up. The earlier universities were built around a core of disciplines in the arts and sciences to which other disciplines, such as law and medicine, were added. In addition to those, there are now agricultural universities, universities of science and technology, universities of health sciences, law universities and universities of information technology.

When one expands from 30 to 300 universities within a span of 60 years, one cannot expect all universities to create and maintain the same standards in teaching and research. There are various reasons why those standards are highly uneven in our colleges and universities. There are vast disparities in material

resources: buildings, libraries, laboratories, and so on. But there are also enormous disparities in the capabilities of the students they admit and the teachers they appoint.

The universities have to contend with contradictory pressures. There is first the pressure to build up excellence on a selective basis, and there is also the pressure to allocate resources on an equitable if not uniform basis. In recent decades it is the second kind of pressure that has grown and mounted while the first has often been reduced to a residual status.

Some university institutions have very good facilities. IIT Madras has a splendid campus, a well-equipped library and excellent laboratories. The Jawaharlal Nehru University also has good facilities. But this is far from the case with most universities, including some central universities whose libraries are stocked mainly with textbooks, and even those are of somewhat ancient vintage. Pressures for the admission of more students and the appointment of more teachers have generally outstripped the provisions for expanding material facilities on a proportionate scale. The money that comes in from the government is limited, and most of it goes into salaries and basic services such as water and electricity, with very little left for libraries and laboratories.



NCDEX Institute of Commodity Markets and Research (NICR)

Vacancy for Senior Researcher

NICR has an opening for a young and dynamic economist to work in the domain of commodity markets. The candidate should be capable of initiating and sustaining an independent research program in the area. NICR offers immense opportunities for learning and growth for research professionals.

The candidate should have a track record of publications and demonstrated competency in methods of empirical analysis. He/she should have a PhD in Economics/Agricultural Economics/Finance/any other related discipline. Prior research experience in commodity markets is desirable.

Compensation will not be a constraint for deserving candidates.

Candidates may apply with detailed CV to: The Director, NICR, 2nd Floor, Jeevan Vihar Building, 3 Parliament Street, New Delhi – 110001

Or admin@delhi.nicr@ncdex.com

Last date for submission of applications: May 31, 2008

Even more important are the disparities in ability and aptitude among both teachers and students in colleges and universities in the different parts of the country. There is an enormous range of variation in ability among teachers and aptitude among students. The variations are not random, but structured in such a way that a few institutions attract both teachers and students of high quality while most have to make do with what is left over, which is of very indifferent quality. There are grounds to believe that the number and proportion of persons of poor or indifferent quality have increased steadily in recent decades both absolutely and as a proportion of the total. It is here that we have to remind ourselves of S Radhakrishnan's observation that intellectual work is not for all but for the intellectually competent even though such an observation is not likely to find favour with any political party today.

Many institutions of higher education are marked by a general atmosphere of apathy and lassitude which is relieved from time to time when there is a festival, an agitation or a strike. Students often stay away from classes because they do not feel the need to attend them in order to pass their examinations. There are many absentee teachers in our universities who use academic appointments as sources of rental income. The fact that more and more persons want to enrol in colleges and universities does not mean that they are there to advance their knowledge of the arts and sciences; many of them come for the degrees which they hope will secure them gainful employment. Similarly, teachers do not seek places in colleges and universities because they all have a vocation for science or scholarship but because they see them as sources of gainful employment or rental income, and because they have political promoters who want academic institutions to create more openings for members of their caste or community or their electoral constituents.

It is natural for students to be deterred from attending classes when they find that they are unable to follow what is being taught. Many students are unable to follow what is being taught simply because they have not had the kind of schooling that could prepare them to meet the demands

of undergraduate education. There are helpful teachers in many colleges who are prepared to relax the standards of teaching even in honours courses in order to accommodate their ill-equipped students. But then when those students seek to pursue postgraduate studies in a reputed institution, their lack of intellectual equipment comes to the surface again. What is an academic problem finds some kind of a political solution through pressures for the relaxation of standards overall.

Neglect of Research

The pressure from ill-prepared and ill-equipped students for admission into the institutions of higher education is relentless. It originates in the middle class and on its fringes, and is transmitted to the college and university authorities by those who control the machineries of government and politics. Over the years, university and college authorities have lost the will to resist these pressures and protect their academic standards. When they are faced with demands to expand their capacity, they bargain with the government for more funds in the spirit of managers who have to expand their industrial capacity.

The political leadership finds it convenient to satisfy middle-class aspirations by opening more colleges and universities instead of attending to the more urgent need of expanding and upgrading elementary and secondary education. Moreover, college and university students are politically organised in a way in which school students are not. Students' unions are a force to reckon with in the running of the university, and particularly its examination system. The university authorities are reluctant to apply strict academic standards for fear of a political backlash if that hurts the interests of the student community or any organised section of it. Vice chancellors are very anxious to avoid any action that might invite charges of discrimination from unsuccessful students and their political patrons.

Standards of evaluation for postgraduate degrees have been progressively relaxed in many, if not most, universities. I know more than one university where scarcely any candidate is failed and it is almost a matter of routine to give every candidate,

or virtually every candidate, high second-class marks. This is a far cry from the days when Bankimchandra had to be given grace marks to clear the MA examinations, being the only person to do so in his year.

The situation is not very different at the level of the PhD degree. Uniformity of standards is in any case very difficult to maintain here since PhD theses are examined case by case instead of in batches. Here the decline of standards has been less due to organised pressure than to negligence and indifference among supervisors and examiners. Yet the hunger for PhD degrees remains unabated. Despite the devaluation of university degrees, even persons outside the academic profession, including civic and political dignitaries, are eager to attach the title of "doctor" to their names, and there are coaching centres to assist them in their endeavours.

No university system can hold its own in the modern world if it confines itself only to the transmission of existing knowledge and contributes nothing to the creation of new knowledge. Doctoral programmes aim to initiate young scholars and scientists into the challenging and exacting processes that lead to the creation of new knowledge. We have added a large number of new universities in the last 60 years but whether there has been a proportionate increase in the creation of new knowledge in them remains a matter of doubt.

It can of course be said that the purpose of setting up new universities is not simply to contribute to the creation of new knowledge but also to make our public institutions socially more inclusive by providing increasing space in them for the accommodation of all the classes and communities that constitute the larger Indian society. It is undeniable that our universities are not nearly as socially inclusive as universities in any modern society are expected to be. In this they reflect the hierarchy in the wider society and in the institutions of elementary and secondary education to which I drew pointed attention in the earlier part of the paper. The manner in which our schools have been allowed to develop has had the inevitable consequence of generating huge inequalities in the conditions of competition at the point of entry into higher education. To

try to rectify those inequalities through crash programmes for making the universities socially more inclusive can end only in frustration.

Our present political leadership believes that the main social responsibility of the universities is to produce more and more graduates so that middle-class employment is more evenly distributed among all classes and communities. There is remarkable agreement on this across the entire political spectrum. No political party seriously believes that creating new knowledge is a major social responsibility of the university or even that our universities are capable of doing so. Having allowed the university's intellectual capital to run down, they now say that since they do not in any case produce good scholars or good scientists, they might as well make themselves socially more inclusive and more representative. They can give more attention to their intellectual tasks after that objective has been achieved.

Modern societies have been described as knowledge societies. Their advance is believed to depend more on the accumulation and deployment of intellectual than of material capital. The creation and transmission of new knowledge takes place

continuously and at an escalating pace. The universities of the 21st century have to operate in an intellectual environment that is radically different from that of the 19th century and earlier [Shils 1992]. Earlier universities acted more as repositories of traditional knowledge than as workshops for the creation of new knowledge. Advances in knowledge no doubt took place in the past but the universities absorbed those advances at a leisurely pace. This they can hardly afford to do if they are not to fall behind and stay behind. No argument for inclusiveness should be allowed to override all considerations of ability and performance in the institutions of advanced study and research.

In earlier times the universities could afford to suspend or relax their effort to keep pace with the advance of knowledge in the interest of some other social objective and expect to pick up the threads after a generation or two. To do so today will be a costly and hazardous venture. We will see other countries where universities were set up after ours overtake us and leave us behind. The Indian universities face a difficult and uncertain future. They must expand and multiply, and they must be socially inclusive. But if they are to

retain credibility as centres of science and scholarship, they must also be selective in appointments and admissions and in the award of degrees. As centres of learning in an open society, they have an obligation to explain to the public why and in what sense being selective in academic matters is in principle different from practising discrimination on grounds of gender, community and class. No modern university can tolerate discrimination on social grounds; nor can it survive as a centre of science and scholarship if it fails to discriminate, "without fear or favour", on academic grounds.

REFERENCES

- Banerjee, Pramathanath et al (1957): *Hundred Years of the University of Calcutta*, University of Calcutta Press, Calcutta.
- Béteille, André (2007a): 'Universities at the Crossroads', *Current Science*, 92(4): 441-49.
- (2007b): 'The School and the Community', *Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*, 21(3): 191-201.
- Commission on University Education (1950): *Report*, Government of India (Ministry of Education), Vol 1, New Delhi.
- Kremer, Michael et al (2006): *Teacher Absence in India*, Harvard University (Working Draft).
- Nehru, Jawaharlal (1949): *Speeches, 1946-49*, Government of India (Publications Division), Vol 1, New Delhi.
- Shils, Edward (1992): 'The Service of Society and the Advancement of Learning in the Twenty-First Century', *Minerva*, 30(2): 242-68.

Economic & Political WEEKLY

Review of Agriculture

December 29, 2007

The Electricity-Groundwater Conundrum: Case for a Political Solution to a Political Problem

– Navroz K Dubash

Revival of Agricultural Credit in the 2000s: An Explanation

– R Ramakumar, Pallavi Chavan

Agrarian Impasse in West Bengal in the Liberalisation Era

– Maumita Bhattacharyya, Sudipta Bhattacharyya

Attributes and Socio-economic Dynamics of Adopting Bt Cotton

– Rajinder Peshin, A K Dhawan, Kamal Vatta, Kamaldeep Singh

Sustainability of Wheat-Rice Production in Punjab: A Re-examination

– H S Shergill

For copies write to
Circulation Manager
Economic and Political Weekly
320-321, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg,
Lower Parel, Mumbai 400 013
email: circulation@epw.in