

Higher Education Needs a Longer View

The decline and fall of the publicly-funded higher education system in India has its origins in the fact that there has been a steady expansion of institutions without any concern for quality of the faculty. Unless such issues are addressed, merely increasing the number of seats will prove counterproductive.

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The government of India has now extended the regime of quotas to central government institutions of higher education. In addition to the seats currently reserved for students belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, seats will be reserved for students from the other backward castes. There will also be approximately a 50 per cent increase in the number of seats in the existing institutions, which is consistent with maintaining the status quo in the seats left for open competition. Increasing the total number of seats while extending reservation implicitly amounts to a quota for the upper castes, but this inconsistency, does not worry the government it seems. In this pragmatic management of discontent is betrayed a flawed approach to affirmative action of which quotas are but one form.

Affirmative action is not credibly motivated by reference to the rights of individuals (or, in this case, groups) but by the greater common good, usually shortened to “the public interest”, aspired to by all members of a society. In this view, the idea that society owes anything to anybody, irrespective of their caste, is a form of sentimentality. For instance, in the US, affirmative action is treated as desirable, and justiciable, as a means to arrive at more diverse public institutions but is not considered an individual right. It has significance in light of the historical dominance of people of European stock in that country. The relevance of affirmative action in India, a Pandora’s Box of inequalities, is undeniably far greater. However, that Indians are unequal in different ways tends to get overlooked in the political mobilisation around caste which has tended to

crowd out gender as a source of deprivation serious enough to merit greater attention than it receives from the largely male political leadership.

Goals of Higher Education

But even as we actively concern ourselves with the many inequalities around us, we must equally actively address the goals of publicly-provided higher education in India. After all, it is to be hoped that the deprivation that we are addressing will not, unlike the Biblical Poor, be with us always. Therefore, it is possible to imagine an end state in which we may devote ourselves exclusively to those goals. Indeed it is not inconsistent to do so right away, alongside our efforts to provide equality of opportunity at every stage of an Indian’s progress. Unfortunately we are not doing so today, which enfeebles even to the extent of eliminating the benefit of affirmative action itself. This failure is no temporary absent-mindedness. Our higher education system is evolving so that is leaving its constituents incapable of either appreciating the drift or of proposing alternatives for a reinvigoration. My concentrating on higher education should hardly be interpreted as a privileging of it over primary education. Only, the government is currently preparing to throw more money into the former, and this move should be socially audited, as public moneys have alternative uses.

As the pursuit of knowledge is a project without borders India can hardly choose to remain an island in the stream. If this is accepted in principle, we cannot get away from comparing where the higher education system in India stands in relation to the global frontier. The comparison would

not be flattering to us. Some years ago, a science writer had claimed in print that Indian science is more distant from global best practice today than it was at independence. He had been provoked to say this upon reading Stephen Hawking’s observation that S Chandrashekar had solved the problem for which he was to win the Nobel Prize for physics over 50 years later even while on the boat from Madras to England where he was headed as a fresh graduate of the Presidency College. This of course is an egregious example, and one must not read too much into it as it involves comparing the upper ends of two populations. It is entirely conceivable that average levels of learning and research in India have improved in the last 50 years. But we must entertain the nagging doubt that despite the extraordinary expansion in higher education, the quality of the research output is far from satisfactory.

But as an academic in India I worry less about any likely knowledge gap than I do despair about attitudes. In those of our institutions prized by the largest number – arguably the IITs and the IIMs – there is insufficient acknowledgement that the problems of this country constitute an intellectual challenge worthy of pursuit. It appears that among the students focus on India appears to have been given up as a project, except perhaps as a market for the multinational companies that they aspire to. Of course, the onus of accounting for student attitudes and aspirations lies largely with the faculty. Confronted by the low energy levels, a neutral observer of the so-called elite institutions has remarked that there is increasingly a mismatch in quality between the faculty and the students there. This may have been only a casual observation, but along with that on the distance of Indian educational practice from global standards one worth pondering over. In any case, our institutions of higher learning are not the dens of free-wheeling “argumentative Indians” that one would have hoped for. It is not too difficult to figure out how this state of affairs has come about. In the context of the current debate over reservation it may help to make one thing absolutely clear. The flaccid Indian academy must have origins other than in the government’s reservation policy, however intrusive it can be at times; for the system

has thus far been run almost exclusively by the upper castes. To my mind the decline and fall of the higher education system in India derives from two related developments. There has been a steady expansion of institutions of higher learning without any concern for quality of the faculty. This was bound to lead to the comeuppance of the project as the faculty are to an educational institution as the colonels are to an army, closest to the action. Subsequently, a further expansion depended upon the output of the preceding rounds for its faculty; poor quality then got embedded within the system. It is not surprising then that the system has evolved in the way it has.

The current state of our higher education system must be borne in mind when the government plans to expand what it has termed "opportunities". Expanding a second rate educational system would be damaging to the public interest. Of course, islands of excellence exist, but they may not remain so buoyant if greater numbers are thrown at them immediately. If this were to happen, and no one can deny outright that it will not, what the government would have given us with one hand, via affirmative action, it would have taken away with the other, via vote-bank politics. The government's decision to increase the number of seats in the central government institutions without so much as engaging their faculty could prove ill-advised. Even Mao had argued for inner-party democracy as an information retrieval mechanism! Of course, not all the institutions are poised similarly and several may well come through. But the top-down, cookie-cutter approach of an identical fix across diverse bodies is demoralising per se, and may induce further stress if the better among the faculty leave as a result. This cannot help our institutions, already facing a crisis of quality. How this will advance the cause of the deprived youth of this country is anybody's guess. One is reminded of the French army who, commandeered by Napoleon Bonaparte to march on Russia, upon reaching Moscow had found her burning. But all is not lost as yet. As a former chief minister, Veerappa Moily who is to head the Oversight Committee surely is a man of the world. He could take the committee to the citizens. All aspects and outcomes of the implementation of the government's reservation policy should be subject to public reasoning. The well-being of India demands no less. **[PW]**

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