

## Other Side of Unemployment in Kerala

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**B**A Prakash's paper 'Urban Unemployment in Kerala: The Case of Kochi City' (*EPW*, September 28, 2002) depicts a picture of acute unemployment in Kerala. The failure to create meaningful employment is the tragic failure of development in the state. The author seems to suggest that the present situation is due to the high incidence of unemployment among the educated youth caused by the excess supply of labour. But the story of educated unemployment in Kerala is probably incomplete without a reference to some of the grave deficiencies and insufficiencies of Kerala's educational system.

The educational system of Kerala was evolved in response to the need for numeracy and literacy created by the commercialisation of agriculture and the resultant trade, both domestic and international. The various socio-religious reform movements and political groups acted as pressure groups to accelerate the process of modernisation of the diverse castes and communities by setting up educational institutions on a large scale. The government also responded to the societal demand by setting up educational institutions of its own. However, all these institutions placed emphasis on general education rather than vocational or technical education. The author opines 'in spite of the vocational education, the educated are not getting gainful employment'. Perhaps, the author neglects the type and nature of the vocational education being taught in the various institutions in Kerala. These institutions do not place sufficient importance on skills development. Experiments to combine vocational activity with academic pursuits really did not take off. Vocationalisation, with its stress on labour skills, is out of tune with the dominant middle class concern of social development. Sporadic attempts for vocationalisation of education as a separate component also failed

due to faulty implementation. Moreover, the school curriculum failed to equip the students with either traditional skills or modern skills. The deskilling by education, together with the disdain for manual labour inculcated among the pupils at the schools and colleges has resulted in the high incidence of unemployment among the educated youth having a "strong preference for regular jobs in public and private sectors, which are scarce". The state has too many 'educated youth', but with few requisite skills, knowledge and work capacities. The outcome is the emergence of an unemployable 'educated youth' reluctant to accept blue collar jobs, leading to mounting unemployment in the state.

The present system of higher education is not rooted in the state's economy and society. The curriculum at the various levels of learning has not been adapted to the diverse needs of the economy. The prominent universities in Kerala lay emphasis only on traditional courses in arts and science disciplines. Knowledge revolutions in science, technology, social sciences and management have not influenced the state's higher education. Not only has there not been any diversification of courses worth mentioning, the contents of the courses as well, by and large, have not undergone major revisions. The formal education system in Kerala is incapable of responding to the qualitative changes taking place in the highly competitive job markets in India and abroad. Moreover, unlike the other states in India, there is very little interaction between educational institutions and industry in Kerala.

The steep decline in the quality of higher education characterised by the extensive use of obsolete pedagogic practices does not adequately prepare the 'educated youth' to get a job of their choice. The 'pedagogy of the oppressed' never takes into account the social and physical realities of Kerala. No educational

reform or policy focuses on improving the dwindling quality of teaching/learning processes in the state. What teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn. However, the entire system of higher education in Kerala is contrived not in the interest of education, nor for the benefit of the students, but solely to protect the interests of the teachers, to ensure that they get their salaries on the first of each month, whether or not they teach and, in all cases, to oblige the students to accept as knowledge whatever comes out of the mouths of their teachers. The academic community does not welcome the idea of regular upgradation of curriculum as it involves more work on their part. Their contribution to the modernisation of academic programmes has been minimal. Under the present system of education, it is possible to get through examinations without regular attendance or much intellectual effort on the part of the students. If formal education fails to perform the basic task of developing human skills, knowledge and work capacities, then employment and eventually development, naturally suffer.

In short, while general unemployment can largely be overcome in the course of economic growth, educated unemployment cannot be solved through higher rates of growth alone although it is a necessary condition. The solution for educated unemployment calls for speedy implementation of educational policies. An NCERT study shows that Kerala ranks very low among the Indian states in terms of learning achievement of pupils at the school level. About 30 per cent of the pupils who complete schooling do not reach the necessary achievement levels of numeracy and literacy in the state. The NCERT study calls for drastic measures to improve the teaching/learning processes in the state for enhancing learning outcomes. Quantitative expansion of education must give way to qualitative improvement and reorientation. It is sheer sarcasm on the part of an economist to suggest that the young and educated should migrate to the other parts of India and abroad, instead of stipulating genuine, down-to-earth measures to get rid of the whopping unemployment in the state. ■■