

Academic Standards in Indian Universities

Ravages of Affiliation

Anyone concerned with academic standards in Indian universities cannot but be deeply concerned at the ravages wrought by the system of affiliation modelled on the University of London with which we started in 1857. In addition to what we inherited, we have made the system even more dysfunctional. There is no limit to the number of colleges which can be affiliated to a university. Nor have any specific rules to earn the status of affiliation been laid down at any stage. Today there are something like a dozen universities which have more than 300 colleges affiliated to them. Some, though not all, of these universities are otherwise good, but what undermines their standing as a university is that they have to carry the unwanted cargo of a large number of affiliated colleges. The discussion in this paper makes two things clear: one, we have been a victim of the affiliating system for far too long; and two, without a decisive intervention by the centre no change can come about.

AMRIK SINGH

Anyone concerned with academic standards of Indian universities cannot but feel unhappy at the ravages wrought by the system of affiliation with which we started in 1857. The first three universities in India (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras) were modelled on the University of London. When these were established, the London model of organisation was taken over. Ironically enough, London University abandoned that model in 1858 but we are still stuck with it.

It is not as if that is the only problem we are saddled with. So many things are responsible for what is happening. But one of them without question, is our having stuck to what was discarded in the country of its origin. Going further, we can say that with the passage of time, we have made sure that the affiliating system which we have not been able to live down, continues to damage our academic performance.

In addition to what we inherited, we have made it even more complicated. For instance, there is no limit to the number of colleges which can be affiliated to a university. Nor have any specific rules to earn the status of affiliation been laid down at any stage. During the last few decades, the UGC tried to regulate the system of affiliation only to discover that the pressure from below was so overwhelming that rules were by and large disregarded. Perhaps it was better to disregard than to violate them, so ran the argument. No wonder, no specifically formulated rules regarding affiliation were laid down at any stage.

As of today, therefore, hardly any university has a set of rules which ensure that a college will faithfully comply with those requirements before it can be affiliated. The decision to affiliate colleges is taken as easily as a traffic policeman sending out a signal to turn right or left and everybody complying with it; and sometimes not even that. To put it in a different way, decisions in regard to affiliation of colleges are made not for academic reasons but for considerations other than the merits of the case. The other considerations include amongst other things, public pressure. Once this comes into play everything else is disregarded.

Today there are something like a dozen universities which have more than 300 colleges affiliated to them. Some, not each one

of these universities, are otherwise good. What undermines their standing as a university is the fact that they have to carry the unwanted cargo of a large number of affiliated colleges and quite a few of them do not measure up even to what would be regarded as the barest minimum. It may not be out of place to recall what the Gajendragadkar Committee set up in 1971 had said. It was of the view that, ordinarily speaking, an average affiliating university should have something like 25-30 affiliated colleges. Once the number exceeds that figure, it was time to set up another university. Today, the situation is more unmanageable than it was in 1971.

A few years before the Gajendragadkar Committee reported, the Kothari Commission had suggested that it would be desirable to create a new category of colleges which it called autonomous colleges. These colleges would have the right to admit students at their discretion, frame the syllabi and conduct examinations. In a sense they would be mini universities.

But nothing worth mentioning happened for the next several years. Some years later, the university of Madras took the initiative to set up autonomous colleges. In the first burst of activity, something like 20-odd of these were given autonomy. After an interval of some years, there was another burst of activity and, by now in that state, there are 60-odd autonomous colleges. At the same times a number of other universities have also come up in Tamil Nadu and they also now have autonomous colleges.

In a recent analysis of data relating to Tamil Nadu undertaken by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), two things are clear. One, the autonomous colleges were performing significantly better than affiliated colleges. Secondly, even out of those that were autonomous, it was the privately-managed ones which were doing better. To be more precise, 70 per cent of those which were doing well were privately-managed and 30 per cent were government-managed. In plain words, privately-managed autonomous colleges present some kind of a model which colleges located in other states would do well to emulate. This is not happening and, as far as one can warn, this is how things will continue to drift unless there is definite intervention by the central government.

Without going into further details, it is time to pause and look at three other distortions of the system that have been introduced

over the last few decades. The first one is that since there is no limit to the number of colleges that can be affiliated nor because precise rules have been laid down, the highest policy-makers, i.e., the politicians, have not felt inhibited in any way by the fact that the number of colleges affiliated to a university is 100, 200, 300 or even more. This consideration of numbers does not seem to matter at all. Most education ministers and other policy-makers who take decisions at this level understand only one thing; a college becomes legally established only when it is affiliated to a university.

There is one additional complication. If a new university is set up in order to provide an 'umbrella' to the new burgeoning colleges, that costs money. And money is scarce. Even more scarce are teachers of the required calibre, at the senior levels. There is such acute scarcity of men and women of the right quality that, more often than not, second grade, even third grade, individuals get appointed. Such appointments set into motion a whole cycle of indifferent performance. In the ultimate outcome, academic standards get depressed and nobody is the better for it.

No university has dared to go against the wishes of those who wield power. In any case, as has happened in a number of states, Maharashtra for instance, the power of affiliation was taken away from the university and vested in the government. In other words, affiliation which should be essentially treated as an academic matter has been treated as an administrative matter. On one occasion when this issue came up for discussion some years ago in the Association of Indian Universities composed only of vice-chancellors, a distinction was drawn between academic affiliation and administrative affiliation. The official point of view is that when a college is affiliated, it involves some financial obligation. As if to ward off that kind of obligation, a distinction between academic and administrative affiliation was attempted. That was done in order to strengthen the hands of the university as and when an occasion arose when a difficult situation had to be handled. But even that did not help. Whatever be the details, today if a college is to be affiliated, nothing can stop it from being affiliated.

The second thing that the political masters did was to adopt one common bill for all universities in the state. In other words, universities were treated as if they were an interchangeable commodity, and had no personality of their own. If one university could have a certain set of rules applied to it (that is what the statutory status meant), surely the same could be applied to another university too. Thus, the next logical step was to pass a Bill which covered all the universities. A number of states have done this kind of statutory jugglery though the more notable ones are Maharashtra and Karnataka.

What these states overlooked was the fact that universities are not exactly similar to one another as is generally assumed. The minimum therefore that any state can do is to recognise their individuality and enable them to function accordingly. Even if that cannot be done, separate legislation can be adopted for each university even while adhering to all those features that are common to one another. To treat all universities as alike is both to misjudge their character and to treat them with scant courtesy.

Thirdly, as if that was not enough, several states started violating the very concept of the word university. A university, by definition, deals with the universe of knowledge. Whether it is veterinary science or history or information technology or law or forestry, every discipline falls under the jurisdiction of a university.

With the passage of time however, certain distinctions were marked out. For example, the US, established land grant

universities in the 19th century. In Europe, even that did not happen. But then, soon came a spate of technical universities. Since during the last two centuries there have been remarkable technological advances, there is now a whole category of universities known as technical universities. At the same time, care was taken to see that these universities did not diverge from the other universities too widely, and generally they do not. In our country for example, IITs which impart technical knowledge are obliged to devote 15 per cent of their academic time to the humanities. To put it in other words, even when an attempt was made to narrow their focus, attempts were made to establish linkages.

To some extent, these deviations could be lived with, but sometimes they have stretched too far. So, on one hand there has been the establishment of medical universities, law universities and so on, but on the other, in one state, in addition to an agricultural university, a university specialising in veterinary science was almost set up. Somehow good sense prevailed and that project was abandoned.

As a matter of fact, nothing has been easier for the policy makers to decide as they please. In the process, they have done grievous injury to the concept of a university. The desire to split and sub-split university disciplines flows from the fact that the working of the existing universities is unsatisfactory in any case and it did not seem to matter whether universities continued to be set up in order to deal with even narrow branches of knowledge.

None of the great universities of the world has been guilty of this default. Why should we in India be doing something which is inconsistent with the concept of a university? The honest truth is that no one needs to be educated in the proper sense of the word more than the education ministers in different states.

Certain policy decisions were taken which, in the ultimate outcome did some good initially, but the passage of time has done more harm than good. In saying this, one is referring to the 1973 revision of salary scales of teachers.

II

Since economic growth under the British was very slow and the population kept on increasing, the British were astute enough to ensure one thing. To the extent possible, they went slow with the growth of higher education in India so as to avoid creating a situation they could not handle. That is why when the British withdrew in 1947, the number of universities was around 20 and the number of colleges was a little above 500.

Within a few years, higher education began to expand. In the 1950s and 1960s, the rate of growth of higher education in India was 13-14 per cent per year. No other country of the world has ever witnessed such a rapid rate of growth. The generally accepted norm in almost every country even in a period of expansion, has been 5 or 6 per cent per year. With the end of the 1960s, the rate of growth in India too stabilised around that figure and has continued to hover around that figure since then. It was almost at the end of that period of expansion that the Gajendragadkar Committee (1971) examined the question of how universities were to be administered. In the course of that analysis, this committee observed, amongst other things, that, generally speaking, a university should have 25-30 affiliated colleges and no more.

The unplanned growth of the 1950s and the 1960s, however made sure that the right kind of planning would not be enforced. Not only that, owing to ceaseless expansion in these years, standards of performance too had visibly declined. Indeed they

declined to the extent that even though the UGC had come into existence by December 1953, it was simply swamped by numbers and could not get a firm hand on the rate of expansion. A good deal of this expansion was in the area of technical education. At the same time, growth in the faculties of science, arts and social sciences was equally massive. In the case of technical education, equipment and infrastructure are always crucial. In the case of the other faculties, it was not regarded as all that important. What is more, since the country had not planned for a manageable rate of expansion, a large number of persons not equal to the job got into teaching. In consequence, standards began to decline very fast.

One of the casualties of the reckless expansion of numbers was that, funding being short, salary scales were not upgraded in the manner and measure required. Before 1973, when salary scales were dramatically upgraded, almost half the teachers working in colleges were seriously underpaid. To resolve this problem, a dual formula was put forward. One, that there should be parity between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. That seemed to be the only way of enabling seriously underpaid teachers to come up to the required norm of remuneration. The second innovation made was that the salary scales were brought at par with class I officers in the government of India. This provided a frame of reference which the bureaucrats dealing with this issue could understand. It must be said to the credit of the then policy makers that both these innovations were successfully sold to the prime minister so that, despite considerable opposition in the cabinet, she pushed the matter through!

It is understood that when the matter went before the cabinet, those who opposed this dual formula were political heavy weights like Babu Jagjiwan Ram and Sardar Swaran Singh. Even C Subramaniam, it is learnt, was not entirely in favour of the new proposal. But the prime minister was categorical that a structural change had to be made and it was made.

Looking back, one has nothing but admiration for those who worked out this formula. Almost overnight, teachers who had been underpaid all these decades were put on par with class I officers. The fact that it was radical should be evident from one fact: even after the centre had accepted this formula, the states were reluctant to accept it. In state after state, teachers struck work but ultimately got what they demanded. In five years, however, except for two states, which had to cope with some local problems, every other state had fallen in line. In consequence, college and university teaching ceased to be a profession which was regarded as the last choice of anyone with ability or ambition.

It was not roses all the way, however. There were problems and some of them fairly serious. The most obvious of them was that the bulk of these jobs were in colleges; only 20 per cent were in university departments. The parity between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching which had been introduced as a part of this formula ultimately turned out to be a double edged weapon. This was not because those who were working at the university level were opposed to the new dispensation in any way. The problem manifested itself in other ways.

Going by the latest figures, 88 per cent of students are enrolled at the undergraduate level though the number of teachers working at that level is nearer 80 than 88 per cent. After all, the student-teacher ratio at the university level is much higher than at the undergraduate level.

The second related development that took place was no less dicey. As per the latest UGC count, 55 per cent of the students

enrolled at the postgraduate level are registered in colleges. In other words, even when the university departments attempted to maintain their elitist orientation, the process was subverted from within by locating the greater proportion of postgraduate teaching in colleges. A good deal of this took some years to come into the open. Meanwhile came the first revision of the revised scales of pay in the mid-1980s.

By then, it had become clear to everyone, including the decision-makers, that no decision unless it was acceptable to the majority of the teachers (and 80 per cent of them worked in colleges) could be enforced. In other words, salary scales which had been revised upwards with the fond expectation of transforming the academic profession produced the opposite effect. Parity between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching turned out to be a hindrance rather than a help.

The political leadership at the central level failed to understand the complexity of the problem. The organised teachers who spoke for the majority of them felt that they would be able to protect their sectional interests only by insisting upon a formula which did not draw a distinction between the two categories of teachers. In their eyes, this single fact was more important than any other consideration. So much so that even if it hurt the cause of academic standards, they were prepared to put up with it. The emphasis of teachers' unity was more important than anything else.

At the same time, there was the unquestioned fact that the policy makers at the centre submitted tamely to the pressure of militant trade unionism. The All India Federation of University and College Teachers Organisations (AIFUCTO) felt so confident about its strength that, in 1987, at the time of first round of revision of scales after 1973, it staged an all India, indefinite strike. That it could not be sustained beyond one month is another matter and need not be gone into here. In the end, some kind of a fake compromise was worked out and the strike was called off. What needs to be underlined is that it was the college teachers who called the shots throughout this wholly avoidable confrontation. More than anything else, the AIFUCTO was attempting to assert its dominance over everyone else. The university-appointed teachers felt marginalised. They responded tamely by even setting up a separate organisation, but that did not get off the ground beyond a point.

This is what happened in 1987. The college teachers did not win any new demand, for most of the things demanded had been already conceded by the Mehrotra Committee. In the situation now unfolding, it was for the UGC to ensure that the assessment of teachers as recommended by the Mehrotra Committee in fairly specific terms was actually implemented. This was a job which required to be undertaken thoroughly, comprehensively and in a professional manner. Nothing of that kind however happened and, before long, the teachers had got the revised pay scales of pay without the kind of accountability which was an integral part of the new deal. Another way of saying the same thing would be that teaching got reduced to the level of working in an office. Whether one worked or not did matter. It needs to be understood however that lack of accountability in the government leads only to inefficiency. In teaching, it leads to ethical and moral degeneration also.

One can go further and say that, for the next decade or so, almost till the Rastogi Committee was appointed, the UGC continued to stumble. Within limits, the Rastogi Committee, however, made sensible recommendations. This time the UGC itself sabotaged its own committee. It brazenly rewrote the report

and submitted a set of parallel recommendations. As if that was not confusing enough, the NDA government did not know how to cope with the problem of undergraduate teachers deciding the fate of postgraduate teaching and research.

At the political level, not only were the teachers able to get everything that they wanted, they were able to get even more. In addition to what the Rastogi Committee had recommended, Delhi college teachers were able to get something much beyond that. Delhi is one of those universities where no colleges offer postgraduate teaching though some of the teachers in the arts and the social sciences do participate in postgraduate work at the university level. To put it another way, postgraduate teaching is the exclusive charge of the university of Delhi.

And yet the ministry of HRD conceded professorship to undergraduate teachers when only a handful of them handle postgraduate work.

It so happened that this decision of the ministry of HRD was challenged in the high court of Delhi. Before the first hearing could come up, the ministry chose to withdraw the scheme which had been extended only to central universities. A proposal which has financial implications has to be spelt out in detail and an estimate presented to the cabinet. In this case, what was being extended mainly to Delhi colleges would have to be eventually extended to all colleges in the rest of the country. But such an estimate was not worked out, neither in respect of Delhi nor the rest of the country. It is believed that the cabinet was not consulted at any stage and the decision was made by the minister in his individual capacity.

Since the ministry of HRD could not afford to mislead the high court with regard to what had been done, it decided to sidestep the problem. In a sleight of hand therefore, the scheme was withdrawn. In both cases, when the scheme was introduced and then withdrawn, the UGC's only role was to endorse the decisions made by the ministry of HRD.

It is possible to go into further details in regard to this bungling both at the HRD and the UGC levels. But that is not the point under discussion. What requires to be discussed is whether the 1973 policy conceding parity between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching was the right thing to do. To what extent has experience over the years justified it? To what extent could the overwhelming dominance of teachers at the undergraduate level become a model which the country would be well advised to follow? Or to put it another way, what is the place and role of colleges in the system of Indian higher education? It is not only an administrative issue, it is also an academic issue which needs to be discussed at the conceptual level.

III

The brief answer to the question posed above is that, as a result of developments since 1947, a peculiar kind of distortion has arisen in our university system. The proportion between undergraduate and postgraduate students is in the ratio of 88 to 10 or 11. Those who are enrolled at the postgraduate level or undertake research do not constitute more than one tenth of the total student population. A relevant question to ask therefore is: What are the essential ingredients of university education?

When one compares the undergraduate course in India with the undergraduate course in other countries, the contrast is instructive. Briefly put, in the first year of the undergraduate course in our country, most of what is done is repetition of what

was either actually done at the higher secondary level. Sometimes, though in all cases, the syllabus prescribed by certain school boards is somewhat watery and far from rigorous. In the next two years of the undergraduate course, some advanced work is done.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the situation varies from university to university. In certain universities, there is an attempt to specialise. In certain others, this is not so with the result that when students pass out, they have no doubt matured with the passage of years but not necessarily in terms of wider knowledge or deeper understanding.

There is no precise way of measuring the achievement of students.¹ When Indian students migrate abroad, however, some kind of a comparative analysis is done by the host university. Hardly any one of them treats an Indian graduate as equivalent to her own graduates. This fact was noted by the Kothari Commission also. In North America, most students when they seek admission there, are exempted from only a part of the course work at the undergraduate level. In concrete terms, those who are admitted are generally expected to spend an additional year or two (depending upon the individual student's ability) in order to draw abreast of what their own students have learnt. Why does this happen? This is a question worth asking.

In most other countries, students having finished school, go on to the university. No preparatory work is done in order to cope with the somewhat exacting demands of university education. The transition is from the school to the university. In our country, we have created a new halting stage between the school and the university. What students learn at the undergraduate level in our universities should have been by and large learnt at the school level. But school education in our country is not as rigorous or as comprehensive as it could have been. A minuscule minority of schools, something like 5-6 per cent do manage to perform up to the required level but not the rest. Also, there are loose ends both at the planning stage and the way most schools function and it is assumed that when students go to college the deficiency would be taken care of.

In plain words, the undergraduate course in our universities offer partly school education and partly higher education. It is difficult to draw clear boundaries except when in certain universities the 'honours' course is taught as a parallel course while a substantial number of students do what is called the 'pass' course. As a matter of fact, labels vary from university to university. Those who do the honours course are certainly working at an advanced level and make the transition to the postgraduate level somewhat easily. Some of those who come from the pass background also manage to make the transition but after a certain amount of effort.

Seen in this background, what we in India have done is to evolve a new stage of education represented by what is known as the college. In other countries as soon the student joins the university course, he knows that he will have to make an effort to come up to the advanced level of instruction in the classroom. This hardly happens in our country. Properly speaking, even though two years were added to schooling and one year was cut down at the college level, the ultimate outcome in terms of enhanced levels of performance boils down to this: till the students grapple with the advanced kind of work which is done at the master's level, a student at the college level has not really become a university student in the full sense of the word.

It need not be inferred from what has been stated above that the structure of university education, i e, 10+2+3 requires to be reworked. But what needs to be ensured is that the body of

knowledge which is communicated at the undergraduate level is so strengthened and the mode of doing so is made so rigorous that, by the time a student comes to the master's level, he should feel that what he is now doing is not in the nature of remedial work. This would imply enriching both the syllabus and strengthening the instruction at the master's level as well as fine tuning it so that, in most cases, a student can easily step on to the PhD level. In certain universities, the MPhil course was introduced in order to make up for what is not done at the master's level. But not all universities in India do this. Therefore this formulation is not valid for each one of these universities.

Altogether there are two problems at the college level. One is the irremediable fact of growing numbers. Secondly, were the higher secondary level teaching to be made stronger and the undergraduate course more demanding, something like 50 per cent of those who now get enrolled in college would find it difficult to keep pace with others in classroom. Who are these 50 per cent students, however? Because of the light syllabus and the relaxed mode of teaching, they amble along and do not feel out of their depth as they should have felt normally. These are the students whom their parents can afford to maintain at college largely because of low fees and the far from demanding nature of the syllabus. They are not interested in pursuing higher education but only in passing time.

Part of the explanation for this state of affairs lies in what happens outside the limited sphere of education. Our annual rate of growth was around 3 per cent for about four decades and has by now graduated to 5 per cent. Therefore, the number of new jobs being created has been consistently on the low side. Were employment to be easier and were undergraduate education to be more exacting, the situation would have been different.

It should not have been necessary to bring up this line of argument except to take up a related issue which has become a favourite mantra with some of the policy makers. One of the ex-chairmen of the UGC was particularly enthusiastic about this point of view. It is assumed by some people that, as in some of the advanced countries, the percentage of students going in for higher education should be higher than 6-7 per cent as at present. On the contrary, they would like to see it doubled or tripled.

What they overlook is one inherent flaw in this line of reasoning. It would be valid to talk of a higher percentage of students going in for higher education provided we had something like near universal literacy and a substantial proportion of these students completing their secondary education. These preconditions, so to speak, would be met only when the country gets much more industrialised than she is today. In this connection, we should ask the question if we are doing enough even for vocational education. As to the more advanced level of industrialisation, the stage is yet to be reached.

Oddly enough, those who advocate such an approach do not stop to look at or scrutinise the low standards of performance both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Nor do they have any serious misgivings about the casual and indiscriminate manner in which postgraduate teaching is done in colleges today. While a small proportion of the colleges – not even 10 per cent perhaps – have the academic capability to handle postgraduate work, the rest of them merely make a pretence of doing postgraduate work. More than most other reasons, this is one explanation for our inability to improve our standards.

Without going so far as to suggest that the college stage is an innovation in the university system, what we should recognise

is that, except for a handful of colleges which are performing very well, the bulk of them operate at a level which leaves a lot to be desired. If India is to be internationally competitive, something radical would have to be done in this regard. That our obsolete mode of testing the ability of students contributes a great deal to our unsatisfactory performance should not require any discussion; the matter is much too obvious for an argument. In brief, what we have is a wage policy and not an educational policy.

In order to understand this argument about undergraduate education better, a digression would be in order. In the next section, some details in regard to how colleges function in UK and US are provided. These details would help to illuminate the argument further.

IV

Colleges in the Indian context are not the same thing as colleges elsewhere. We are more familiar with the situation in UK and US than in other countries. The model in both countries needs to be described in order to see where the Indian system differs from both. The word 'deviate' is not used advisedly: there is no such thing as a model which can be followed by others.

In UK, a college is an educational unit which does not measure up to the level of a university. Ordinarily speaking, it is a small unit. Quite often it deals with only one discipline such as nursing, forestry, music or things like that. If anything, the more relevant thing to note is that a college in that country exists on its own and is not affiliated to a university. As a matter of fact, the affiliation system in UK was in vogue till the middle of the 19th century. It ceased to exist after 1858 when the university of London was reorganised more or less in line with what it is today. Currently, therefore, the affiliating system is to be found only in the three countries of the Indian subcontinent and for reasons which should not be difficult to understand.

London has an Imperial College of Science which was established in the mid 19th century. In terms of its academic output and research accomplishment, it is as good as any university anywhere. To put it another way, a college is almost a mini university. In respect of its academic reach and performance, it can be as good as a university but its size may not be all that large. One can even go to the extent of saying that there is hardly any distinction between a university and a college except one of scale.

During the last few decades, UK has diversified her system of higher education in a contemporary and creative way. If students pass out from school at the age of 16 – education is compulsory till that age – those who aspire to go on to university prepare for Form VI which is the gateway for admission to the university. In terms of academic standards, Form VI provides for a certain kind of specialisation which those aspiring to join a university have to opt for.

Till a few decades ago, before the submission of the Robbins Report in the early 1960s, the percentage of students joining the university was not even 10 per cent. But with the growth of the GDP and the impact of the American model, this percentage has been growing. Today, almost 40 per cent of those who finish school in UK go on to a university. This proportion may go up marginally but it is not likely to exceed 50 per cent at any time.

What happens to the remaining 50 per cent? Some of them enter the world of work but most of them do what is called 'further education'. Strictly speaking, further education is a two years full time programme. But the proportion of those who join on

a full-time basis is not very large. A substantial proportion of the students start working and pursue further education on a part-time basis. Quite a proportion take three years even in order to complete the two years course. Of course the rest take 4-5 years or sometimes even more.

Further education is basically a programme for vocational training. The whole thing is very flexible. Students can join, drop out and rejoin if they feel like it and a large number do – some time even after a gap of several years. The proportion of students who do not pursue a course after the age of 16 is very small. There are also arrangements for the retraining of those who are 30 years or more. It needs to be mentioned here that, in economic terms, UK is doing better than most other countries in Europe. Several of these countries have been trying to learn from the British experience during the last few years and have carried out fairly extensive changes in their own programmes of vocational education. Some of these institutions in the further education system are also described as colleges. As a matter of fact, the word college is so flexible that it can be used to virtually describe any kind of educational outfit.

Coming to the US, the situation till the end of second world war was that both universities and colleges existed side by side. Most colleges admitted students in four year programmes. From the 1950s onwards, a new type of institution describing itself as a community college came into existence. In any case it should be remembered that the school leaving age in the US is between 17 and 18 and not 16 as in the case of UK. The general thrust of development in respect of these colleges was that a certain number of colleges which had a four-year structure improved themselves further in academic terms and promoted themselves to what might be described as mini-universities. Some four-year colleges have had a long standing and are as prestigious as several of the universities. But their number was not particularly high, perhaps a couple of hundreds till 1945. The rest of the colleges were of a distinctly lower category and continued to be described as four-year colleges. They do not aspire to be a mini-university, if one may venture to say so.

The two-year colleges in contrast have consistently focused on vocational courses. The kind of flexibility which characterises American life and education can be seen at its best in these colleges. New courses are started and discontinued as and when necessary. This is generally done in response to changes in the market situation. Those who feel that they are preparing themselves for junior level jobs in industry or business opt for study at these colleges. A few of them sometimes aspire for a degree. They either shift to another college or join the higher range of courses in that college itself. The American system is highly fluid in its working and there is very little of rigidity in it. Only, whatever they do is done in the interests of academic standards.

V

Having broadly described the situation in those two countries so as to provide a comparative picture, it is time to turn to our own situation. Our situation is not only conditioned by what we inherited, we are by now almost bound hand and foot by what has come to be known as the affiliating system. A good deal has been said about it earlier and it need not be repeated. Every single college in these two countries is entirely on its own and has hardly any connection with any university. Therefore no one prescribes their admission requirements, their courses of study, the conduct

of their examination, even the scales of pay, and so on. Everything is left to the college. Who controls it and who finances it are issues that need not be gone into here.

The point to underline is that whatever happens in these colleges is largely in response to the market situation. It was partly in recognition of these considerations that the Kothari Commission recommended that, without going into the issue of affiliation and all that goes with it, a parallel system of autonomous colleges should be set up. Formally speaking, these colleges would continue to be affiliated to a particular university, but for all practical purposes, they would be on their own.

Over the years, it is only the state of Tamil Nadu which has promoted this scheme consciously and consistently. As already stated, virtually half the autonomous colleges in India are to be found in that state.

Why did the system not spread to other states? One obvious reason was the lack of leadership. But the deeper reason was another development. In 1975, the central government came up with new scales of pay which were enforced with effect from 1973. That created a new pressure group. As described already, the teachers saw to it that the autonomous colleges did not come into existence. The teacher leadership was afraid that, were that to happen, parity between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching which was the cornerstone of the new scales of pay would get jeopardised.

Before proceeding further with this analysis, it is important to refer to two other aspects of this problem. The first one is that owing to the short sighted policy of the state during the first quarter century after 1947, talented persons seldom opted to go into teaching. The scales of pay were so low that they did not feel attracted.

The second significant development was that while medicine and engineering continued to be popular, some new careers also became popular; the armed forces, for instance. Gradually, other careers also opened up. For example, step by step, business management loomed larger and larger on the horizon. Along with this trend came large-scale growth in the number of privately funded professional colleges. Owing to these multiple factors, despite improvement in the scales of pay at the university and college level in the mid-1970s, the pecking order of the professions did not undergo a change as expected. Things might have shaped differently if the scales had been revised upwardly before the surge of numbers in the 1950s and 1960s had got under way. A contributory factor was the growing migration of a large number of the abler students to other countries. Even though a number of high level jobs went abegging, there were not enough takers to fill them.

How did the teaching profession respond to these challenges? Only in a defensive way and not at all in a constructive way. At one level, it fought and won the right to keep intact the scales of pay in each state. Unfortunately, that was the one thing on which they focused all their attention and energy. It was a stroke of good luck that parity between undergraduate and postgraduate education was brought up as an argument when the formula had to be sold to the political bosses. For their part, none of the teachers except in Delhi had brought up this argument. (It was valid till the early 1960s. After that, the situation underwent a qualitative change but those details need not be discussed here.) Once it was accepted, its beneficiaries latched on to it. They knew that if a higher scale of pay was to be justified in academic terms – and it came under attack every now and then – this argument

must not be weakened in any way. Were that to happen, their principal prop of support would be gone.

At another level, the teachers sought to change the plane of argument when more and more colleges chose to opt for post-graduate teaching. Standards at this level had never been satisfactory. All this time, the UGC had never been able to work out a suitable answer to the question of declining standards. Where should the postgraduate course be located and what should be the quality of those who are engaged for teaching? Such questions were seldom raised and, in any case, never concretely answered. Everything had remained vague and undefined. In this intellectual vacuum, they pushed in the direction of more and more colleges opting for postgraduate mode. Today 55 per cent of the post-graduates are enrolled in colleges and, in a state like Tamil Nadu, 60 per cent of the colleges have provision for postgraduate teaching. The situation in UP is not particularly different.

In this connection I recall an encounter with a well known professor of Economics who was working at that time in the Madras School of Economics. During the course of conversation, he told me that the focus in that school was on research. All that they admitted at the master's level was 15 students per year and that too after a rigorous test in which almost 200 students participated. As he explained to me, these students were the cream of the students interested in the subject. After selection by the Madras School of Economics, there were another 20-30 who did come up to the range of acceptability considered suitable for admission to the master's degree. But there was no second round of selections and the whole lot of them get admitted to the dozen or so colleges which did MA teaching in the city. The blunt truth, as he put it, was that only two or three of these colleges had somewhat satisfactory arrangements for postgraduate teaching; the rest just managed to blunder along.

Since Economics is not my subject, I am not qualified to sit in judgment on what he said. But, broadly speaking, this is the situation in almost in every single university discipline. What we have to remember is that a certain proportion of these students then go on to teach sometimes, even at the postgraduate level. This is how the cycle of low standards is perpetuated.

A powerful factor which has contributed to this unenviable situation has been the traditional fee structure followed by universities and colleges. Hardly any distinction is drawn between those who are poor and capable and poor but not so capable. What is required is a flexible approach. Those who are capable but poor must be helped but not only if they are poor. Let this fact not be forgotten that we are talking of the situation at the postgraduate level. We have so far failed to devise a system which will ensure both these objectives. Two recent developments which have a bearing on this issue may be referred to here.

The first one is the recent Supreme Court judgment which has empowered the colleges to fix their own fees. The state governments have yet to work out a proper response to this decision. The second one was an experiment which was undertaken by Osmania University a couple of years ago and has some degree of academic significance. The system is still being followed in that university even though the vice-chancellor who initiated it is no longer in office.

His governing consideration was how to raise additional resources. He put forward the proposal to admit an additional 10 students at the master's level on payment of the full cost being incurred by the university. Thirty students were admitted every year on the basis of a test. Those who qualified got admitted.

The additional 10 seats belonged to the category who did not qualify in the list of 30 who were selected but had means enough to buy their seats. Those students who were not affluent enough to pay the higher amount were obviously left out.

Under the existing system, to repeat, poor students almost invariably get left out. This should not be allowed to happen. We have to devise a system where, if a student is found academically eligible, he should get support from somewhere. So far, it has been a hit and miss affair and, most often, poor but capable students fail to make the grade.

The issue here is not only how to render social justice; the problem has an academic dimension as well. Those 10 students who had paid the full cost insisted upon quality teaching; after all they had paid for it by straining their resources. Out of the remaining 30, at least half of them, if not more, also thought that way. Thus, between them, they became a formidable force in favour of quality teaching. Teachers who tended to be slack or casual had to pull up their socks and perform. To put it another way, the stagnant fee structure in most universities and colleges tends to depress academic standards further.

Clearly, what we need is a system which is socially sensitive and academically demanding. In the existing system, both these preconditions are either absent or weak. And these, without question, have further lowered academic standards. The purpose of this digression, if it may be said, was to make the point that in addition to trade union pressure, other forces too are at work. The absence of a distinction between undergraduate and post-graduate teaching as also the defective fee structure have significantly aggravated the situation. That there is a strong case for recasting the fee structure should be obvious. These facts also underline the fact that the teacher response to the changing situation has not been all that constructive.

The sum total of what has been said so far is that from whatever angle the issue is seen, everything seems to work for the lowering of standards. Salary scales were revised upwards in the mid-1970s in order to attract good people. In the process, an unwarranted attempt to ensure parity between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching was made. Unfortunately, it worked to the disadvantage of academic standards. Instructing 55 per cent of students at the postgraduate in colleges is one example of that trend.

By the time the salary scales were improved, university teaching had thus ceased to be an attractive proposition. When fees were not revised upwards in line with the rising prices, it had the effect of undermining the will to perform better. Student pressure in favour of quality teaching ceased to be a factor in the situation and, on the whole, a kind of academic miasma developed. In brief, whichever step were taken, the ultimate outcome was not to improve academic standards. No wonder most people were content to receive their wages and not bother about issues like academic improvement.

The only other dimension of the problem that remains to be added is that, as per the latest calculations, the number of colleges has already crossed 12,000. And unless there is a radical change of direction, the current rate of expansion at 5 to 6 per cent per year, is likely to remain unchanged.

VI

It would be no exaggeration to say that it is a grim picture which has been projected. With literacy spreading steadily and more and more children going to school, pressure on colleges

is bound to grow. The current enrolment at the university level is approximately eight million. Reckoned in terms of this rate of growth, it is likely to grow by less than half a million every year during the next couple of years. Meanwhile the base would get widened and the rate of annual growth would be half a million, perhaps even more. The population too is growing. This undeniable fact too will continue to exert pressure.

Two questions arise: Is the affiliating system in a position to take any further load? Secondly, is the existing system flexible enough to adjust to the growing load? The answer to both questions is in the negative. Only one has to work out a pragmatic answer to the question as to how the system is to be changed. For the last three decades and more, some half hearted attempts have been made to change the system but it has not improved the situation. This was for the obvious reason that we did not attack the problem at its roots.

What steps therefore are required to be taken in order to deal with the situation? Something like the following needs to be done:

(A) The most urgent thing to be done is to get out of the deadly grip of the affiliating system. This objective is not going to be fulfilled unless the centre provides the right kind of leadership and gets the states to agree to the alternative plan which is worked out. One thing is clear. A decision like this cannot be taken overnight. Not only that, whatever approach is adopted, the decision will have to be modulated in such a way that certain self-locking stages of development are visualised and planned for. Each stage has to be given a few years to work itself out before the next stage is embarked upon.

(i) Establishment of a large number of autonomous colleges should be the first target. Something like 500 can be virtually set up overnight. NAAC has already evaluated more than 200 colleges. Another year or so and about the same number of new colleges will get evaluated. It is being put this way because no college should be given the autonomous status unless NAAC, through its own processes, has evaluated and graded it.

NAAC has to expedite its process of evaluation because another 500 colleges or so are ripe for becoming autonomous. In other words, a thousand colleges can be given the autonomous status within two years. This is not a small number. Once this happens, it will generate a new momentum and more and more of them will move in the direction of becoming autonomous.

(ii) This move will be resisted by the organised body of teachers for reasons that need not be repeated here. The one thing to ensure would be that both the centre and the states agree upon this fact that there would be differential scales of pay for different categories of colleges. This is the core issue. Unless there is complete unanimity on this point, no progress would be possible.

In the mid-1970s, the centre could use its prestige as also its superior financial resources to persuade the states to go with its decision in favour of the new plan of action. Subsidy by the centre to the states was increased from 50 to 80 per cent in 1973. This was in order to tempt the states to fall in line with the lead being given by it. This very formula can now be followed in reverse.

If the states are willing to forego the central subsidy, they would of course be free to do so. But that is not likely to happen for the simple reason that the states are already reeling under financial pressure. They will, in other words, fall in line with whatever the centre suggests. All they would need is a little bit of prodding. Even if their views in this matter are not clearly formulated today, most of the states are already feeling overburdened with the

financial load that they are having to carry. Therefore they would like to see this burden reduced. Some of them are already moving in that direction. Some more are likely to do the same within the next couple of years.

To put it another way, it is just the right time for the centre to take the lead and the states will, without much reluctance, fall in line with what the centre wants done.

(iii) In suggesting that the scales of pay should be differential in character in the next round of the revision of scales, there should be no question of going back to the situation that obtained before the mid-1970s. The university-appointed teachers and those working in autonomous colleges should be given the same scales of pay. In the case of the rest, both the starting salary and the structure of the grade may essentially remain the same; only the upper ceiling of the scale should be reduced by 2-300 rupees. The intention is not to depress the wage packet of the teachers though there would be a certain measure of re-distribution there.

The overall intention should be to build an academic hierarchy. One of the distinctly negative outcomes of the 1973 scales has been that the teachers have lost the incentive to move from one institution to another. A kind of indolence has overtaken them. It is not only physical indolence; worse than that, it is both academic and spiritual in character. The overall structure of the system however needs to be retained and the way to do it would be as described above.

It may be noted in this connection that in UK, for instance, some salary differential between the university and the senior school teachers is there but the gap is not particularly wide. In other words, the states need not make the assumption that the overall financial responsibility will come down sharply. It will not. But it will get redistributed in a different way and in a way which will prompt people to work harder, to rise faster and to perform better. Some such system needs to be worked out.

(iv) What about those colleges which cannot be given the autonomous status? As far as one can judge, in about five years time, the number of autonomous colleges will rise to 3-4,000. Even more than that. Once the system is restructured in the manner suggested above, the colleges which fail to make the grade would sooner or later be placed in a category which is above the higher secondary schools but lower than the autonomous colleges. But quite a few will aspire to move higher and some of them will hopefully succeed in doing so. We have to evolve a competitive system which has a number of inbuilt stages linked to performance and a number of identifiable incentives. Movement from one stage to the other should be always possible and need not be restricted.

(B) Working out a new system does not require the appointment of a high powered committee which will take a couple of years to report. What is required is a certain amount of internal discussion in which the state representatives are involved. The problem with the NDA government is that there are political tensions between the centre and the states. In this matter, however, unless some individuals choose to be perverse or downright political, there need not be any serious problem of coordination. The country as a whole is faced with a difficult problem.

Both the population and the educational sector are growing. It therefore requires greater input of money which is not forthcoming so easily. If the annual rate of growth goes up, it may be possible to provide more than what is being done today. Till then, it would be a question of redistributing whatever is available.

If the centre is not assertive enough to take the initiative, there should be nothing to prevent the UGC being asked to do this job. At the end of this year, this body will be 50 years old which gives it a unique kind of standing. Its mandate is to coordinate and determine standards. In pursuance of it, it can undertake this job, though it would be preferable if the centre itself were to undertake it.

So far the centre has not given any evidence of new thinking except in the field of technical education. Here is an opening which can be picked up and pushed forward.

VII

Two things should be clear by now. One is the fact that we have been a victim of the affiliating system for far too long. And the second is that, without a decisive intervention by the centre, no change can come about. While this entire analysis deals with the first issue, the second issue can be discussed only in a somewhat tentative kind of way.

That is why it has been suggested that if the ministry of HRD is not in a position to take the initiative, let this responsibility be handled by the UGC. There is one difference however. The UGC can use only the academic argument whereas the ministry could have used the constitutional argument as well. But that would have been possible only in the beginning of the NDA government's career and not at this stage when, in a few months' time, people would start talking of the next election.

The political argument is not all that weak, if it may be added. Only this is not the right time to invoke it. According to the 1949 Constitution, all education, including higher education, was with the state governments. This was the situation till 1976 when the 42nd amendment was adopted and education became a concurrent subject. In the pre-1976 phase, the centre could not have forced the states to follow a certain line of action in recognition of the right to coordinate and maintain standards. But this could have led to confrontation or even a legal battle and so on. But after 1976, there is no room for such a course of action.

While saying this, it must be acknowledged that the centre has so far not invoked the 42nd amendment by framing any follow up legislation. Somehow the centre has been cagey about doing so. For instance, after the 1976 policy on education, the scheme called 'operation blackboard' was launched. P V Narasimha Rao who was then the minister for education said at that time that this was the centre's constructive way of enforcing the 42nd amendment. In other words, the legal sanction was there but had not been invoked.

This happened partly for reasons of apathy but partly because there was nothing significant or substantial that the centre wanted done. The issue of the affiliating system in a sense is that kind of an issue where intervention by the centre would be in order. But can the job be done without recourse to the legal provisions? The answer is in the affirmative because the existing system has become dysfunctional. To replace it with a more rational way of doing things is something that can be discussed on the plane of argument in a give and take spirit and achieve the same purpose.

However, as already stated, assuming that the centre would be inclined to push in this direction, the NDA government in the last year of its tenure would not like to invoke this power at this stage. From that point of view, the matter would remain

pending. That is why the suggestion has been made that the UGC be asked to undertake this job.

In conclusion, it needs to be reiterated that continued inaction would mean more and more colleges coming up and the universities not being able to do anything about it. More precisely, two things are required to be done. One is to push in the direction of setting up more and more autonomous colleges and the second is to lay down a set of rules which are framed through mutual consultation between the UGC on one side and the state governments on the other side. These rules should govern the whole range of issues connected with affiliation. Unless colleges are affiliated according to an agreed upon set of rules, the situation will continue to be chaotic.

At the moment, out of 12,000-odd colleges something like 4-5,000 are recognised by the UGC under section 2(f) of its Act. Another 2,000 colleges have been asking for recognition for the past several years. All kinds of objections, some of them even trivial, were raised and these colleges have so far not been given the recognised status which they were keen to have. In an exercise which is now on within the UGC office, perhaps a thousand-odd additional colleges would get recognised. But this would still leave out something like 5-6,000 colleges in the limbo. This is too large a number to be allowed to function in a lawless manner.

It was criminal of the UGC, if one may say so, to have allowed this situation to arise but, now that it has arisen, it can be rationalised in one of the following three ways:

- (1) Persuade, prod and push the colleges recognised under Section 2(f) to move in the direction of becoming autonomous.
- (2) Decide the cases of the 2,000-odd colleges most of whom can be recognised if handled properly, and
- (3) Bring the rest of the colleges under its indirect control by persuading the universities, and, more specifically the state governments, to function under the new system of management which has yet to be devised. **EW**

Address for correspondence:

Amrik Singh
2/26, Sarvapriya Vihar,
New Delhi-110 016.

Note

1 In December 1991, the English association in the university of Delhi organised a two-day seminar about the English honours course: content and discontent. To it were invited participants from all the universities of Delhi, the British Council, the university of Hyderabad and the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages.

In a sense therefore, it was a fairly representative gathering. One of the participants who was a student at that time made the following observation:

The present course was ridiculously light. It provided an incomplete exposure to authors as only one text or part of the single text was prescribed for each of them. To remedy this, more texts should be prescribed along with a wider list of recommended reading. Providing statistics, he pointed out that at American Universities, students were required to read about 800 pages weekly which was many times of what an Honours student has to do here.

The point being made here confirms what is under discussion. What was even more interesting was the fact that this observation came from a 'vocal' student as the proceedings describe him. I have no means of verifying how thoroughly familiar he was with the American system. Since I also worked as a visiting professor more than three decades ago, I can see the point of his criticism. That is why the argument put forward at that seminar has been quoted here.