“DISMAL STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA” by S L Rao

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It is generally accepted that every level of Indian education and research, from primary schools to universities has very few institutions of high quality. The demographic dividend that India expects during the next 30 years is predicated on the young age of its population. The premise is that their energy and high aspirations will make them productive and accelerate economic growth.

Yet the country’s youthful work force must become better educated and equipped with new skills. Without these inputs, the ‘dividend’ will become a nightmare. Dissatisfied youth (either unemployed or in low paid casual work) will become restive and crime will increase. India will become a ‘sick economy unless investment in education and skills development increases manifold. In effect this means that, India must invest not merely to increase enrolments but also upgrade education quality by creating trained faculty on a massive scale.

Restricting this essay to higher education, it’s quite clear the majority of teaching and research is conducted in government owned and controlled institutions, although some higher ed institutions are privately owned and run. In the latter, there are those promoted for profit, and others promoted with the social purpose of creating good scholars who can work anywhere worldwide.

Yet despite the country hosting 37,000 colleges and almost 800 universities, standards and ethics in education (including research) have been declining at all levels. There’s an enormous dearth of adequately qualified teachers and researchers. There are too many faculty vacancies in engineering, medical and other professional education institutions with even the globally-renowned IITs experiencing a 35 percent shortage. Too few teachers are recruited and most have superficial knowledge of their subjects and minimal professional training. In addition to this dearth of qualified teachers, teacher absenteeism is rife and teachers often delegate surrogates to teach. India’s poorly educated students are unready for jobs required in the industry and services of the future.

In institutions of higher education abroad Indian scholars have established a good reputation for the quality of teaching, research and publications, and are rewarded handsomely financially and by designations . This is not the case in India where there is no meritocracy in faculty based on teaching quality, research and pub;icatiosns. As a result research and publications output in most of our universities is mediocre.

To compound the numerous problems of higher education in India, the administrative and supervisory bodies are rigid, bureaucratic, prescribe ill-researched outdated curricula and prevent innovation.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) which supervises liberal arts, sciences and commerce education and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) which rigidly controls technical and professional education, and the Medical Council of India, have diminished instead of raising -learning and research standards in the country’s colleges and universities. Moreover, they have a penchant for creating new institutions by cloning the reputed institutions, hurting the image of the originals. An IIM, IIT or AIIMS in each state is a noble dream. But great reputations take many years to build. They cannot be decreed without academic leadership, large-scale faculty training and recruitment and detailed infrastructure development.

Therefore a nationwide drive to train faculty for all education institutions, from primary schools to the highest levels of learning, is urgently required. The Union human resource development ministry should encourage the promotion of private institutions such as the Azim Premji University which has focus and funds to make a difference in producing good quality faculty in sufficiently large numbers. Simultaneously, research funding must increase substantially. Government and industry must pour money into research. China started doing this, decades back and is now a global centre for innovation and development. Moreover, the teaching load on faculty must be balanced so that they have time to research and to write high quality papers.

The country’s colleges and universities also need good governance. Therefore scholars with administrative skill, leadership qualities, knowledge and competence should be appointed to institutional boards and governing councils and vice chancellors must be appointed on the basis of competence rather than connections. Currently, the governing board of universities tend to be packed with bureaucrats, small businessmen, notwithstanding the reality that they have little to contribute. Boards must be small, have people who are successful practitioners or specialists, and who are able to improve the systems and processes of academic institutions.

Due to acute supply-demand imbalances created in higher education by a plethora of licence-permit-quota rules and regulations legislated over decades for private higher -- especially professional -- education, profiteering and corruption are now common in many institutions especially engineering and medical colleges/universities. Focused on micro-management, only a few ‘independent’ regulatory bodies pay minimal attention to learning outcomes or research outputst best, the UGC or ICSSR, etc are money distributing organisations while AICTE, Medical Council of India etc, award recognition, but do little to set and raise teaching-learning standards.

There is a  huge regulatory superstructure looms over the country’s schools, colleges and universities. A large HRD ministry at the Centre with many specialist departments is replicated in the states, and together they rigidly control government and private undergraduate, engineering and medical colleges, B-schools and technology institutes. In addition, there is a plethora of regulatory bodies as well as advisory and training organisations -- NCERT, NUEPA, UGC, AICTE, Medical Council of India, etc, and separate legally mandated bodies for professional education in law, accounting, cost accounting, company secretarial practice and architects.

With over-regulated and over-subsidised government colleges and higher education in the dumps, middle and upper class students are migrating abroad or to a new genre of private universities with high tuition fee structures -- by Indian standards. This phenomenon is exacerbating inequalities in society, adding class to caste and communal tensions in Indian society.

The educatiosn system needs an administrative and scholastic clean up, and vastly more funds for adequate faculty creation, their training and scholarships for poorer students.

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