

The rot in higher education is deep and wide

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January 31, 2018



The deluge of hate and the outpouring of admiration for television anchor Ravish Kumar, both say the same thing. He does good work, which can't be ignored. His show on NDTV India is an oasis in the barrenness of Indian television. If you haven't, you must watch the series that he has done on the state of India's higher education in the past few months. His bare, unembellished stories from the ground tell us of what we hide behind a conspiracy of national silence. The state of India's higher education is much worse than the state of India's school education.

Unlike school education, there is no national survey of the learning levels of college students. If there were one, it would make us feel proud of what we have achieved with our schools. And we know well the deep problems of our school education. While there is no systematic national assessment of higher education, there are indicators galore, if we care to look.

We know that engineering attracts our highest-achieving students and that the engineering colleges, as a category, are substantially better resourced than other colleges. Despite this, study after study has found that only a small proportion, ranging from 5% to 25%, of our engineering graduates know enough engineering to be employable. We can project from this state of affairs to other fields and disciplines, which don't have even a fraction of the investment of engineering. Let me share an experience from our work at the Azim Premji Foundation that is repeated year after year.

Our fieldwork is extensive, across seven states, with thousands of public schools. We recruit hundreds of people in our team for this work and we invest heavily to develop their capacity. A significant proportion of our recruitment is that of students graduating from masters programmes in disciplines across physical and social sciences, humanities and math. We use a written test for the first-level screening in our recruitment process. The test assesses very basic understanding of the discipline. In the past five years, in universities that are recognized as among the better ones in our country, the pass rate in this test has ranged between 5% and 20%. That implies that about 80% have not learnt the absolute basics of the discipline in which they have received a master's degree. You may have your own experience in similar circumstances, many of my friends do.

By valorizing the few good higher education institutions (e.g. the Indian Institutes of Technology), we have wilfully averted confronting the reality of the over 740 universities and 40,000 colleges in the country. Undoubtedly, even in some of the worst of our colleges, there are excellent and dedicated teachers and students toiling away. But the rot

in this system is deep and wide. This state has been many decades in the making. The causes are many and none of them are unknown. Let me list a few of these, without attempting to be exhaustive.

Public investment in higher education has been way lower than required for a country of our size and complexity. Cumulative philanthropic investment too has been short. This is manifested in inadequate human capacity, shoddy infrastructure and weak institutions. We have ignored the basic disciplines, across the physical and social sciences and humanities. Higher education institutions have been systematically used as political battlegrounds, as rewards for loyalists and channels of graft. Poor governance, with mindless over-regulation, has been responded to by institutions with vacuous claims of academic and institutional autonomy, mostly a smokescreen for a culture of sloth. This vicious cycle has created, sustained and made acceptable educationally defunct institutions as the norm in higher education.

Many of the problems of higher education have deep roots in our societal condition. School education also has a few issues of this kind, but most of its problems are within. The most insidious of the societally determined problems in higher education is the culture of cooperative dysfunction between institutions and students.

It is quite simple: Students don't want to learn, they only want a degree. At the same time, institutions and teachers are happy to dish out degrees, and not make any effort at educating. Students stay happily out of classes, as do teachers. The educational contract is corrupt at the core. In school education, the educational contract is not only intact, but has been strengthened in the past few decades. Parents want to send their children to school to learn. Schools and teachers know that their job is to teach children. Many may not be doing well, but there is no ambiguity on the expectations and commitments on both sides.

It is this corrupt educational contract that permits much of the rot in higher education to continue unquestioned. Needless to say, there are honourable exceptions, among institutions, teachers and students, trying to do their best every day. But much has to be done to improve India's higher education, on many fronts. And until we acknowledge the rot at the core, we won't get far.

Education, by its very nature, is a social-human endeavour. Its effectiveness being dependent on human capacity and an enabling culture. But the morass we have let ourselves sink into in higher education calls for some tough love at all levels: with students, with teachers and, overall, with institutions.

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