

The sordid tale of teacher education in India

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The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) was established in 1993 by an Act of Parliament. It is the all-powerful regulatory body for the teacher education system in the country, consisting of the Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) that run bachelor of education (BEd) and diploma in education (DEd) programmes to prepare teachers, and masters in education (MEd) programmes to prepare teacher educators.

To fulfil the national commitment to education for all, India began a massive expansion of its schooling system in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This demanded a proportionate increase in the number of teachers. The NCTE was set up in this period, “with a view to achieving planned and coordinated development of the teacher education system”.

From the mid-1960s to 1993, the number of TEIs in India went up from about 1,200 to about 1,500. After the NCTE was set up, the number of TEIs exploded, to about 16,000 (over 90% private) by 2011. This did increase the supply of teachers. In every other aspect, the NCTE was a colossal failure.

From 1993 to 2011, the NCTE presided over the development of what is perhaps the weakest teacher education system in any large country in the world. The institutional architecture, the curricular approach, and the key operational aspects such as faculty quality, are not only bereft of imagination and sound educational basis, but are designed to serve the consolidation of power of the NCTE. This power was then actively used to drive a system of graft where college licences were sold, with not even a modicum of consideration for even the most basic matters, such as whether the college being approved actually has faculty or not, or whether classes are conducted or not.

This weak and corrupt TE system is at the core of India’s problems in school education. Till we fix this, all efforts at improving the quality of our schooling is like tinkering with the skin, while an aggressive cancer corrodes the body everywhere inside.

There is no empirical study available on the extent of such corruption. Those who sell (or buy) degrees without even conducting classes don’t cooperate with researchers. Many of us in education estimate that 75% of the TEIs are completely dysfunctional and corrupt. The other 25% are not corrupt, but the quality of the majority of them is very indifferent. We have many good teachers despite this mess. Certainly, there are a few outstanding TEIs in the country, but these exceptions are similar to those exceptional and brave individuals within and associated with the NCTE system who have fought for probity and educational quality, even as this reprehensible drama has unfolded since 1993.

The qualification rate of 2-8%, through the Teacher Eligibility Tests started a few years ago in an effort to insulate the schools from the devastating effects of this system, correspond to these estimates. Only those who qualify can become teachers in public schools. But this is like a small water purification plant when the whole river is poisoned, with millions living along the river.

In 2011, the Supreme Court (SC) established a high-powered commission with the late Justice J.S. Verma as the chairperson to review the TE system. This suo motu action of the SC was sparked by a case that it was hearing. In 2008, the NCTE approved the establishment of 291 DEd colleges in Maharashtra, even as the state had explicitly stated that it did not want any more TEIs. This matter went to court. The SC realized that this was the tip of an iceberg of corruption and dysfunction. The commission's recommendations were accepted by the Union ministry of human resource development (MHRD), which is the ministry governing NCTE. The commission suggested a complete overhaul of the TE system, including its regulatory, institutional and educational aspects.

The implementation of the recommendations was another matter. Other than on the most innocuous of recommendations, nothing really happened. The majority of dysfunctional TEIs are owned by people with significant political and financial capital, the TE mafia. Taking on this mafia required doggedly energetic execution and political will, which wasn't there.

I narrate this sordid story, not to regurgitate grief, but as a call to action.

We are on the cusp of what may be a critical period in India's teacher education history. The MHRD and NCTE are now doing something that most of us had only hoped for. They have begun a complete and methodical overhaul of the TE system, from its regulatory to its educational aspects. This requires capability and alignment of the people within MHRD and NCTE, and it requires steely resolve and political will. The start seems to exhibit this in adequate measure.

The campaign has just begun, it can get thwarted by many forces. They are already facing resistance and attack from multiple quarters. Unsurprisingly from the TE mafia, but surprisingly from a few in the education establishment who are perhaps envious of the initiative that they were unable to take, and also many others.

What has been started is not a battle of a few months but a war against a deeply corrupt system. This will take years to conclude. The MHRD and NCTE need public support. All citizens of this country bothered about the future of education, should align behind this effort, and stay steadfast till we have a new teacher education system.

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