

NUMBERS OR STANDARDS ?

THE DILEMMA OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Having recently left the university system in our country partly in protest against the inability or unwillingness of administrations and teachers and students to stop the collapse of standards of conduct and education on our campuses, and partly to gain an insight from outside into the ills of our academic life, I find myself insistently asking and pondering the following question :

Is it possible and profitable in our country to make higher education, and the fruits of higher education, available to as large a number of people as possible ? Only elitist or narrowly pragmatic schools of educational thought would answer this question in the negative. The conviction and confidence of those who would answer the question in the affirmative ought to rest, not on populist calculations, but on the following axiomatic consideration : The aim of higher education is the fulfilment of the deepest intellectual needs of the human soul, and the discovery of feasible and defensible solutions to urgent practical problems of human life. So conceived, higher education simply *cannot* be restricted to small section of our population. But how best can we ensure a continuous expansion of higher educational services in our country ?

We can answer the above question only if we first answer two other questions, which are : (1) In view of the fact that any sudden increase in the student-strength of existing higher educational institutions will predictably result in a corruption of standards of teaching and study, should these institutions wait passively and indefinitely for a dramatic improvement in the quality of college and higher school education ? (2) If higher education is conceived comprehensively in the manner suggested earlier above, what should be the broad structure and scheme of its programme ? There is only one answer to the first question which goes to the heart of the matter, and it is this : On as large a scale as possible, *all* our very best teachers and researchers and advanced students in *all* our centres of higher learning

must not only be allowed but *required* actively to associate themselves, directly or indirectly, peripatetically or through correspondence, with the educational activities of *all* our colleges and even schools, enriching these activities, deepening the curiosity of young students in all spheres of study, enlisting them in transformative social tasks which higher educational research and commitment make possible. Only by ending in this way the current resourcelessness and complacency and timidity and handicappedness of college and higher school education and its life-orientation can we create kind and quantity of entrants that comprehensive higher education deserves and demands.

Of course an utterly unfamiliar kind of social price will have to be paid by our pampered university and college faculty members and senior students if the above aim is to be achieved, but let us not forget that nothing worthwhile in education or in any other field of our national life can be initiated without the payment of an exacting price. No compromise on this point ought to be countenanced. The point is a general one and its significance extends far beyond the sphere of education to areas of evolutionary possibilities of individual and social change, the underlying principle being this : like wealth, talent too requires to be equitably distributed in the service of truth and *dāridranarayana*, not merely in the sense of an arithmetically more just despatch of gifted people to areas of need, but also by means of indirect but massive modes of involvement in the lives and struggles and hopes of our peoples. Writing, multi-lingual talking, recording, transmitting, service, satyagraha—the possibilities are endless. A hand-operated printing machine in every village, or every small cluster of villages, will abolish for all time the threat of censorship in our country, supplanting the *charkha* in symbolic power. For an explosion of a literature of truth and love to occur, these machines will need the services of the most gifted sons and daughters of our land. Illiteracy cannot come in the way of the reading out of such literature to non-literates. *Gram goshtis* could be so much more interesting and important than tedious city seminars.

Question (2) compels the following answer. When the kind of steps suggested above are actually taken, and not merely talked about, i.e. when an optimisation of the use of

the best available human resources of higher education in our country is brought about, and these results an explosive release of the creative and idealistic energies of young people seeking admission to institutions of higher learning, the structure and schemes of higher educational programmes will be determined largely by the very logic of expectation and promise which will characterise these young people. Flexibility and range of courses and projects will go hand in hand with the most uplifting and demanding standards which students will set themselves in consultation with their teachers. Achievement will replace examination. Students will to a great extent pay their way through university by participating in imaginatively selected transformative social tasks cognate with their fields of study, and socially productive minimum physical labour undertaken by all members of university communities will, quite apart from its spiritual worth, further reduce the cost of education. And, apart from specially trained and carefully recruited faculty members, students will receive instruction and inspiration also from a variety of representatives of trades and vocations and professions from enviroing communities.

It should also quickly be added that an uninhibited and sensitive use of our own languages *along* with an emotionally, and not merely stylistically, uncomplicated use of English is likely indefinitely to remain an absolutely essential requirement of all these exercises in responsive and responsible education. An unself-deceiving acceptance of this fact ought peremptorily to conclude our vexatious language controversies in the field of education. English can have no great *size* in any scheme of Indian education, but its place in direct communication between India and the rest of the world can only be overlooked by those who do not or will not see the significance of such communication, the significance of unmediated dialogue between metaphysical Asia and modern civilisation. (It is self-deception which holds us in its grip most remorselessly. Self-deception it is to believe in the possibility and desirability of stability without a nation-wide ferment of thought and participatory aspiration. It is equally self-deceiving to believe in the possibility and desirability of freedom without the sacrifices of equality and austerity. Similarly deluded are hopes of an Indian revolution without the nourishment of our spiritual tradition.)

I am not unaware that revolutionary changes in our educational practice would require the support of revolutionary changes in the structure of our society, but the process must begin somewhere, and I suggest that it can begin immediately in our higher educational establishments. *Teachers and students at our centres of higher learning must boldly resist attempts merely and mechanically to increase the student-strength of these centres within the existing unproductive and uncreative framework of higher education, and at all times they must oppose the lowering of established standards of examination.* They must thereafter demand and offer—the apparently paradoxical character of such a stance ought to spell hope for all those who are caught in the unedifying trap of claims and compromises—a radical reemployment of their intellectual and human resources in the larger interest of a qualitative as well as a quantitative growth of education in our country. They will be opposed by elitist and populist lobbies in powerful places. However, if they offer their satyagraha and their constructive programme with courage and clarity, they will succeed at least in showing who stands for what in higher education. And this will have implications beyond the sphere of education. For any opposition to the deepening and widening of higher education is opposition also to the deepening and widening of the quality of life, and such opposition is incompatible with the pretensions of revolution or tradition or stability.

Would-be participants in the satyagraha and constructive programme summarily described above must, however, be warned that the former etymologically demands the discipleship of truth and therefore the complete shunning of the falsehood of self-righteousness and violence, and the latter unreserved and strenuous self-giving in the intellectual service of our country with no expectation of special monetary reward. Those of us who are in higher education may not be ready for such an experiment in truth, but no one should think or say that there is no honourable way out of the chaos of university life in India today.

Only education in the form of an explosion of celebratory communication can be a fit tribute to the memory of Loknayak Jayaprakash Narayan, prophet of a caring and participatory

and teachable Indian society and polity, cruelly snatched away not long ago in the midst of our nation's and now, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and shortsighted American support of militarism in Pakistan, our subcontinent's gravest crisis since the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi thirty four years ago. No priority in these times of confusion and temptation can realistically be expected to be attached by our self-centred rulers and politicians or our weary and easily distracted public to the responsibilities of education, although miracles do occur. Meanwhile higher education continues to totter in the land of the Buddha and Ramana Maharshi.

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