

Why are Students Not Serious?

by Dr Amrik Singh

The brain drain phenomenon has been a real problem all these decades. In the process, the proportion of competent and talented teachers came down sharply and standards began to decline. They have not picked up during the last 20-30 years even after the rate of student enrolment came down from 13-14 per cent to around 5 per cent per year. This happened in the early '70s and has continued since then.

WHY do students choose to absent themselves from classes so consistently and so regularly? A number of teachers raise this question and do so quite often. Their answer, sad to say, is generally superficial. "They are not interested in study" is what is usually said. This is not fair. What they should do is to understand the issue in respect of its deeper implications.

What they need to understand is that the student is as much a victim of mis-governance and wrong economic policies of those in power as the rest of us are. To take a specific example, one has only to look at the rate of economic growth. For the first four decades, after 1947, on average, the rate of growth was 3 per cent per year. The Hindu rate of growth, as one member of the Planning Commission, who is no longer alive, put it caustically. For the last decade or so, the rate of growth has somewhat picked up, though it cannot be said that there is an even curve of growth or that it is satisfactory.

This is for the simple reason that the rate of growth of population most of the time has been 2.5 per cent per year. If the rate of growth of the economy was 3 per cent and the growth of population was 2.5 per cent, they more or less cancelled out each other. In other words, poverty has continued to be as much a problem as it used to be before 1947. According to most estimates, 40 per cent of people lived below the poverty line be-

fore 1947. The proportion seems to have come down marginally but not by more than 5-10 per cent. This is loosely put for the reason that the estimates vary and economists keep on arguing with each other about what constitutes poverty.

The honest truth is that the population has increased. At present, almost 3 items and, there is, more and more pressure on everything, including air and water. As to those who live below the poverty line, the absolute number has grown substantially though the proportion continues to be the same approximately.

In contrast, soon after 1947, more and more schools and colleges came to be established. This was done to meet the unmet demand for more colleges which had been manifesting itself even when the British were around. With the change of government, the new rulers met this demand as well as they could. In the first quarter century after 1947, particularly in the '50s and '60s, the rate of student enrolment in colleges and universities was 13-14 per cent per day. Such a high rate of growth has never been known

in any part of the world. So much of dilution of quality that we encounter today took place because a large number of new entrants into the teaching profession were sub-standard. At the same time, a large number of teachers, in addition to doctors and engineers, started migrating abroad. The brain drain phenomenon has been a real problem all these decades. In the process, the proportion of competent and talented teachers came down sharply and standards began to decline. They have not picked up during the last 20-30 years even after the rate of student enrolment came down from 13-14 per cent to around 5 per cent per year. This happened in the early '70s and has continued since then.

rent figures, the number of those registered for jobs is between 30 and 40 million. The details provided above make it clear that students who join college are not really interested in pursuing higher studies. They join largely because there is nothing else to do and the tuition fee is in any case exceedingly low. Except for Maharashtra which raised the fees marginally on two separate occasions, most other states have not chosen to do. The fee charged by most colleges is approximately the same as it was in 1947. Meanwhile, the cost of living has risen 30-40 times but there is no attempt to raise the tuition fee.

It needs to be recognised that even when students do not study seriously, they enjoy being in college. For a large number of them, a college is like a club. They get the opportunity to interact with their own peers. Therefore, if the family is able to support a student without his having to earn a living, there is never a problem. It was in this context that the phrase 'baby sitting' came to be used for college education. At college, all students are not always educated. To quite an extent, they

are kept busy and given the illusion of academic activity. Linked to it is a related issue. Standards of performance even at the school level are downright unsatisfactory. Those who join college do so partly in order to learn what they should have learnt at school and partly because they expect to acquire something more in college. It is difficult to say for definite what is the proportion of school syllabus and college syllabus at the college level. Generally it is believed that the proportion is 50-50. That is why college education is, not unoften, described as part school and part college education.

Can this situation be changed? In theory, there should be no difficulty about it. In practice, all kinds of difficulties will be encountered. A precondition for upgrading school education is that those who pass out should find employment in the organised sector. This means faster industrial growth, modernisation of agriculture and an efficient service culture and an efficient service sector. Everyone talks about these highly desirable things. In actual practice, so far, we have been unable to break with

the tradition of low economic performance, lack of control over population and a focus on quality, both at the school and college level.

Whatever has been stated above should help most teachers to understand that the problems of education are partly educational and partly non-educational. In regard to the latter, they do not have a very significant role to play. It is only in regard to education that they can play a role, of course, within limits.

One thing that they can do and ought to do is to ensure that their curriculum is made both relevant to contemporary requirements and there should be a certain degree of alignment between what students learn in educational institutions and what they are required to do when they enter the world of work. This kind of alignment does not exist even in the case of polytechnics.

A large number of industrialists are critical of what is done in polytechnics. According to them, even after students have spent a few years in polytechnics, they are not fully trained to handle jobs in industry. This example is mentioned here so as to reinforce the point that contact with real life is not only vital but also indispensable.

— Mandira
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