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UNIVERSITIES MUST HEED WAKE UP CALL

Deepak Nayyar's tenure as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Delhi ended on Sunday. In a farewell interview, he told Siddharth Varadarajan that the Indian university system is in urgent need of structural reform if it is to remain relevant.



Isn't there something fundamentally wrong with the Indian university system today? Even the few centres of excellence we have are largely unable to keep up with global standards as far as research or teaching infrastructure is concerned.

Deepak Nayyar: Our universities have been in decline since the early 1970s. What happened to the Republic of India happened to the universities in India. We saw an erosion in values, a decline in the work ethic, a dilution of institutions, and that has taken its toll. If I think back to the time when I was a student — I spent five years from 1962 to 1967 at St. Stephens College and the Delhi School of Economics before going to Oxford — the difference between the two institutions then was visible but not striking. The quality of education DU provided in economics was world class. And John Hicks said to me, why have you come to Oxford?

When I came back here five years ago, I noticed that the University of Delhi and the world outside were poles apart. The infrastructure was not just inadequate, it was close to collapse. Libraries and laboratories, with a few exceptions, were way behind. Curricula and courses had not changed for decades. Apart from inertia, there was also an embedded cynicism that had become resistant to change.

Is this because the number of students has gone up without a corresponding increase in teachers, facilities?

Average levels declined as there was a proliferation of universities where not much attention was paid to standards in the new institutions. But the older institutions — the Universities of Allahabad, Calcutta, Mumbai, Madras, Aligarh — also experienced a decline. Now the University of Delhi, all said and done, has remained the premier university in India. Today, it still provides educational opportunities for undergraduate students that are at par with possibly much of the outside world. There is of course a diversity, we are large ...

Another reason for the decline is that structures of governance were not conducive to change, particularly curriculum change. Finally, there was a tendency to move resources out of the universities, to create centres of excellence outside. So in the sciences we saw the CSIR system of laboratories and in the social sciences and humanities a proliferation of research institutions. Research centres can at best complement, not substitute, universities. Universities are the lifeblood of higher education. If we want to think of ourselves as global players, we have to really treat this as a wake-up call and do something about our universities.

Are the current levels of investment in our universities adequate?

I think the resources allocated to higher education are simply not adequate to meet the needs of our times.

As an economist, can you put a percentage figure on that?

On average, funding is only at about one-third of what we need to provide. But let me give you a striking example which epitomises the sad story. When I took charge, I found that of every 100 rupees spent, 73 was on salaries and superannuation benefits. Of the remaining 27, 15-17 was used for electricity, medical reimbursement, etc. So you had 10 rupees of every 100 to meet all needs of maintenance. It is no wonder that physical assets languished. This is just an example but it is the story of universities everywhere in India. Look at the library budget. It was Rs.6 crore, of which Rs.4 crore was salaries. Add superannuation and you'll find you're not buying any books! Capital expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure in universities is at best 3 per cent. Think of a firm, an economy which invests only 3 per cent and you'll see the problem.

Do higher fees provide a way out of this problem?

There is an incentive compatibility problem. In Delhi, university fees have remained Rs.15 a month for undergraduates and Rs.18 for postgraduates for almost 50 years. But this is not what a student pays. Colleges over the years have raised fees. Typically you pay Rs.300-1000 a month depending on which college you're at. Much of this has come not in the form of fees but disguised as library development charge, campus development fund etc. Why? Because the UGC formula for computing grants is to estimate total expenditure, deduct total income and give the rest as grant-in-aid. Fees for capital expenditure do not get adjusted. The UGC method of allocating resources creates no incentive to raise fees. Fees, of course, have to be raised but two conditions are essential. First, when universities raise fees, the entire increase for, say, five years should accrue to the institution. Later a sharing formula can come. Second, you have to make sure there are scholarships to support those who cannot afford the restructured fees.

In our universities, you have this paradox of affluent students paying next to nothing and a large number of students from poor backgrounds who find even low fees burdensome. You had once suggested college students should pay what they paid as fees in high school. This way the poor could study free, and the rich pay no more than what they were paying in class XII anyway.

The most logical solution to the problem is for universities to charge students fees that they paid when they left school. It is logical, just and fair, because it measures your ability to pay. But this has not been readily accepted because of concerns that this may not be consistent with law. Somebody may go to court saying 'why should I pay more for the same educational opportunities?' Yet, I do believe it is possible to bring about a consensus on restructuring fees. I suppose had I been here a year longer, I would have done it. We are close to it. There is recognition on the part of everybody that what we have as university fees is anachronistic. A student will pay Rs.30 for a coffee at Barista, Rs.150 for a movie ticket at a multiplex, Rs.10 to park a car every day, and yet pay the university only Rs.15-18 a month! We need to index link what we charge as fees.

A few years ago, a leading Indian sociologist and historian was told he was ineligible for a job in a sociology department in Bangalore because his MA was in economics, not sociology. A student who has an MA in Women's Studies from abroad is not allowed to enrol for a PhD in history. Surely these kinds of absurd rigidities — at a time when inter-disciplinarity is being encouraged worldwide — have to be ended?

Despite the large numbers and diversity at the undergraduate level, what we have done in Delhi is dramatic. We have restructured programmes, not simply revised courses. The BA Pass course is now state-of-the-art, the BA Hons allows interdisciplinary courses. We have also restructured science courses that were caught in the boundaries of yesteryears.

But at the postgraduate level? Let's say an economics professor at the Delhi School wants to introduce a course on the application of game theory to resource conflicts. This would go through a whole rigmarole of approvals that would take years. Abroad, she could just up and offer it.

I agree with you entirely. We have too many structural rigidities in our system. The University of Delhi provides a telling example but most universities in India are caught in that warp. They are divided into departments and the walls between them are so high that the possibilities of interaction, intersection are few and far between. So a person with an MA in sociology would find it difficult to go on and study law or history, the kind of flexibility you have everywhere. When we advertised some positions in the social sciences as interdisciplinary positions, there was a storm that someone who had done a degree in English literature was appointed to the Department of Political Science. But you have to look at the person's work. I think we need to break our mindset. Knowledge is developing at the intersection of disciplines. Today, it is difficult to offer courses that are not seen as mainstream. This kind of flexibility must come.

Will we ever reach a situation where a teacher of a course or a department by itself would have the freedom to do something simple like update a reading list? When I inherited a course on the political economy of Africa at New York University in the 1990s, I tore up the old reading list and drew up a new one without consulting a soul.

This kind of freedom is much more plausible in educational institutions that are small in size and which have semester systems. At JNU, IIT, this is feasible and it happens. At the undergraduate level at DU, this kind of flexibility may not come for some time. But for postgraduates, it must. Exams should be decentralised. There is no reason for the university to be running exams in anthropology, geology, linguistics. The departments should.

You asked why we are being left behind. We've created a situation where there is no reward for performance, no penalty for non-performance. The system of internal assessments we introduced at DU has helped students return to class. Because 25 per cent of assessment is now based on what you do through the year and this is in the public domain, there is more accountability. The students get back to teachers, whose presence becomes mandatory.

What about students assessing their lecturers? Why can't we have that?

I think it is both necessary and desirable for there to be an evaluation of teachers by students. But in my experience, those who need evaluation don't want to do it, and those who don't need it do so with enthusiasm. When I first came here, I met the department heads and asked how many of them would retire in the next five years. The answer was nearly three-quarters. I then asked how many faculty are aged less than 30. None. Under 35? Almost none. And when was the last time you appointed a professor from outside the department? The closest we came was 22 years ago!

That is the story of DU and universities across India which adopted native son, native daughter policies. We've changed that. I always thought of VKRV Rao as a role model. He brought talented young people as faculty members. When they came, nobody knew them. Ten years later, they were stars.

So at the end of the day, the issue of university leadership is crucial.

Absolutely. If you look at role models, we've had C.D. Deshmukh, Maurice Dwyer, S. Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussain. Alas, what has happened with the passage of time is what economists call adverse selection. There are many distinguished academics who would be excellent vice-chancellors. But they do not wish to become VCs or the system will not appoint them. And there are many who are simply not good enough and yet are appointed.

The education sector looks like the health sector did 20 years ago. If we don't wake up, we are going to get education as a business in much the same way as you got health as a business. It will come. And those of us who work in public institutions, the sooner we realise this, the better.