

SUNDAY SPOTLIGHT

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India's education sector is unprepared to face the WTO regime in education that will be applicable from April 2005 when Indian universities and colleges will be exposed to the world's gaze and international standards. Apart from driving licenses, Indian medical and law degrees are not recognised abroad. After April 2005, each member state would have to carry out its own international standard QA (Quality Assurance) of each university if they want international recognition of their degrees. The Indian government would thus have to carry out ratings of Indian universities and colleges in terms of international standards of quality assurance, teaching infrastructure, student evaluation of teachers and yearly updating of curricula.

For the past two years meetings of the committee under the University Grants Commission responsible for implementation of the WTO regime in the education sector have constantly deferred the issue for want of an answer which will be suitable to all the interested parties. In fact, a wag says it may be continuously deferred till the next government (of whatever hue) takes over the Delhi throne. The tenure of the NDA government is till October 2004 while the WTO regime in education would be applicable from April 2005. Instead of grappling head on with the challenging WTO educational regime, it is just keeping this matter in abeyance till the next government takes over.

That's what seems to be the attitude of the pro-BJP committee. The NDA government is going the whole hog to privatise even the profit making public sector undertakings and even in strategic areas like oil. But education is anathema to it. HRD Minister Murli Manohar Joshi, who describes education as a 'liberating and evolutionary force', has not come to grips with the privatisation of higher education because of his misplaced sense of its affordability. Moreover, he may lose his clout in universities.

If the country's middle class can spend hundreds of rupees in getting better school education for their children, it can also afford private higher education. In the new free economy the ultimate employer is the private sector which lays emphasis on merit. Government jobs are meant for those who have 'paise' (money) and 'pehchan' (connections) or those who belong to reserved categories. The general category students can only look forward to the private sector for gainful employment.

Except IITs and IIMs, most of the other universities and colleges are likely to fall below international standards, experts in education feel. The curricula in Indian universities and colleges are almost 50 years old and have not changed keeping in view the requirements in the changed scenario of economic liberalisation and privatisation. We are still teaching an English course which was devised 50 years

ago. English curricula in Indian universities is not being taught even in England. So is the case with other disciplines like medicine, architecture and law.

What's being taught is history of no real relevance in getting jobs. Standards in school education are better than higher education because excellence in private schools has come up as against government schools where teaching quality is abysmally low. Most private schools have excelled in quality education but feel suffocated with CBSE and NCERT norms.

Higher education is still chained because it has not been privatised in the country. Higher education in India is not being privatised simply because no political party, be it the Congress, BJP, Communists, Socialists or Janata Dal brand of politicians want it. All of them do not want to lose their say and influence in Indian universities and colleges. These politicians do not want privatisation of higher education simply because they would not get the youth cadre for their parties from traditional universities.

Politicians who come to seek your vote are not in favour of meritocracy. They are for reservation for the special classes. Indian universities and colleges have become a hot bed of politics. A sizeable number of students and teachers are full-time political activists who are not interested in learning or teaching. Even the Supreme Court took umbrage over Delhi University teachers' refusal to devote extra hours to teach students. The Leftists have even started a campaign against privatisation of higher education.

If higher education is privatised, who will bother with these politicians and politically-oriented teachers? Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University are battlegrounds of BJP-Congress and Leftist students. Every year students' Union elections become screaming headlines. Lakhs of rupees are spent by political parties just to ensure the victory of their student cadre. It's ABVP of BJP vs NSUI of Congress in Delhi University or ABVP vs Students Federation of India of Leftists in JNU. The traditional educational system, which has simply been supplying the white collar work-force, is going to be outdated as government jobs are shrinking drastically due to downsizing of governmental organisations and reservation for special categories. Students of general category can only afford to look forward to the private sector.

Some private establishments have forayed into the higher education, but they are not allowed to use the word "degree" with their courses. They can only use the word "diploma" with any course they teach to youngsters to prepare them for the job market in the private sector which is the biggest employer. Teaching any law degree is out of the question as it would be a violation of the Bar Council of India's rules. Even in the computer sector, except a few educational institutions, the private sector has yet to come up to the international mark, particularly in hardware.

Private institutions in engineering, medicine, management, computer and law have come up but they have to function according to the dictates of the UGC and the AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education). Many ministers and politicians have forayed into the education field just to have their importance felt or to make money at the cost of the Indian middle class. Once private institutions in higher education are established with recognition from foreign universities, it would have a catalysing effect on the Indian university education system. Teachers and politicians will come

to their senses when students flock to private institutions of excellent learning. Parents get their children admitted to traditional universities because they have a fixed mindset about the recognised "Indian degrees". It's high time that importance is given to merit, capability and right attitude rather than earning a degree from traditional universities for the sake of it.

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