

More education for less privileged

RASHEEDA BHAGAT

While travelling in the smaller cities and rural India, I have seen and felt the desperation of graduates, including engineering graduates, who aspire for a decent job but cannot get one. Surveys have shown a bulk of our engineering graduates take 1-2 years to land a job. But at the same time, there is a huge, unmet aspiration of lakhs of young Indians seeking higher education. They simply lack the means to pay for it.

So, is there justification for increasing the number of engineering institutions or the capacity of existing ones to churn out more unemployed graduates?

Consider this: Today India has 3,800 engineering colleges offering 1.2 million seats against only 550,000 four years ago. And yet the enrolment to colleges from the 18-24 age group is a dismal 13 per cent.

But the dilemma is: If people cannot find jobs, should seats be increased? Yes, says T.V. Mohandas Pai, who has quit as HR Director of Infosys, and who has put in sterling work in the area of higher education. He is on the Anil Kakodkar panel on the IITs, on the boards of several universities and working with the Karnataka government for five years on its Skill Development Corporation.

Armed with this experience and blessed with the gift for clear thinking and vision, a razor sharp mind and a lot of passion and compassion for less privileged Indians who aspire for quality higher education, his “next dream” is to invest 30 per cent of his time in the area of higher education, after his Infosys stint ends on June 11.

“The challenge for India is to increase access to higher education... increase the gross enrolment from 13 per cent to 30 per cent in the next 5-7 years. If you have 87 per cent of your youngsters not going to college what will they do? They'll be on the streets, unemployed, with low skills and lower capacity to contribute to society. They will become stone throwers as in Kashmir, or will join the Maoists or get into crime.”

Brownfield expansion

More seats should be created by brownfield expansion. Setting up new colleges is difficult because it will take 10 years to stabilise management, attract faculty and build a reputation. “So, good colleges that are 10 -20 years old should be allowed to expand freely; double, treble in capacity. If they need money, create a financial corporation and give them a 10-year loan at reasonable interest.”

On faculty shortage he says, in the last 2-3 years, with salaries going up after the Sixth Pay Commission, academics working overseas are returning. “They’ve seen India’s economic growth; on the IIT panel we found applications from many young Ph.Ds who want to return home from US.”

We need to work on the premise that a relatively bad education is better than no education. When youngsters spend 3-5 years in a college, they get, along with the curriculum, social bonding with their peers, they learn to think, debate, argue, negotiate, “become problem-solvers and create a peer network. Their aspirations go up and they become less bitter about lost opportunities”.

Scholarship Authority

To finance the education of the underprivileged, the government should set up a national scholarship programme, says Mr Pai. While Rs 20,000 a year can be given to a student for degree courses, engineering students should get Rs 50,000 a year. “Assume five million students get the degree scholarship, the amount is Rs 10,000 crore, and this could be stepped up to Rs 15,000 crore in three years. If half a million benefit from the engineering programme, it’ll cost Rs 2,500 crore a year and Rs 10,000 crore over four years. Rs 2,500 crore from a Central budget of Rs 12 lakh crore — Rs 20 lakh crore, if we include the State Budgets — is peanuts,” he says.

Surely, this should become a national or social priority. Such a scheme would empower the students to choose the best college, and the parents would be grateful that the government is meeting their children’s aspirations. But, then, what about employment for these huge numbers?

JOB CREATION

For this, too, this finance/HR professional has a ready answer. He says today about 8 crore people are employed in the formal sector, being paid benefits such as ESI, PF, etc. Of these, he says about 2 crore are with the government and para-government — about 45 lakh with the Central government and the rest with State governments. The public sector employs up to a crore and the private sector about 5 crore.

He argues that if the economy grows even at 7 per cent, it can double in the next 10 years, which means we’ll need 8 crore more people. “And 2 crore of the present 8 crore will retire in the next 10 years, so we’ll need an additional 10 crore educated, skilled people. Should we not prepare for that?” he asks. The banking system should be roped in to disburse scholarships and then get reimbursed by the national authority.

With such visionary ideas supported by statistics at his fingertips, shouldn’t people like him be involved in giving shape to such schemes? Just as Mr Nandan Nilekani was roped in for the Unique Identification Development project, would he be willing to head such a task force?

POLICY INVOLVEMENT

“I am willing to be part of such a group, but not head it. This is not an execution problem, as the UID is. It just needs some good policy initiatives,” says Mr Pai.

He has already discussed with the Karnataka Chief Minister the setting up of such a scholarship venture in the State; “they are interested and are looking at it. It would start with Rs 250 crore and be stepped up to Rs 1,000 crore in three years,” he says.

But shouldn't corporate India also chip in? “Of course; let the Prime Minister, a scholar himself, make a public appeal to 10 industrial groups to set up world-class universities, spending about Rs 1,000 crore over 3-4 years.” They should have full freedom to recruit the best faculty, admissions would be merit-based, but include voluntary, independent diversity programmes to ensure social inclusion. They should be allowed to charge suitable fees but students with less means should get some help.

He names the Tatas, Birlas, Mahindras, Bhartis, Infosys, Wipro, Essar Group, Vedanta, TVS, and a few PSUs for this. Asked if he thought they would respond, he says: “Of course, Rs 1,000 crore is nothing for them; they have all benefited from the country's economic growth, they are our leaders and nationalists, and would love to do this for their country. But don't interfere, keep away; give them no subsidy, no grants, let them choose the location and buy the land.”

Wonderful ideas, doable ideas, but will they get done is the question. Execution, Mr Pai, is always a problem in India, at least when it comes to the non-privileged classes.

(Response may be sent to rasheeda@thehindu.co.in)