

Privatisation of education in India: a failed experiment

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Following the policy of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG) initiated in 1991 the successive Indian governments have been trying to privatise higher education in the country. The main arguments given are that private players will bring in state of the art infrastructure and teaching techniques alongside quick decision making to impart quality education. As per the latest UGC notification of 2016, India has 173 universities offering education in engineering, management, teacher education and Medical Sciences and the number is growing with each passing day. This mushroom growth of Institutions is propelled by the sole motive of making money and has done more harm than good to education in India. Today very few of private institutions figure among the top national institutions. The major reasons for dilution of standards in these institutions have been excessively profit making orientation of owners, poor regulation and monitoring by government authorities, political patronage, poor infrastructural and faculty support and poor entry level competence of students.

Profitability in these private institutions is such a powerful driver that very quickly the cold stores and other empty Industrial/agricultural buildings and spaces are turned into Engineering and B. Ed colleges. These ill-equipped and understaffed colleges send agents to remote corners of India to recruit as many students as possible. They offer handsome commission to whoever brings students to college. They charge heavy fees and generally employ less qualified and inexperienced teachers at low wages to teach students. Even teachers, who are highly qualified, are exploited and given much less salaries than what teachers with similar qualifications get in government colleges. This clearly demotivates teachers who cannot give their 100% in their teaching assignments. Regulatory agencies are unable to do any quality control because the inspectors who are supposed to monitor institutions' malpractices often fall prey to greed and corruption.

Meritorious but poor students who cannot afford to pay heavy fees are another casualty of private system of education. They are denied entry to these colleges because they are unable to pay and this leads to further division among haves and have nots. Students who get admission to these colleges are also aware that their parents have invested a huge amount of money to secure their seat. Upon graduation they want to recover this investment as quickly as possible, sometimes resorting to unethical practices. Moreover, a large majority of students who pass out from these colleges are often found unemployable by employers because they do not possess job-related competencies. This further complicates the employment scene in the country and breeds frustration among the youth who have to undergo retraining.

This goes on for a few years till job market start rejecting these graduates and finally these colleges have to shut down their operations. But before drawing the curtains, they try to earn as much as possible. Some of them default on their bank loans, declare bankruptcy and siphon off the banks' money. In short excessive greed of private players is doing irreparable damage to the cause of higher education and badly obstructing the growth trajectory of our country.

In a democratic welfare nation like India higher education should be the main responsibility of the government. Developing nations have progressed because their governments very wisely invested to strengthen the higher education system. Nations like Korea and Japan that were devastated by wars, invested wisely in higher education and went on to harvest rich dividends in terms of highly skilled workforce which ultimately lead to improved productivity and prosperity. Their Motto was: "Plant education, everything else will follow" and how successful this experiment has been in these countries!

After independence leaders in India tried to follow the same path and consequently, reputed institutions like IITs and IIMs were set up to provide state-of-the-art education to Indian students. These institutions have consistently delivered by producing world class graduates who have fuelled the growth engine of the nation. However, their number is very low compared to the burgeoning demand for higher education. For instance, around 10,00,000 students compete

for 20,000 IIT and NIT seats every year in India and same is the case with other courses. This should be motivation enough for the government to set up more high quality institutions.

Government should understand and appreciate the socio-economic and academic divisions prevailing in the country and vigorously fund colleges and universities to create better infrastructure and facilities that could boost quality education. At the same time, the objective should not be the “massification of education”, rather only those who are meritorious and talented should be admitted to higher education. Other students should be diverted to job-oriented courses in Polytechnics and ITIs or similar institutes. In recent past Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown much interest in skilling youth and had assigned handsome budget for this ambitious project. However, most of the money is going to private institutions, some of which do not have sound credentials to impart relevant skills training. If we had large number of government institutions, this money could have been used there to create human resources of diverse competencies to cater to various employment needs in society.

Once we have the facilities and infrastructure in place, we can fix teachers' accountability to produce better results. Better performers could be motivated through incentives and rewards. Young teachers, who are appropriately qualified, will feel motivated to teach well when they get better remuneration in government colleges. Meritorious students would also get opportunities to excel and acquire knowledge and skills to contribute to nation's growth. Since education in government colleges is not propelled by greed, the objective of all stake holders will be on creating innovation and excellence. Private colleges can co-exist if they follow fair practices, meet all conditions and truly want to promote higher education.