

A HIGHER EXCLUSION

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Indian campuses can take some satisfaction in the fact that they are more inclusive than before in terms of the presence of women, dalits, tribals and people from Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This is the predominant takeaway from a recent study, 'Exclusion in Indian Higher Education Today'. Published in the India Exclusion Report 2017 and released by the Centre for Equity Studies this week, this writer and Delhi University professor Satish Deshpande co-authored the study. However, beyond the optimistic findings, education still needs to be located within other realistic frameworks.

Comparing the present numbers with numbers of the earlier times, one has to accept that the improvement would not have been possible without political interventions like the 93rd amendment to the Constitution (2006) which ensured OBC reservation to the elite institutions of national importance. It should be a sobering moment for those who have always opposed such moves, calling them an attack on the meritocratic culture of higher education. A system which excludes the genius of a large section of society by way of tradition or custom cannot call itself meritorious at all.

However, Muslims still lack a significant presence in higher education, reflecting the larger socio-political reality of India which is forcing them out of all common public spaces. We cannot say that there is a lack of desire, if we look at the numerous efforts which the community itself is making to bring their youth into the arena of higher education. From instituting scholarships to establishing their own institutions, the community is desperately trying to make up for the indifference of the polity and society at large towards it. Why can special legislative interventions not be made to facilitate their entry into campuses, as in the case of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and OBCs? Why can't national resources be earmarked for this task? Would the enterprise of knowledge generation not be the richer with their contribution?

Inclusion in educational spaces is a complex issue. Apart from offering information and knowledge, seen as the primary priority of the campuses, these spaces attract the youth, especially young women, because they assure them freedom, a sense of equality and also a promise of mobility. The sight of numerous young women from modest backgrounds, enrolled in different distance-mode courses, trooping out of the metro stations to attend classes on Saturdays and Sundays, proves that the campus, for them, is a relief from their communitarian confines.

How substantive is the inclusion that the numbers claim? Are the hitherto excluded groups, which have now gained entry, getting an educational experience even remotely comparable with the earlier times? Classrooms bursting at their seams, struggling to accommodate the increasing numbers, stagnant libraries and decaying laboratories are a common sight even in Delhi University. Colleges are being made to run with the help of ad-hoc teachers. Now we have a generation of unhappy teachers, who spend their prime years in constant anxiety about their uncertain status.

Teachers today, unemployed tomorrow! To ask them to do research and claim their place in the

community of knowledge creators is a cruel joke. Recently, a colleague from the faculty of science in my university told me that the grants for the laboratories have dried up and they cannot access even the online journals.

I happened to be at a college in Bettiah in Bihar a few months back. Once a pride of the region, the college wore a desolate look, with locks hanging on its doors. The controller of examination told me that the college had more than 9,000 students on its rolls, but they hardly attend the classes as there were departments which did not even have a single teacher. Examinations do take place, though, and degrees are given regularly.

Shorn of all kinds of resources, what colleges and universities in the states offer to the youth coming to them can barely be called an education. Yet, we see students from these regions fighting their way to the universities of Delhi, Hyderabad or JNU, and shining there. This is proof of what can be achieved if these educational spaces are adequately equipped.

Language still remains a huge stumbling block for first-generation university goers. Even after 70 years of Independence, we have not thought of decolonising our minds. Indian languages are not yet seen as fit to be academic languages. Without having a sufficient grasp over English, you cannot be part of the higher education universe. Initiatives like the National Translation Mission are lying in tatters, and the “vernacular” masses have to fend for themselves or exist as second-class citizens.

Severe cuts in the budgetary allocation in recent years to the higher education sector threatens to undo all the legislative initiatives to ensure an inclusive higher educational space.

More recently, educational reforms in the name of semesterisation, four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP), the choice-based credit system (CBCS), etc, have wrecked the classroom experience. The ownership of courses and classes has been taken away from the teachers, turning them into automatons. The increasing pressure of nationalism on the universities unleashed by the present regime has also shrivelled them. What the first generation learners are getting is actually a shadow of what their predecessors enjoyed.

The last decade has also seen skill replacing knowledge in the governmental discussions on higher education, submissively adopted by the educational leaders. Generation of new knowledge is no longer presented as a dream or a challenge in itself. Now, the youth is simply expected to prepare to be the backroom workers of the world of knowledge. However, inclusion would be truly meaningful only if the youth feel confident enough to stake their claim as creators of such knowledge. We are not only very far from this goal, but have slid back, instead, sadly. Just when the masses need it the most, public higher education is getting dismantled. The elites are building for themselves world-class private universities and institutions. Acceptance of this inequality as natural would nullify the gains reflected by the increased numbers recently.

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