

Education and the Destructive Forces of Government

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The Preamble to the Constitution of India mandates, amongst other things, that we shall secure to all citizens equality of status of opportunity. Equality of opportunity can only come about if in terms of education we provide the infrastructure and the facilities which give equal access to quality education from preschool to university level and that every citizen, regardless of social or financial standing, is enabled to avail of all these facilities. Therefore, I would put the creation and maintenance of a top class education system, available to all, as the fundamental duty of the State. As a countervailing duty of the citizens Article 51A (h) mandates that every citizen of India is required “to develop a scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform”. As per sub clause (j) of this Article he is also required “to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavour and achievement”. Both of these are possible only if the State, through the education system, provides the institutions, the facilities, the teachers and the environment in which people are educated, can develop a scientific temper and also strive towards excellence.

Education begins at the preschool level in the playschool and moves to the Kindergarten where recognition of letters and figures is taught. Thereafter there is the primary school the middle school, the higher middle level and higher secondary where a student has to choose that discipline or stream in which he will specialise. By the time the child finishes twelve years of schooling he has learnt enough and also chosen a discipline in which he can be groomed through collegiate education at undergraduate level. For the next three years the student would study a specific subject and acquire adequate expertise in it to be able to enter the job market or opt for postgraduate education to obtain a masters degree. Thereafter those who want to specialise further and have an inclination for research would move to the doctorate level and this would be the stage at which learning, research and the invention which flows from research would come together.

At every stage of education from playschool to university there are two main players, the student or the one who has to be taught and the teacher or one who has to impart knowledge. The understanding of the young mind, its span of attention, its capacity to absorb what is being taught is a highly specialised skill and not everyone possesses it. I state with a degree of authority that teaching at all levels can only be done by a trained teacher and that, too, with an aptitude for teaching and research and a temperament which allows easy interaction with students.

Learning, teaching, research, a syllabus based on research and application of research all come within the ambit of education. Undoubtedly education has to be institutionalised. The creation and funding of educational institutions has to be the responsibility of government because educating people is the duty of government. However, the relationship between government and the educational institutions has to be what Bill Clinton stated when asked what is the relation as the President with the United States was with the universities of that country. He said that his relationship was such that he had to provide the funds for education, but the use of those funds was the responsibility of universities. Government had no further role to play. Look at the result of that system. Universities such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Leland Stanford, University of California Berkley, Carnegie Mellon, MIT are today amongst the best in the world, as are Cambridge and Oxford in United Kingdom. The Education Department in America does not even ask the university how it has used the funds provided for research. In Cambridge Lord Rutherford, at the Cavendish Laboratory, was the first person to split the atom and thus became the father of the whole concept of nuclear energy. All this happened because the education system in Britain and the United States, especially at the level of the university, is completely free of State intervention, especially at micro management level.

India is a complete contrast because the Ministry of Human Resource Development at the Centre and the Education Departments in the States are control freaks who feel that politicians and ministers, officers and clerks are the best people to run an education system. The Indian Institute of Information Technology and Management, Gwalior first of four such institutions set up by the Government of India as institutes of national importance following the IT revolution, almost lost its outstanding Director, Sanjeev Deshmukh, because Jyotiraditya Scindia, then Minister of State for Power at the Centre, did not find him convenient in that he refused to surrender the autonomy of the Institute to the demands of the Minister. It took the personal intervention of the then Prime Minister to stop this unfolding tragedy, but the question remains that the system almost permitted a junior minister to destroy an institution. The Indian Institute of Management, Indore, had a Director who was highly innovative and introduced a five-year integrated course, the only IIM to adopt it and also tried to bring academic discipline to the faculty and the students. A few faculty members resented this and used the standard practice in India, intrigue and repetitive complaints, which led government to buy peace by not renewing the term of the Director and instead bringing in someone who would not rock the boat, there would be no complaints because there would be no insistence on academic discipline and if in the process the Institute was damaged, well, so what! How can our universities compete with Princeton or Cambridge under these circumstances?

The worst government in this behalf is that of Madhya Pradesh which has enacted a new Universities Act whereby the autonomy of the universities is virtually destroyed. An university by definition has to be autonomous, its Vice Chancellor has to be a man of standing because he is the Principal Academic and Administrative Officer of the university and he must enjoy freedom subject only to the decisions of his own Executive Council and Academic Council. Whatever autonomy they had will be taken away because teachers would be recruited by government and not by the university and they will be subject to transfer like any other government servant. How can such a university decide what it will teach, how it will teach and who in the university will teach? All these questions will be decided by some low level clerk or officer in the Education Department. Other State Governments are not much further behind in this behalf and, therefore, we need not expect any Nobel Laureates, any worthwhile research or path-breaking invention coming from our universities. Instead, in a parody of the Preamble, we can only offer an equality of opportunity of ignorance.
