

The Last Straw On The Back Of Indian Higher Education

Author - Anil Chawla

This is a three decades old story. I was in second year of B. Tech. course at Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay. Kadam was a fresher. He was in our hostel. He could speak neither English nor Hindi. He could understand a few words of English as well as Hindi. But no one was sure how many words he could understand. He spoke a dialect of Marathi that even Marathi-speaking Mumbai-Pune crowd found difficult to understand. Yes, he was a scheduled caste, who had entered IIT taking the benefit of reservations. Almost no one in the hostel was willing to take the trouble of talking to him. I felt bad about this. One night, I called him to my room for ragging him. No one else was willing to be my partner in this venture. By convention, ragging at IITB, even in 1976, did not involve any physical roughing up. So all that I could do to Kadam was to speak to him or once in a while raise my voice. This was not easy considering that I did not know Marathi and he did not know any language that I knew. It had been more than an hour during which I had been struggling to rag Kadam, when there was a knock at my door. To my horror, it was a team of Professors led by Hostel Coordinator out to catch cases of ragging. They asked Kadam to go to his room. The next day, Kadam was called by the authorities. Fortunately for me, he said that he was not being ragged. I felt relieved. Probably, Kadam was happy that I had not ignored him and had taken the trouble of trying to interact with him, even though it was in the form of ragging him.

Kadam came from a very poor family. Later, I had the occasion to see him struggle through ridicule, poverty and even hunger. He found it difficult to clear many courses in first attempt. This meant that he had to be in IIT during summers. His scholarship did not cover summer expenses. So he could not join the mess during summers. How he survived during these summers is a classic story of grit and determination. On some days, he would survive just on a fistful of soaked grams and a bit of jaggery.

But Kadam was not alone. Some of my best friends at IIT came from the reserved category. One, who now works as a senior officer at a public sector oil company, worked as a worker at a construction site during the vacation after first year - bending steel rods. Another one's mother used to be a vegetable hawker on the streets of Nagpur. My heartfelt salutes to each of them!

IIT education and the system of caste-based reservations provided many poor young boys a ladder to climb out of poverty. Surely, they were not as bright as many others. But didn't society owe these poor souls a duty.

That is half the story. The other half is about those who tried to climb up the ladder but slipped and fell on their face. They landed up in a bigger mess than the one they started with. In 1978 (or was it 79), three such students were expelled from IITB. They went on

an indefinite hunger strike. A large number of students sat with them in support of their demands. IITB refused to budge. The expulsion was not revoked.

Even now, there are many cases of reserve category students struggling for three/four/five years and being expelled due to poor academic performance. By the time they are expelled, they cannot go to any other college or institute and IIT does not even give them a certificate recognizing the courses that they have done till the point of expulsion.



The dilemma that IIT administration faces is understandable. On one hand, they do not want to sacrifice their standards. And on the other hand, there are these students who enter through a legitimate backdoor and who are unable to face up to the challenge of reaching up to the level of other students of IIT. Few years back, IITs started a preparatory course of one year duration for reserve category students. Notwithstanding the special efforts, the reserve category students, exceptions aside, are unable to come up to the level of other students. This leads to the reserve category students going to a different profile of jobs after graduating. A large majority of reserve category graduates of IITs and even IIMs find employment in public sector units, once again benefiting from the caste-based reservations in these units.

The benefit, that the reserved category students receive or fail to receive, is one way of looking at the problem. The other way of looking, which is as important, is from the system's point of view. One can do charity only up to a point and no more. Donating blood is recommended but beyond a point it hurts. No one should be bled to the point that one's existence is threatened.

It appears that institutions of higher education in India may soon be reaching that point. Before we look at institutions of higher learning in India, let us just take a quick look at some other institutions in India. Government-run schools (except Kendriya Vidyalayas and a few other exceptions) across the country have almost reached a point of collapse. Teachers do not bother to even go to schools. Attendance records are routinely fudged. Teachers are busy with collecting population data, counting cattle, administering polio drops, conducting elections, preparing mid-day meals and pleasing administrative officers - almost everything else except teaching. Private-run schools and coaching institutes do a

roaring business, while the taxpayer pays huge sums for maintaining an infrastructure that fails to achieve its primary objective. Similarly, the public health system is in extremely poor health. No one needs to be told about the poor health of public sector companies. By and large, one may generalize and say that almost every sphere, where government has a controlling stake, is seeing negative growth in terms of quality of services offered.



A school building in rural India

The above generalization is subject to a few notable exceptions. Some public sector units have done extremely well, even though the sector as a whole has been falling. Almost in the same way, IITs, IIMs, and a handful of other institutions have performed well, even while the standards of higher education across many other universities in the country have been falling. I did LL.B. from Barkatullah University, Bhopal. The university is so bad that examination question papers are full of mistakes; it is recommended that one reads both English and Hindi versions in the bilingual question paper to decipher what any particular question is. The story of Barkatullah University is the story of almost every other university in India. Even engineering colleges are no better. In many government-run engineering colleges, senior teachers consider it below their dignity to go to a class. Not that they spend time doing research. They are just busy chatting, politicking and preparing imaginary research proposals using which they can siphon off government funds. Private engineering and management colleges run by unscrupulous promoters (read politicians) create huge buildings but do not even want to pay basic salaries to faculty.

In the midst of all this darkness, IITs, IIMs and a few other institutions have stood almost as a beacon of hope. One must add that all is not well even with these institutions. Way back in seventies, IITB had a professor who used to spend more time at the stock exchange than in his classes or lab. His type has surely grown in the past three decades. It is not unusual even in IITs to encounter faculty members who skip classes. Of course, one must add that, fortunately, their number is a small (but not insignificant) percentage of the total.

The pressures that these premium institutions face are too many to enumerate. The first and foremost is acute shortage of adequately qualified faculty members. India is not

producing sufficient number of Ph.D.s in engineering and management to meet the needs of its fast expanding education system. Bright young graduates are not interested in pursuing a career in research and education, which is no longer seen as rewarding in terms of either money or prestige. Many fresh IIT or IIM graduates get salaries, which are higher than the salary of even the Director of IIT / IIM. How is it possible to convince these bright graduates to study further for five to seven years and join a job that will pay, relatively speaking, just a pittance? Sadly, many persons who decide to pursue post-graduation and join the academic world are the ones who fail to get suitable employment after their graduation.

Second major problem, at most premium institutions, is of motivation. In each prestigious institution, there is a bunch of self-motivated people who keep working just because they enjoy the work. The rest find it difficult to keep up their motivation levels in the face of constant pressures and destabilizing factors.

Other problems include shortage of land, law and order issues, mundane court cases, political and bureaucratic interference, low efficiency of non-academic staff, etc. Most premium institutes are facing a shortage of land. The problem is aggravated by encroachments, which no government is interested in removing. For example, a locality named Jia Sarai has come up on land that belongs to IIT Delhi. Often, IIT Directors and other faculty members are pulled to courts on flimsy grounds. Recently, a warden of IITB was trying to avoid a summons / warrant issued by a Court on a fabricated complaint filed by a mess worker. A bureaucrat in India enjoys constitutional protection, a lawyer is learned, a judge is honourable, but an IIT / IIM / NIT professor deserves and gets no respect in the eyes of law. Yes, judiciary remembers them only when they want an opinion on something or the other. In recent times, IITs have been flooded with judicial requests for opinions - a thankless job that gets them no credit or prestige.

To top it all are the problems of finances. Most premium institutes have been squeezed for funds. Block grant scheme, introduced a few years back, has fixed their budgets at some historical level. As inflation increases expenditures, these premium institutes are forced to look for funds to meet their day-to-day expenses. There have been times when IITs have found it difficult to even pay salaries.

Premium institutes are supposed to be centres of research. If you ask any of the premium institutes about funds available with them for research, you may draw a blank. They have to run from pillar to post to fund almost every research project. Bureaucrats of one type or the other control the purse strings and open them for the ones that catch their fancy.

The above scenario sounds so depressing. Sometimes one is forced to wonder - what makes a handful of the so-called premium institutions retain their prestige in spite of such odds. The prestige of these institutes rests on just two foundations - (a) a few committed faculty members and (b) extraordinary students. India has been lucky that some of her most bright students decide to remain in India and pursue an academic career. They do it because they love this country and love a career of teaching and research. Recently, when IITB 1980 batch had its silver jubilee meet, I was surprised to see that Apoorva Patel, gold medallist of the batch, had gone to USA for higher studies and come back to India. He is currently teaching at Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. Apoorva is not alone. There

are many more like him. There would have been no premium institutes in India if there were no zealots like him.



Prof. Apoorva D Patel

The second leg on which prestige of premium institutes rests is the extraordinarily talented students. Every year about 300,000 students appear in the IIT entrance exam and less than 4,000 are selected. This speaks volumes about the prestige of IITs, which has been built up over the years due to the performance of their graduates. Industry across the world is willing to pay a premium for graduates from these institutes and that is the sole reason for the long queue for admissions to these institutes. It must be noted that government does not recognize the premium nature of these institutes while recruiting. An IIT /IIM / NIT / IISc graduate gets no preference (not even an extra increment) in any government job. If industry changes its perception about these institutes, it will not take long for the queues for admission to these institutes vanish.

The proposal to increase reservations in central universities and institutes from the present 22.5 per cent to 49.5 per cent has to be seen in the light of the above facts. When half of the students get through a non-merit based route, every graduate of these premium institutes will be looked upon with suspicion that he/she got in on the basis of caste and not merit. This will affect the reputation that the graduates enjoy in the industry. It may even lead the industry (on the lines of the government) to stop giving any preference to the graduates of these institutes. This is not a far-fetched scenario. Infotech companies like Infosys, Wipro and TCS have already stopped paying any premium to graduates of IIT. Of the 10,000 or so fresh graduates that Infosys is taking in the current year, IIT graduates form an insignificant minority.

The other problem is internal, but is as troublesome. Almost all premium institutes follow a system of relative grading. For each course, grades are based on relative performance of the class as a whole. If a frequency-marks curve is plotted, a bell-shaped curve is generally found. Students falling in the centre of the bell receive a C grade. Ones with marks higher than the central portion of the bell receive B or A, while the ones with lower marks get D, E or F. If half of the students of each class are non-meritorious, they will determine the mean / median marks of the class. For a general category student it will become extremely easy to get an A in any course since the C level will be defined by others who are far lower. This will mean lowering of the overall standard of the class and will eliminate the spirit of competition that is the biggest factor driving the students at IITs and IIMs. In due course, it will mean that general category students will find IIT / IIM easy game, unlike

the present scenario where one is grilled thoroughly and is stretched to the limits of one's performance.

When the class standard is set lower, the teachers will also have to adjust their lectures to lower levels. Teaching a class at IIT / IIM is a challenging task today because the students are extremely demanding. The level of questions in a class at IIT can unnerve a poorly prepared teacher. When half the class is just struggling to catch up with the basics and asking stupid questions, the rest half will have no motivation to go into depth and ask more probing questions. The effect that this will have on the morale of the teachers is obvious.

If I found it difficult to rag Kadam, one can imagine the challenge that teachers would have faced in teaching him. Probably, some of them tried to teach him, while others just ignored him. But if half the class consists of people like him, it will be a rare teacher that would make any effort. Many of the teachers would just throw up their hands and bury themselves in some research, if they are bright. Most others will just take to some other activity like their equally well-paid brethren in other colleges. A few years back, one heard about a professor of NIT, Bhopal who used to run an atta chakki (flour mill). As teachers at IITs, IIMs and IISc lose their morale and motivation, one might hear many more such stories. The professor at IITB who used to play stock market may even be held as a role model for others to emulate.

Academic atmosphere is an extremely fragile and vulnerable thing. One can create buildings, laboratories, workshops and such infrastructure with money. No amount of money can build academic atmosphere. Politicians and bureaucrats rarely understand this. They believe that pumping in money, changing labels can upgrade quality. Unfortunately, it does not work like that. Politicians seem to believe that they can just double up the seats in premium institutes, so that the present intake is not affected and all the new seats can be given to the reserve category. This is a pipe dream. It is impossible to double up the number of teachers in these institutes. The country does not have sufficient number of qualified, capable and sincere teachers in the field of engineering and management. If a sudden increase in capacity is forced upon these institutes, even at these premium centres of learning, we might get teachers that are best described as linguistically, intellectually and educationally challenged. Then a question paper in IIT or IIM will be like the question paper at Barkatullah University - full of grammatical, spelling and factual errors.

President of India has said that he would like the number of seats in educational institutes to increase so that everyone can get admission and there is no need for reservations. Mr. President Sir, there is no shortage of seats in engineering or management in the country. In fact, many engineering colleges and management institutes find it extremely difficult to fill up their seats. It is just that students do not want to go to these colleges/institutes. The teaching and research at these institutes needs to be upgraded so that they can produce world-class products. This does not need better buildings or better labs or even workshops. This needs investments in better faculty. This needs reformation of the work culture in these institutes. This needs a change of mindset. With these changes, any engineering college can be like an IIT and any management institute can be like an IIM. We do know that there are management institutes in India that command more respect than some new IIMs. Can we aim for a stage when every engineering college and management institute in India benchmarks itself against the best in the world? Politicians and bureaucrats of India

will do well to leave alone the institutions that are working reasonably well, and instead focus on institutions that are not performing well.

Bhopal has a Model School, which is run by Board of Secondary Education and not by the education department. This was intended to be a model for all other schools in the state. It was the equivalent of IIT at the school level in the state of Madhya Pradesh. Three decades back, getting admission to Model School was really difficult and it was a matter of pride to have one's child studying in Model School. In the past three decades, the school has seen steady decline. Today, one gets one's child admitted to Model School only if one cannot afford the private schools and one stays next to Model School. Will IITs go the way of the Model School at Bhopal?

That question may seem hypothetical, but it is not. Even now, developed pockets of the country are no longer finding it worthwhile to prepare for IIT. Students at Mumbai and Bangalore no longer aim for IIT as a preferred choice. Admissions to IIT from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Goa have been declining over the past years.

If IITs and IIMs lose some of their sheen, talented students across the country may stop finding it worth the effort to appear for IIT JEE or CAT. The total number of students appearing for the exams may not see a significant decline. If 10,000 most talented students do not appear for JEE, any one looking at statistics will never notice it. The annual growth in number of JEE / CAT examinees will conceal such a phenomenon. The effect of such a change will, however, be far-reaching.

The loss of IITs may well be a gain of Australia, New Zealand, China or even USA, Canada and UK. These countries are trying hard to attract the best of Indian students. As things stand today, it is cheaper to get an MBBS degree from a college in China as compared to getting it from a private medical college in India. There is no statistics available about Indian students studying in these countries. Based on informal estimates, one can say with confidence that the number of Indian students in these countries already exceeds the total student strength of IITs, IIMs and all central universities and institutes put together. With the proposed reservation policy, many more students may head for foreign shores. The rich will surely find it easy to send their children abroad (some of them are already doing it). With the fees that these rich children pay to foreign universities, the foreign varsities will find it easy to give scholarships to the talented but economically weaker students from India. The process is already on to some degree. It will gather momentum with the new reservation policy.

When the best of the students leave for foreign shores, will the good teachers like to remain behind? My friends - Apoorva and Utpal, who came back from USA after their Ph.D. to teach in India - may no longer find it intellectually stimulating. The best of faculty at IITs, IIMs, IISc and even NITs are known globally for their research work. Any foreign university will be too glad to take them at salaries that will be many times over their present pay packets.

If the best of faculty and the most talented students are no longer at IITs, IIMs, and other premium institutes, will these institutes still remain the world-class institutions that they claim to be. At that stage, will the politicians and bureaucrats be able to redeem these institutions? Will the beneficiaries of reservations be still interested in joining these institutions, when glory of the institutes is a matter of history?

Before concluding, let us go back to my friend Kadam. I do not know what finally happened to him. I do not know whether he graduated or not. I believe that with his grit, determination and a sharp mathematical mind, he would have. But, in case he did not, surely he was a victim of the reservation policy and not a beneficiary. On the other hand, if he did graduate, the question still is - did he benefit by coming to IIT or would he have been better off studying at some other engineering college where he did not have to undergo the cultural trauma, ridicule, stress and pain? His CPI at IIT was, as I remember, much below what is called respectable in IIT. If he had gone to a state engineering college, he would have surely had a respectable score card with more than 70 percent marks. He ended up being branded as a second-divisioner, when he could have been a bright distinction-holder. With his communication problems, it is almost impossible that he would have got a job in a private company. He would surely have gone to the public sector. A less bright schoolmate of his from the same caste who went to a state engineering college and graduated in the normal time (instead of the extra time taken by Kadam) with flying colours, could well be Kadam's boss in the public sector unit, where Kadam's IIT label is of no worth whatsoever. The hypothetical classmate would have enjoyed three advantages over Kadam - (a) seniority, (b) higher percentage of marks and (c) more confidence due to the absence of psychological scarring that Kadam suffered at IIT.

It should be a matter of interest for the whole country to monitor whether beneficiaries of reservation policy actually gain or lose by the reservations in premium educational institutes. It is indeed sad that the institutes have not conducted any formal studies in this regard. Probably, they are too busy firefighting the problems that keep cropping up almost everyday. The proponents of reservations - Indian politicians, of this hue or that - have neither the time nor the inclination to understand such complex issues. They seem to believe that reservations can be vote-pullers and so no political party or leader dare oppose it. They forget the fact that ex-PM VP Singh, who first implemented Mandal Commission recommendations, has been virtually wiped off the political scenario. If reservations are half as beneficial politically as they are touted to be, VP Singh should still have been the Prime Minister of India.



VP Singh

Indian politicians in their mindless pursuit of power have failed in their primary duty of providing leadership by educating people, by putting issues in perspective, by telling them where their real interests lie. On the other hand, emotive reactions by intelligent educated

persons to the recent proposal on increasing reservations in Central educational institutions have only helped the politicians whip up emotions. Let the educated class that cares for the growth of the country explain to the people, especially the so-called beneficiaries of reservation policy, the dangers that are inherent in the proposal, which is intended to be a vote-catcher.

Premium educational institutions are, as a rule, extremely vulnerable and are almost fragile. They serve the country not by distributing pieces of papers, called degrees and diplomas, but by producing people who contribute to development of nation by their talent, knowledge, competence and efficiency. Indian political and bureaucratic class has already done irreparable damage to India's government-run school education system and also to the vast majority of so-called institutions of higher learning. Let the country not allow them to push over the brink the few institutions that are still held up in esteem across the globe. These institutions already have a huge load on their backs. Asking them to reserve half of their seats may prove to be the proverbial last straw on the camel's back. Can the country afford to take this risk?



Anil Chawla

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anil@samarthbharat.com

hindustanstudies@rediffmail.com

hindustanstudies@yahoo.co.in

Website www.samarthbharat.com

www.hindustanstudies.com

www.indialegalhelp.com