

National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration  
New Delhi

## Twelfth Foundation Day Lecture

### The Poor B.A. Student Crisis of Undergraduate Education in India

by

**Professor Manoranjan Mohanty**

*Professor of Political Science, Delhi University (Retd.), and  
Distinguished Professor, Council for Social Development, New Delhi*



August 10, 2018

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# **The Poor B.A. Student**

## **Crisis of Undergraduate Education in India**

**Manoranjan Mohanty**

Thank you for the invitation to deliver the NIEPA Foundation Day Lecture. It is usually a great occasion to raise an important question and draw public attention to grapple with the same. I have decided to take up the crisis in undergraduate education in India as the issue for discussion, for I believe that this is one of the most neglected areas in India's educational system.

We are all happy that during the past decade a focused discussion and some determined efforts to universalise elementary education have produced some results. Though even there the overall performance is far from satisfactory, many active groups are engaged in efforts to ensure full implementation of the RTE Act of 2009 and fill in the gaps in the law itself. But very few groups and much less policy-makers have tried to acknowledge the magnitude of the crisis in undergraduate education. Except for nominal references in policy documents, the thinking and policy on higher education are mainly concerned with the post-graduate level, namely Masters and doctoral level and higher research. The current discussion on IOE (Institutions of Eminence)

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without going to the controversial aspects of the government initiative is an example of the priority of the Indian policy-makers. The structural reorganisation of the management of higher education in India stipulated under the proposed law to have a Higher Education Commission of India to replace the UGC to “maintain standards and monitor them” and transferring its grant-giving duties to the Government’s Ministry of HRD pays little attention to strengthening undergraduate education.

This is an appeal to the education and public policy community to pay attention to the crisis and analyse its dimensions and causes and come up with ways of making it a worthwhile and meaningful stage of life of the vast number of youth who are victims of this crisis.

Strong foundations sustain and produce good outcomes. Just as without universal and good quality elementary education the base line for the development of talents in a society remains narrow, similarly without good quality Bachelor level education the baseline for talents for higher education and advanced research remains narrow. No amount of efforts to create islands of excellence, ‘world class research’ can be adequate. On the other hand, good quality education at elementary and undergraduate college level can produce a wide mass of talents out of which a

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range of high quality, innovative and creative minds can emerge who then become catalysts of further development. Then they contribute to the making of the world class rather than falling into certain criteria of excellence formulated elsewhere.

The crisis is manifest at three levels: learning outcomes are extremely poor while the burden on the students and teachers steadily increases; infrastructure facilities are grossly inadequate while the number of colleges and the volume of enrolment continues to expand; this sector has become yet another arena of growing inequality in society despite reservation for weaker sections. The last is the result of the first two. At present the undergraduate education is not only deficient in learning of the required knowledge and infrastructure, it is a vast sphere of generating greater and greater inequalities among social groups, regions, classes, castes, gender, religious groups, ethnic groups. The children of the farmers, dalits, adivasis, minorities and especially girls in general are particular victims of this situation. No doubt, through reservation of seats, special grants to certain colleges and regions some efforts have been made during the past decades to grapple with this. But the structural characteristics of undergraduate education - especially centralised management and norms for teachers' recruitment and curriculum control which are less sensitive to the local needs - are such that they are particularly

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unfavourable to the marginalised sections of society.

A word about the title – ‘the poor B.A. student’. It is to provoke attention to their situation, certainly not to show pity for them. This mass of youth in the age group of 18 to 21 or 22 is today in a state of rebellion and they are going to be more rebellious by the day. They are citizens with voting rights for the first time. They are increasingly conscious of their democratic rights and will one day, demand equitable and quality education to grow as full-some and creative citizens. The student union elections which are increasingly violent and expensive despite Lyngdoh Committee regulations, the political mobilisation in each area by political parties using bulk of them are indicators of this new condition. Forces of religious extremism use them as volatile tools for their campaigns. The expanding drug and liquor use not only in Punjab but in the entire country in varying degrees in colleges, cities, towns and villages manifest a dangerous aspect of their life situation. The growth of the youth involvement in the social media and entertainment industry everywhere in different degrees provide the picture of their present preoccupation which has both positive and negative implications. The level of anxiety among the youth is visibly high. The suicide rate among the youth is a disturbing trend. On the whole, this group of the youth which



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has an institutional link to a college or a university is in a turbulent arena. Even though they form only about 20% of their age group in the society, they have the identity of a College student, somewhat privileged in the society. Their situation is symptomatic of the nature of the social situation as a whole. They will gradually know how and why they are neglected as a sector of society. The talk of the “poor B.A. student” is actually a recognition of this situation – neglect of a turbulent generation that is potentially most creative.

### **A Teacher’s anxiety**

I make this presentation to express anxieties of a teacher and not as an expert on education. I no doubt speak as a social scientist, a teacher of Politics who has also been involved in the human rights movement for over four decades. I want to speak about my experiences and reflect upon them to make my point.

I had started as a Lecturer in Delhi College, now called Zakir Hussain College, Delhi, but taught there only for three years, too brief and too old an experience to make that as the basis of any generalisation. But I maintained that as a reference point to observe changes I saw over the next four decades. My experience as a member of a University Department was the key factor that has made me look at this particular problem. The

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overly exalted status of University Department teachers vis-à-vis College teachers of Delhi University perturbed me throughout my teaching career. In my student days and early in my teaching career the Colleges had many distinguished teachers. To take the names of only a few, Frank Thakurdas, Randhir Singh, Bhasham Sahni, A. S. Bhalla, and in my generation, Krishna Sobti, Uma Chakravarty, Dilip Simeon – I know there are many more names that would be always remembered in the history of Delhi University (DU). Randhir Singh joined JNU and moved to DU. The others retired from Colleges. DU was ostensibly patterned after Oxford and Cambridge where Colleges were the main pillars of the University and still are. But here in Delhi the university vis-à-vis college gap in resources, standards, results, teaching and learning facilities, working conditions and reputation had continued to grow. The community and the press only talked about this once in a year at the time of admissions and note the descending order of cut-off marks among colleges and subjects. (This year NDTV India's Ravish Kumar's series was remarkable in covering some crucial admission-related issues.) Being almost a helpless witness to this persisting gap between University Departments and Colleges, and the differential reputation of colleges has been a learning experience to me. I have tried to understand the reasons behind this phenomenon.

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In small ways we tried to address this issue in the Political Science Department in Delhi University. Whereas in “prestigious Departments” such as Economics and Sociology involving college teachers in M.A. teaching had disappeared, in Political Science, thanks to Randhir Singh’s leadership we steadily strengthened “cooperative teaching” by sharing courses with teachers from colleges. We created many forums such as the DCRC (Developing Countries Research Centre) in DU as joint initiatives involving college teachers across disciplines for research, seminars, curriculum development and social action. I have always believed that there were, and there are teachers and scholars in DU Colleges, intellectually far superior, than many in the University Departments. University appointments are not always only merit-based decisions but are results of the conjunction of a variety of circumstances including partisan, factional, and caste considerations even though some outstanding scholars do find place on many occasions.

As the gap continued to grow, teaching jobs became a second or a third option for bright students after corporate and civil services. The good candidates not only preferred careers other than teaching in a College, if they happened to join a college they looked forward to moving to University Departments. The work load for the College teachers was too heavy to allow them to

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find time for research. The UGC role in accentuating this gap was enormous despite the provisions for study leave. The introduction of the Semester system without necessary preparation further increased the teachers' work-load. Requiring their presence in College for a certain number of hours, without providing proper sitting and working facilities, made it worse.

In Political Science we tried to ensure that each course was taught jointly by a University teacher and a College teacher. (I must confess that not all my colleagues welcomed such encroachment on their right to teach 'their' course.) Actually some innovative courses were offered by College teachers alone as they had been newly trained in such courses as Human Rights, Politics of Environment and Gender Studies. It was frustrating to notice that this practice was discontinued when some of those very teachers joined the Department. The perspective of 'cooperative teaching' which was an organic element in the concept of a 'federal university' that DU is supposed to be, was practically given up during the past two decades. At one time there were seven to ten teachers in the University Department of Political Science as against about two hundred teachers in Colleges. Currently there were nearly thirty teachers in the University Department and over one thousand in Colleges. The University Department and its Head treats this

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as an administrative domain exercising power in appointments, curriculum-making, examination, promotion and related matters. The original vision was to treat the entire body of teachers of a discipline as an organic whole – in fact the DU Statutes still contain that view – collectively owning and developing the discipline, developing curriculum jointly through committees, general body meetings, addressing concrete questions such as falling standards, how to make Hindi medium students equally competent and similar other issues. We made small gains in some of these initiatives. But they were overwhelmed by the strong currents of unequal development that swept all sectors of Indian society including education at DU.

My participation in the DUTA (Delhi University Teachers Association) activities was another major input to my thinking on higher education. DUTA's role as the champion of teachers' rights has protected the economic interest of the teaching community in India as a whole. That the teachers' pay scales today are comparable to the higher civil service scales – not quite really as the bureaucrats never allowed complete parity – was largely the result of the struggles waged by DUTA and the All India Federation of University and College Teachers Organisations. Even while the status of college teachers continued to decline and the power gap between University and

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Colleges steadily expanded, DUTA provided a close vigilance against arbitrary treatment and harassment of teachers. (But it was not always successful as was evident in the case of G.N. Saibaba despite its sustained efforts.) As competitive party politics acquired more intensity in India, teachers' movement contained within it different political formations. The different factions of Congress, Left and BJP now were fully occupied in building their support base and protecting their members' interests in Colleges of Delhi where votes were important. Correspondingly student politics got party affiliations and produced solid linkages. One positive outcome of this was the mutual checks by the groups each constantly trying to expose the lapses of the other especially when political power shifted from one party to another in the local level or the national level. But this meant less efforts to unitedly face the challenges of a deteriorating system. Thus campaigning for economic demands and maintaining support base preoccupied the teachers' movement so much that it did not find enough time or space, to pay greater attention to the trend of professional decay that had set in. Only on occasions when the central government took steps to curb teachers' rights, made unfair working conditions such as increasing hours of class room teaching or announced fresh policies on education with little or nominal consultation with the public at large, did the DUTA undertake to

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organise major discussions and produce its alternative proposals. DUTA's achievements in protecting teachers' interests and failures in stemming the waves of commercialisation and centralisation of education in India through central government policies have lessons for all those who think about higher education in India. I have seen the rise of DUTA as an organisational force achieving significant gains for teachers. I have also seen the effects of its complex character with conflicting ideological groups creating deadlocks in the teachers' movement, thus making it difficult to grapple with the growing crisis in higher education and prepare the teaching community to face its new challenges. This was required in a much greater degree than what DUTA has done at a time of corporate take-over of education under neo-liberal globalisation and digital management. We all have to share the blame for the current crisis.

But the most important lessons that I wish to refer to the ones I learnt in course of steering the B.A. Restructuring Committee and subsequently chairing the B.A. Programme Committee during 2002-2005, my last three years at Delhi University. I still follow this process in Delhi and generally and reflect upon them. They form an important source for my comprehension of the crisis of undergraduate education in India. When the then Vice-Chancellor Deepak Nayyar invited me to

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head this Committee my first question to him was whether he would be able to implement our recommendations. His unambiguous answer in the positive had spurred our effort. I am pleased to notice that during the decade and more of its implementation the B.A. Programme, even with subsequent changes, it grew into a coveted programme of DU, often preferred over honours courses, attracting the best students while remaining the largest programme of the college. Transformation of the previous B.A. Pass course into a new and attractive B.A. Programme through a collective, consensus-building process involving college teachers and students as well as University teachers, taking Principals and Heads into the consultative process and addressing intellectual, pedagogic and organisational issues was a valuable experience. It showed the possibilities as well as limits of educational reforms in contemporary times.

At the same time, I should add that I have closely observed the colleges of Odisha and have been involved with a research society called Gabeshana Chakra which is devoted to doing research on Odisha for over thirty years. It is basically an organisation of college teachers that meets in colleges or university campuses in different parts of the State. Witnessing and analysing the crisis in education in Odisha and being a part of many studies on this and related



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aspects taught me many lessons. I should also state that my engagement with civil liberty issues has taken me to many parts of India as a member of the fact finding teams where interactions with local teachers, students, social workers and common people including alienated groups and social activists trying to address them, have been a great learning experience on many issues including the crisis in education.

Knowing fully well that one cannot talk about the all India situation with this limited experience and not having done systematic research on this issue I am still daring to put some propositions. All these disclosures are meant to convey the background I present a teacher's perspective, a democratic rights perspective on a significant question. I will now take up a set of issues identifying the magnitude of the crisis and make some suggestions for intervention by academics, social action groups and policy-makers.

## II

### **THE BIG B.A. CRISIS:**

#### **PLIGHT OF TWO AND A HALF CRORE YOUTH**

##### **Welcome Expansion and Steady Undervaluation**

Everyone is proud of the fact that education at every level has expanded progressively in India. In

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higher education one has to note that the number of universities has increased from 30 in 1950 to 795 (47 Central,123 Deemed, 360 State Public, 262 State Private and 3 State Special Act) in 2016-17. According to the UGC Annual Report for 2016-17 from some 2.1 lakh students enrolled in 1947 we have reached over 294 lakhs in 2016-17 in universities and colleges. The number of colleges which stood at 700 in 1950-51 rose to 42358 in 2016-17 (pp.74-123). In the same years, the strength of the teaching staff rose from 24,000 to 14,70,000. Of the total enrolment as much as 86.39% are in undergraduate classes and 9.61% are in Masters level, while the rest are in research and diploma courses. Thus we are talking about over 250 lakh students in Bachelor level courses of whom 94.33% study in Colleges, the rest in universities. Of them the boys outnumber the girls by over 10 lakhs. It is the plight of this large body of two and a half crore young people that we are talking about. Let us remember that they constitute less than 20% of the Higher Secondary graduates and therefore are more privileged than the 80% who could not enter college. Narrating the hardships of their life conditions is another story. Together with their situation if we add the conditions of some fifteen lakh college teachers and forty two thousand colleges the magnitude of the crisis becomes clear.

This large section of the youth has experienced a steady trend of undervaluation of the

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B.A. level education. It has been caused mostly by central regimes who were guided by their favourite educational advisers whose line of thought at the time shaped the fresh policy. Even before education was moved to the Concurrent List by the 42<sup>nd</sup> Amendment during the Emergency the central government used the instrument of financial control through the UGC to impose new system of school and higher education throughout the country. Violating the spirit of federalism and norms of such significant exercises in launching new policies that affected the lives of millions of young people, they often declared new educational policies without sufficient deliberations. Except for the Kothari Commission all the other exercises in making a “New Education Policy” have been done with mostly nominal or carefully guided consultations to announce and carry through their current thinking. The latest push on instituting a Higher Education Commission of India is no exception.

The four year IA and B.A. courses had continued from before Independence. That was replaced by a Three Year Degree Course for B.A. level on the one hand and Ten plus Two at the school level on the other. Until then 11 years of schooling and four years of college had also provided for 15 years of education after the age of six. It has taken many years to implement this scheme throughout the country. Even now not all

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States have higher secondary as a normal part of schools.

Undervaluation of B.A. became expedited when Masters level was followed by another master degree called M.Phil. in the 1970s. This was done ostensibly to improve standards of higher education in India at the doctoral level. From then onwards the prevailing leadership's obsession to achieve 'world standards' has led to frequent introduction of arbitrary changes in the structure of programmes – a process that continues even now. Lack of self-confidence in setting one's own high standards based on adequate consultation and careful planning through building national consensus has been a recurrent phenomenon in Indian educational policy. Being a norm setter rather than a norm follower has never been an aspiration of the Indian elite since the 1970s. By adopting prescriptions made by western think tanks serving institutions of neo-liberal globalisation they go on integrating Indian academic institutions with the world capitalist system.

In universities of Europe and US students go into Ph.D. or Graduate Studies as they call it after the B.A. level. In the process of fulfilling some courses or writing a dissertation they may choose to get an M.A. degree as a part of the Ph.D. programme. In many universities, a student who is

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considered not good enough to proceed for Ph.D. is given M.Phil. or M.Litt. as a terminal degree and is asked to leave. In India since the 1980s, the strategy of the rulers was perhaps to keep students at the University longer before letting them to join the job market. And the job market was not expanding well enough to absorb the new entrants. This policy of adding the M.Phil. programme was not only unfair to two generations of students who suffered it, but it devalued the M.A. degree which in turn devalued the B.A. degree. The attempt in 2012-13 in Delhi University to further enforce a structural change by introducing a four year bachelor degree programme with the ostensible goal of making it in conformity with the US universities was another adventure encouraged from the top. Fortunately, it did not materialise due to opposition of teachers and students.

In the job market where a Bachelors degree was adequate, we found hundreds of M.A., M.Phil. degree holders applying for jobs. UGC norms for lecturer appointment now took M.Phil., later Ph.D. as essential qualification. That led to mass production of Ph.Ds with questionable quality. Remedial measures such as introducing NET examination for selection as lecturers or Accreditation Council to check the standards of education in colleges and universities were hardly adequate to arrest the structural decay of higher

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education caused by thoughtless policies from the top.

Having just a B.A. degree was a great achievement until forty years ago. It had equipped the graduate with a reasonable acquaintance with some subjects, writing skills, linguistic competence and commitment to liberal values. The restructuring through the decades and expansion without accompanying measures of support have turned it into a degree programme that does not have much worth today as on each of the fronts today's graduate is extremely poor. Incidentally, a Bachelor degree is still the only requirement for civil service examinations though the UPSC has reduced itself to a body that produces en masse millions of robotic youth who train themselves in mastering some techniques of passing general studies and discipline examinations rather than gain any knowledge in depth about anything. It has resulted in the mushrooming of a private industry of coaching institutes producing them. Those who pass enter the colonial frame of managing state, economy and society with that kind of 'knowledge' and enjoy enormous power to maintain status quo or serve the agenda of political masters rather than the agenda of the Constitution. The ninety-five per cent or so who fail to get into the services enter other life world with that amount of robotic training. The decay in undergraduate

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education has been consistent with the transformation of the UPSC examination system.

Many business enterprises also look for fresh graduates from “good colleges”, though most of them recruit from the IIM system or the private management institutes which have also come up everywhere. Direct recruits of B.A. to corporate jobs who train them on the job has declined drastically as the devaluation of B.A. degree hastened.

Undervaluation of the B.A. is particularly tragic because the expansion of college education indeed gave opportunities to the children of poor classes, especially peasants, workers, dalits and adivasis and more and more women went for higher education. Colleges came up in remote areas and every MP and MLA worked to set up a college in her/his Constituency. The central government decision in 2006-07 to give OBC quota in admission to colleges was a significant decision that was overdue. But again this welcome decision was implemented without adequate facilities. (A college teacher who otherwise supported the policy said to me that her classroom which could seat maximum of 40, now had to accommodate 60 students, with a lot of them standing outside the door to mark their attendance that was compulsory. Such situations, she said, took away one’s “joy of teaching” as it was now

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impossible to know the students and build rapport with them.)

Like the poverty eradication programmes that gave temporary relief, or at best short term gains to the below-poverty-line population, expansion of higher education provided a bloated sense of doing B.A. when the degree was actually getting devalued. The politicians of course boasted for achieving a new college in their area or more seats and subjects or scholarships in their colleges. Permission was readily granted to open colleges and even universities to respond to political pressures or to show the ruling party's concern for the region. But allocating adequate funds, building the requisite infrastructure, appointing regular teachers, providing the necessary reading facilities to students and such other steps were lacking. In fact the phenomenon of ad hoc, part time or guest lecturers or lecturers in a lower scale fast spread all over the country and created much disincentives to the profession of teaching. The expansion of colleges was necessary and did provide opportunities to some to achieve some mobility. But for the vast majority of the students it was an illusion of having higher education to move ahead in life. No doubt even in such conditions a few students came up and steadily moved on. But the vast majority encountered utter negligence. Even though some privileged colleges in different parts of the country found ways to improve their



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infrastructure and maintain certain standards, they could not escape the consequences of overall trend of decline of the value of undergraduate education. They may not account for more than one lakh students in the country as a whole out of some 250 lakhs. But every college had to reckon with the prescribed curriculum which may vary from state to state or university to university but was monitored by the UGC to link the sanction of grants with the adoption of certain curricula recommended by them. From 1992 onwards, the UGC has framed guidelines for restructuring of undergraduate courses' and has insisted on their adoption by colleges. That brought about not only increasing centralisation of the educational system but enforcing curriculum that was consistent with the regime's economic policy rather than being the outcome of the local consultation process. That is how we landed in the current phase of crisis.

### **Where are the Educational Visions of Tagore and Gandhi gone?**

#### **Shift of focus from Knowledge to Skill education**

In Tagore's vision, education was a creative experience enabling a student to learn about the integral relationship of self, society and nature, discover and understand the ways that operate among them and acquire a capacity to better serve the universe. The making of a Visva-manav –

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universal human was the goal of Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan. Several aspects of Tagore's perspective need to be recalled today. One, every level of education was important and worthwhile – pre-school, school, college and university. Two, all teachers taught at every level and earned equal respect. Three, every aspect of life formed a discipline and was interconnected with other aspects. Humanities, Sciences, Music, Arts and Technology formed an organic whole. Not until after Independence did discipline departments along the lines of the European Universities were introduced in Visva-Bharati under UGC directives. Four, Santiniketan, the abode of peace and learning was connected with Sriniketan where the local people's handicrafts formed the experience of 'doing' with hands with indigenous craft people as teachers. Five, Knowledge was sought from traditions and history from all over the world, West and East and not only from western sources. Study of non-western languages and cultures, Chinese, Japanese, Persian were promoted consciously along with European languages. Indian languages and culture were at the centre. Six, living, learning, teaching and working were a fulsome experience each impacting the other reflecting the values which were upheld by the institution. Holding classes under the trees, farming in the fields of the campus, caring for the animals, taking part in the production process, singing, painting, acting in plays, writing and

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reciting poetry were as important as attending lectures, reading books in the library and doing experiments in the laboratory. Seven, Santiniketan did not believe in granting degrees for a long time. Just learning and living experience in Santiniketan was the certificate that placed several thinkers, artists, musicians, social scientists in different parts of the country.

All of it may not be seen today if one visits Santiniketan. It has been transformed as a Central University into one of the normal institutions following UGC norms. But if you know the history of this great institution and have met some of its products – sorry for using this word product – of that era you can still find traces of that practice. I do not know if they still observe Thursday as their weekly holiday! But compare that vision with what we have in our colleges today and see how we have proceeded in the opposite direction.

Gandhi's Ashram was a learning place through work and study in course of the freedom movement. But we can take the Gujarat Vidyapeeth in Ahmedabad as a reference point with its unique focus on studying labour and creative processes of rural India and relating them with western knowledge system. Of course Gandhi's *Nai Talim* perspective spelt out the principles governing his vision. Much research and

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publication exist on this. But it has had little impact on Indian educational policy.

Three aspects of Gandhi's educational philosophy warrant emphasis in today's context. First, reducing the growing gulf between mental labour and manual labour by making everyone take part in productive work along with classroom study was central. Second, education is about acquiring ability to pursue truth throughout one's life. Not only Gandhi's life was one of 'experiments with truth' that was his perspective on every aspect of human life and work. Third, education in school or college and outside was a part of human life in striving for *swaraj* – self-realisation a constantly evolving process of realising creative potentiality of one and all. The 'swa' self was not conceived against the 'other', but in relationship with others seen as self. Relationships of domination, exploitation and inequality were to be transformed in course of struggle. These would seem very distant ideas for the current policy-makers. None of these principles inspire our education system today.

Both Tagore and Gandhi despite their differences were sharp critics of colonial education system and provided their alternatives. These alternatives contained a fundamental critique of capitalist Industrial Revolution and its cosmology. In the early decades after Independence, the

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Radhakrishnan Commission, and the Kothari Commission had carried some of that philosophy into their frameworks even while taking the Nehru agenda of building a modern industrial nation as their main focus. For them realising the Constitutional vision of equality, liberty, fraternity and justice for all men, women and children and all social groups was the main goal for which the state had to play the central role. This agenda was gradually altered in the 1980s. After the adoption of economic reforms in the 1990s, the neoliberal agenda made education an instrument of capitalist development. At the same time, operation of liberal democracy compelled the rulers to maintain the reservation for the SC, ST and later OBCs and take measures to expand higher education. It was more a legitimisation strategy of the ruling classes rather than serious steps for structural transformation. Today this constitutional provision was regarded by the rulers as a stumbling block for India's economic growth. Periodically we have heard of the desire of Party leaders to scrap reservation.

It is in this context that the present crisis in education has emerged. Expansion of colleges and seats was to respond to the demands of electoral democracy. Shrinking of public funds for education and the fast pace of privatisation was to enable the corporate sector not only turn education, a public good into a profit-making business but

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have its own way of shaping the growth of knowledge in the state sector as well. The Ambani-Birla Report of 2000 decisively charted this course which the Knowledge Commission pursued. Having even one representative of industry in the proposed Commission on Higher Education continues that trend. Content and nature of education underwent perceptible change in this process from imparting knowledge to training in skills. The Skill Mission's active programmes and initiatives attract far more interest of state and capital than the crisis in higher education.

Academic disciplines were now further graded in the market. Professional courses of engineering and medicine were already the first choice for students. Technology was given more value than basic science. Study of Literature, Philosophy and Humanities was considered less important than Sciences. Among Social Sciences once upon a time Economics, History and Political Science were much sought after. Gradually Commerce and Business Management became the first choice. In the drive for covering more items and achieve up-gradation, curriculum was made so vast that students were left with little time to read books, take part in other activities – which are damned as “extra-curricular activities”. Market provided its pain-killers in the form of key-books – *kunjis*. Students found short-cuts and managed to

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get marks- beating the system alright but not gaining knowledge.

In the digital era of the recent years the state and the corporates worked even more closely making computers, laptops available to schools and colleges. Political leaders vied each other for securing praise for such measures. Technology and capital took over the education system, both the public and private institutions adopting themselves compulsively to this demand from the top. Industry was happy making profit out of this. Finding that funds did not permit to provide resources to all colleges in the country, the policy of selecting some colleges and calling them as ‘autonomous Colleges’ was launched. Education which was to promote equality in society had already become an arena of accentuating inequalities. It was further widened with the concept of autonomous colleges. This policy has been the common recommendation of all the commissions since Ramamurti Committee in 1990.

It was in the midst of this wave of commercialisation of education and devaluation of undergraduate education that we in the B.A. Restructuring Committee in Delhi University had taken up the challenge to intervene. We could only attempt restructuring of courses within the existing structure and funding. After two years of deliberations with teachers, students and invited

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experts we formulated a package for the new B.A. Programme having four components: Foundation Courses, Language and Literature courses, Discipline Courses and Application Courses. They were spread over three years. Some foundation courses such as Social Enquiry; Contemporary India; Human Rights, Gender and Environment; and Language, Literature and Culture, made every student learn about their environment irrespective of the discipline they came from. Unfortunately, in some cases narrow notions of foundation courses were introduced taking advantage of this and pet themes of the then Vice-Chancellor or the ruling Party got into the course. Application courses ranged from Statistics and Computer Application to Appreciation of Hindustani Music, Legal Literacy and Tourism. From the list of 27 originally it seems to have gone up to 56. Colleges could propose and add new courses and take the help of colleagues from other colleges making arrangements to teach either in their own college or in another college. This linked the college students with the great talents available in the city who came to take classes or received students as interns. The disciplines curriculum had to now be more interesting to match the others. Language and Literature courses too had to be reconceptualised to provide the critical ability to the students. The programme seems to have attracted lot of students who find it relevant to their life.



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But the general trend of devaluation of undergraduate education has persisted and the crisis has reached massive proportion all over the country. *The modern college has become a factory manufacturing disabilities.* It produces millions of youth with stunted minds, crippled hands, blurred vision, surcharged emotions, tottering feet and aggressive values. Their mind that is capable of questioning, creating and innovating things are put under immense pressure and not allowed to grow into its potential. They are no longer willing to soil their hands working on the fields to create things of beauty and utility with their hands. Use of the finger tips on the key board of a laptop or a cell-phone is their major preoccupation. Their vision is blurred by strong reversals of their faith in history, in the plural multi-religious tradition of India when they are told that this is the nation of one religion. The future is defined for them by their rulers rather than giving them the right and ability to envision their future. On issues of culture, religion, partisan interest, ethnic identity, loyalty to a leader or organisation they are easily provoked to become highly emotional and charge upon others. Education should have committed them to use reason and debate with a cool mind. They can hardly stand on their own, literally and figuratively. They are insecure to the hilt, so they need a group to support, a guard to defend or a weapon. Freedom from fear which was a goal of education is a far cry today. And what values are

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cultivated today? Not love and service or question and reason, not struggle for justice, but defend yourself, your community and a particular interest or cause that you have been mobilised to uphold. Committing aggression upon others through competition, manipulation or fight is the second nature of the modern youth. One realises that what we call disabilities may actually be treated as abilities by some and modern college well be regarded as their achievement. It is also true that even in the midst of this crisis and disabling processes, many students stood out and have passed with great values, talents and creative ability. But their number is miniscule. The evidence on the ground is that there is a widespread decay of higher education. It is a big B.A. crisis.

### **What is to be done?**

Knowing fully well that these suggestions are put against the tidal wave of neo-liberal policy on education strongly pushed by the rulers, they must be put on the table for discussion as an agenda for debate among the teachers, social action groups and policy makers. Otherwise the posterity shall not forgive us. These proposals are based on the belief that education and health must be given the highest priority in a country's development. In this particular case of undergraduate education, efforts must be made to support this mass of critical

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talent in the age group of 18-21 to flourish comprehensively and graduate into purposive adult life. These ideas follow from our analysis of the crisis.

1. *Decentralise educational management:* States and regions or districts must get the proportionate funds and power to enable colleges to manage their educational institutions. Central and State funds should be allocated directly to the college according to the agreed norms without partisan interference. The district representatives should also demand that in addition to central and state funds, those who utilise local resources must contribute a certain portion of their income towards education and health in the region. Central and State government bodies and agencies may formulate ideas for circulation and reference. They should not be imposed on colleges and universities. University is a civilizational institution located in society which state supports with funds and respects its dignity and autonomy to serve society and civilisation. The institution in return has to constantly prove itself by self-assessment that it fulfilled the trust put on it. Even if a private trust sets up a college it has to operate in this framework. This view is in total divergence from the recent Bill to create

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a Higher Education Commission of India that centralises the entire higher education system.

2. *Collective self-management of colleges:* Teachers, students and the community should jointly manage the college through their representatives who should have fixed tenures. The democratic process involving the community must ensure that weaker sections such as landless, unorganised workers, dalits, adivasis, women, minorities are represented in decision-making. How they try to achieve academic and social objectives will be their responsibility to design and implement. They can emulate aspects of other institutions. They are accountable to themselves and the district council which represents the public. Their reputation shall be judged by their community through the achievements of the graduates of their institution. This makes every college an autonomous college located in a region but always with a wider, national and global vision.
3. *The B.A. and M.A. programmes in the same college:* Every post-graduate teacher must teach also at the B.A. level. There can be colleges where M.A. teaching is not provided for *practical* reasons. But there should be no exclusive M.A. teaching. All University Departments must offer B.A. and B.A. (Hons.) programmes. College teachers should

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closely interact with school teachers on the one hand and have adequate access to research facilities on the other. The particular methods of breaking the existing barriers and promoting free flow among different levels of teachers should be worked out without overburdening them.

4. *Knowledge for seeking truth and serving humanity*: All disciplines are important. The College can decide on the choice of disciplines which may or may not conform to the recommendations of the state or capital and their councils. Foundational courses and application courses are both important just as language ability and study of disciplines in all field humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. Instruction in the local language must be the norm along with training in English and other languages as *Languages* where a student can acquire proficiency in three to four years. The current push for add on, self-financing professional courses is causing disruption of the main programmes. If they are important they should be part of the curriculum.

5. *Continuous collective assessment*: The annual or semester examinations whether objective or essay type should be abolished. Instead there should be continuous self assessment

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and mutual assessment by student groups in class with the help of teachers. At the beginning of each segment of the course they should collectively decide how to help each other best comprehend and remember the subject and implement it according to a schedule worked out by them. They devise multiple forms of mutual assessment – essays, papers, discussions, debates, field visits for application of what they learnt, taking the place of the teacher and so on. The present system is based on distrust of the student and is full of tensions for all. Assessment should be a normal tension-free enjoyable experience. This is possible if the maturity of the college student is recognized and the student is made a party to the assessment process which is in their interest. The teacher is not to be in the role of the ‘Master’, a ‘giver of knowledge’, an authoritarian commander directing students, the receivers of knowledge by command. The teacher must be a friend of the student, a co-learner helping one another in their pursuit of truth and creative ability.

These or similar ideas are going to be demanded by the ‘poor B.A. student’ who is already awakened. They are bound to challenge the agenda of the state and capital which has turned education into a commodity called skill. They demand their right to good education for after all

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education is an important path to equality and freedom. Teacher must stand with the student, so should the community who together must make the college a place for the joy of learning. It would be the joy of discovering one's self, society, nature, environment and civilisation. Many people, young and old are engaged right now in going ahead along this path of transformation. So there is hope. NIEPA has often demonstrated that. Thank you.

Please forgive my provocations.

Namaskar.

**Manoranjan Mohanty**

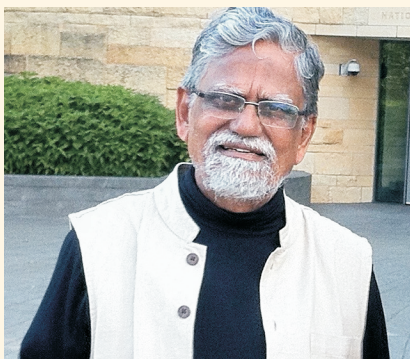
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