

Education reform needed in Kerala

- [T. P. Sreenivasan](#)

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A new kind of intolerance was demonstrated in Kerala recently when a student protest at an educational conclave turned violent, more by design than by accident. A State known for its international linkages through the flow of cultures, languages, religions and trade, and the presence of its people virtually in every corner of the world today now dreads internationalisation of education. Any suggestion of opening the doors of its educational institutions to outsiders is perceived to be evil by a vocal minority willing to nip reform in the bud. Academic isolation is considered beneficial to the State in an era of international cooperation.

Kerala has a long tradition of excellent teaching and learning. It produces graduates, who capture high positions in the civil services in a tough competition. Every world-class university boasts of excellent academics from the State. Talented students and dedicated teachers are in abundance. But the infrastructure is abysmally inadequate in most institutions; training in pedagogy is not a condition for employing teachers, technology-based teaching and learning are in infancy, newly set-up autonomous colleges are struggling to assert themselves, research remains deficient and international contacts are nominal.

Need for interaction

Internationalisation is not the panacea for the ills of higher education, but even a glimpse of the scene outside the State and the country should help to identify areas for interaction with them. In addition, the ideas of the State government to start an Academic City and International Higher Academic Zones had to be explored with possible collaborators. A Global Education Meet,

convened this year with these objectives, was demonised by interested academics and taken over by a section of the students. Any amount of explanation through the media that the measures contemplated were strictly within the laws of the Centre and the State fell on deaf ears. Propaganda was whipped up that the objective of the meet was to commoditise education and to bring in foreign universities.

Bringing in foreign universities is beyond the ken of the State government and any decision on this issue will depend on the fate of the related bill in Parliament. But among the collaborative programmes that are possible even today are International Dual Degree, twinning, study abroad, student exchange, summer schools, joint research, faculty exchange and joint conferences on teaching skills. Introduction of one or more of these measures would energise universities in Kerala and acquaint them with the changes taking place around the world. It is estimated that in the last 10 years the educational scene around the world has changed more than it did in the last hundred years. The Global Education Meet was a modest effort to increase collaboration between universities in Kerala and those in both developed and developing countries.

International collaboration will benefit the rich, who go in search of better education abroad at a high cost. If they can get comparable education in India, they will go to the universities in Kerala and thus conserve their wealth. But better universities will benefit the poor even more as they will have access to better institutions right here through a scholarship scheme built into the plans for the Academic City and Academic Zones. By agitating against reform, those in the universities in Kerala are denying themselves and their successors the opportunity to study in modern institutions.

Competition has proved to be the engine of the race for excellence in every field. Just as new generation banks have changed the way public sector banks do business, a few new generation institutions would impact existing ones. Regulation of these institutions would be so rigorous that they will not be able to take liberties with the laws of the land. There is no need to fear that either private universities or foreign universities will be brought in through the back door.

Kovalam Declaration

The Kovalam Declaration, adopted at the meet, contains a treasure of recommendations which have the potential to transform the higher education scene. By rejecting the declaration, some are throwing out the baby with the bathwater. They had the option of biding their time without any risk of changes taking place in the system.

Undoubtedly, private investment is essential to upgrade universities in Kerala. The State exchequer is on the verge of bankruptcy and the promise of additional funds from the Centre under the Rashtriya Uchcharat Siksha Abhiyan (RUSA) has been belied. Blocking private investment in the Academic City and Academic Zones on account of ideology appears unwise.

In Kerala there is a proclivity for agitations. When hartals (“hurt all”, some say) are declared by any organisation, many stay indoors, some of them with a stock of liquor. But in the last four years, no working day was lost on account of student agitations. This makes the violent education agitation curiouse. There was no urgency to block a decision by the government, which remains ambivalent on private and foreign universities. Intolerance is often seen as a consequence of a perceived rather than a direct threat. Since elections in Kerala are likely to be held in April or May, parties are lining up for coalitions with strange bedfellows. Those who have been accusing others of intolerance, but they are now gripped with their own brand of intolerance of education reform. It has set the clock back on the much-needed upgrade of an antiquated system of education by trumped-up fear of commercialisation.

The evident consternation of the participants over the signs of intolerance was reflected in the Kovalam Declaration, which expressed the hope that dissent will not degenerate into violence.

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