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Challenges In Higher Education

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Addressing the Kerala Legislative Assembly a few days ago, the Governor of Kerala, H.E. Shri. H.R.Bharadwaj, stated: "My Government recognizes that higher education is a powerful instrument of economic and social transformation and will aim to ensure quality education based on access, equity and excellence. My Government realizes the importance of regaining the primacy of our state in the field of higher education. The thrust of our Government will be on encouraging setting up of world class institutions and infrastructure in the state."

Indeed, the challenge is to fashion an education system, which will provide access, ensure equity and maintain excellence. Today, none of the Indian universities figures in any list of a hundred or more world-class universities identified by different assessment agencies. The wide gap between our universities and world-class universities must be bridged so that our graduates can compete with their peers in India and abroad.

Higher education system in the state has succeeded in increasing quantity to meet the aspirations of the youth. The enrollment rate in Kerala is higher than the national average. No one needs to deny himself higher education for want of accessibility, though he may not get the course or college of his choice. Of late, even engineering colleges have vacancies. We have also risen to the occasion when it comes to offering new courses, including cutting edge technologies in some colleges and universities. Compared to the situation when I was a student at the Kerala University till 1966, there is a world of difference in quantity, diversity and quality in higher education today. Modern methods of teaching, including use of technology, have been introduced. Internet connectivity has opened a new world of knowledge. In other words, the system has much to claim credit for.

But Kerala seems to have lagged behind in competitiveness. This is evident from the fact that our graduates have only a small share of seats in specialized institutions in Kerala and outside, for which national competition is necessary. Similarly, the share of our graduates in the IT industry worldwide is low. We need to reform our higher

education in such a way that it matches the highest standards in the world and makes our graduates competitive.

We should recognize that reform in the field of higher education would be slow and painful. Innovation gurus concede that it is hard to introduce innovation in the so-called “mature enterprises” as innovations can be risky and expensive. Past successes can also be a disincentive. Higher education is in this category of enterprises. Any failed innovation may put a whole generation into jeopardy. The available teachers may not be well equipped to impart the new system of education. Introduction of reforms should be after due deliberation and preparation. Any wrong step can be costly.

Inadequate infrastructure, particularly in the Government institutions is an immediate challenge. Low living and high thinking may be a good dictum, but our educational institutions should have the minimum comforts and conveniences to enable the teachers and students to perform at the optimum level. The disparities among the facilities available should also be a matter of concern. Libraries, laboratories and other facilities need modernization and upgrading as new courses are introduced. Internet connectivity, which remains low, is also crucial in higher education. Massive infusion of funds is necessary to improve the infrastructural facilities.

Teachers are the backbone of any system of education. The better the teachers, the better the students. Much has been done to improve the wages of teachers, but the wages are not linked to performance and the security of service tends to make some of them lethargic. There should be a system of evaluation to provide incentives and disincentives to teachers. The strength of the faculty must also increase to give teachers time to learn more and take time off to reinvigorate them. They should also have enough time to evaluate answer books and interact with their students. The present teacher-student ratio does not meet the basic academic requirements. Teachers training programmes and exchange programmes must be developed.

The basic weakness of our higher education system is that teaching and learning methods continue unchanged from schools to post-graduate studies. Teachers are the sources of all knowledge and the students merely imbibe knowledge. In higher education, the initiative for learning should come from the students and the teachers should be guides, evaluators and motivators. The spirit of enquiry should be encouraged in planning the curriculum and prescribing textbooks. As HE the Governor stated, “Our universities must not only impart knowledge, but also create knowledge through research and innovation. New products and processes must emerge from our campuses, giving the industry a stake in our education system.” Today, industry merely recruits graduates. Instead, they should invest in education and participate in its planning so that the graduates meet the requirements of the industry without

sacrificing the basic academic standards and overall development of their personalities.

Fluency in English language, particularly its spoken variety, is lacking among our graduates and it militates against the acceptability of our graduates outside Kerala. Stress should be given to articulation of ideas in English as well as in the mother tongue and opportunities should be given to them to use the language in every day life. A special effort to develop linguistic skills must be made.

The Government of India is in the process of enacting laws to facilitate and regulate the operation of foreign universities in India. Since profit making is prohibited, only those universities, which have an interest in Indian knowledge and talents, will come to India. Kerala should equip itself for the advent of foreign universities by establishing links with some of them in advance in anticipation. Emulating the best practices in foreign education is the first step towards building world-class universities.

Continuous assessment of institutions and teachers is absolutely essential to determine the amount of autonomy that individual institutions should enjoy. Institutions of excellence can be developed in the state by identifying the potential of each institution. A state assessment and accreditation mechanism is being planned to meet this requirement.

Two reforms introduced in higher education recently have shown how problems develop in implementation of reforms, even when they are sound in objectives. The introduction of the semester system at the graduate level was long overdue in the state and it has proved valuable nationally and internationally. It aims at broader acquisition of knowledge, encourages the spirit of enquiry and transforms the relationship between the teachers and the students. It certainly increases the workload of the students and teachers, particularly since the number of examinations multiplies. The system was introduced rather hastily and without consequential changes in the curricula and the student-teacher ratio. As a result, several anomalies have cropped up, raising the demand for a return to the old system, which would be a retrograde step. We are in the process of examining the problems through wide consultations among the stakeholders and close examination by experts. The semester system should stay, but with the necessary correctives to make it an instrument of improvement in higher education.

The other reform, which met a similar fate, was the introduction of a cluster of colleges, aimed at sharing of resources among the colleges in the same area. But it has not yet taken off because of the reluctance of the private colleges to share their assets. The scheme is being examined to remove the apprehensions of the reluctant managements.

Everyone agrees with Swami Vivekananda that the purpose of education is “man making”. It should bring out the talents already inherent in every individual. Our own ancient system of education remains a guide and efforts are being made to revive the spirit of Nalanda and Takshasila. But in modern terms, man making will also include equipping the students to stand on their own two feet, another point that Swami Vivekananda had stressed. As the saint Narayana Guru emphasized, education must develop the hand, the head and the heart. The challenge of higher education is to devise a system that will meet the multiple needs of our youth to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. They should be equipped to seize the opportunities of globalization, without being swept away by its tumultuous impact.

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