

# Universities in the sick bay

THE spread of education is at the foundations of success in countries that are latecomers to development. This was recognised by the founding fathers of the Republic, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru. In their vision for India to catch up with the world there was a critical role for higher education. Universities, Nehru believed, are about reason, humanism, tolerance, just as they are about the adventure of ideas and a search for truth. In an address at the University of Allahabad, soon after Independence, he said: "If all is well with our universities, all is well with our nation."

In the quest for development, primary education is absolutely essential because it creates the base. But higher education is just as important, for it provides the cutting edge. There is a widely held view that India did not place enough emphasis on primary education. This is correct. The resources set aside for primary education were simply inadequate but not because the focus was on higher education. It was an error of omission, not commission. In any case, this is not an either-or choice. We need both.

In fact, 50 years later, it is clear as daylight that Nehru was right about the importance of universities. If the world thinks of India as a global player today, it is because universities created educational opportunities. We now reap the benefits of what was sown then. Even so, we must recognise that much has gone wrong with our university system.

In doing so, it is necessary to make a distinction between two quarter centuries: 1950-1975 and 1975-2000. In the first 25 years, we made two mistakes. The first mistake was to allow a proliferation of universities, nation-wide, even when there were not enough resources to ensure a critical minimum in terms of scale and standards. There was a misguided importance attached to numbers. The importance of quality was almost forgotten as every university, good or bad, was treated at par. The dilemma then, as now, was educating large numbers



## Learning, research and creativity are sacrificed in pursuit of numbers

■ DEEPAK NAYYAR

without diluting academic standards. The second mistake was the near absence of alternative educational opportunities for school-leavers, as more and more students drifted into universities caught in the "diploma-disease".

In the next 25 years, two things went wrong. The first was the mistaken belief that research should be moved out of universities, as we attempted to create stand-alone research institutions pampered with resources. In the process, we forgot an essential principle — that there can be no good research without teaching and no good teaching without research. For there are synergies between teaching and research which enrich each other. And it is universities that are the natural home of research.

tronage emerged. The casualty was the teaching-learning process.

There is serious cause for concern as the gap between our universities and the best in the world outside has widened. Some symptoms are striking. First, curricula, which have remained almost unchanged for decades, have not kept pace with the times, let alone extend the frontiers of knowledge. Second, the milieu is not conducive to learning or creativity, for it is caught in a 9.30-1.30 syndrome. Third, the boundaries between disciplines have become dividing walls that constitute barriers to entry, as also exit, while knowledge is developing at the intersection of disciplines. Fourth, the academic calendar is no longer sacrosanct, for classes or for examinations, and there are

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The second thing that went wrong was that, essentially, what happened to the Republic of India happened to our universities. This was inevitable. Universities are not stand-alone islands. Nor are they immune from the law of averages. They simply mirror society. Our universities witnessed the same erosion of work ethic, the same dilution of values and morality, the same chipping away at norms, that was experienced by polity and society. Nehru saw universities as temples of learning. But they became arenas of politics. As the political process slowly but surely intruded into the day-to-day life of universities, their governance became a political balancing act. As competing interests strove for control, a system for sharing spoils and extending pa-

slippages in schedules; so much so that, at places, results are declared with a time-lag of 12 months. Fifth, the infrastructure is not simply inadequate, it is on verge of collapse. Sixth, as in most public institutions, there is almost no accountability, because there are no rewards for performance and no penalties for non-performance.

What is more, there is a serious resource crunch, which leaves universities with little financial flexibility. In general, about 75 per cent for maintenance expenditure is on salaries and pensions. Of the remaining 25 per cent, more than 15 per cent is absorbed by pre-emptive claims such as rents, electricity and examinations. The balance, less than 10 per cent, is not even enough for maintenance, let alone for development. But that is

not all. In most universities, plan (investment) expenditure is less than 5 per cent of non-plan (maintenance) expenditure. Such a small proportion of investment in total expenditure can only mortgage the future.

We cannot turn a blind eye to this reality. There are of course institutions of excellence in professional education like the IITs and the IIMs, which are a source of pride. But that is no compensation, for these islands of excellence do not add up to a continent of excellence. Such institutions are valuable complements but cannot be substitutes for universities which provide educational opportunities for people at large. The icing is important but it cannot replace the cake. Therefore, it is imperative that we introduce correctives in our university system.

In the wider context, however, there is reason for hope rather than despair. For one, the same university system turns out some students who excel wherever they go, whatever they do. Their success stories have become folklore. This is, perhaps, a tribute to the enormous reservoir of talent in our young people. For another, the same university system has helped develop educational capabilities and entrepreneurial talents which created the initial conditions so essential for the success of economic reforms. This is perhaps a tribute to the vision of the founding fathers of the Republic.

We must, therefore, do everything we can to combat the inertia and cynicism that characterises our public institutions. Universities are no exception to this rule. To begin with, it is essential to believe that a better world is possible, but it is just as important to recognise that there are no magic wands, no messiahs. What is needed is good leadership and cohesive teamwork, combined with a determination on the part of university communities to work together for a common cause. There is, after all, something to the old adage that even God helps those who help themselves.

*The writer was, until recently, vice chancellor, University of Delhi*