‘COMMENTARAO’ IN “THE TELEGRAPH” OF

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# “Learn the hard way

- Education in India needs to be privatized and regulated ” by S L Rao

In the early days of management education in India it was said that management is value neutral and could be applied to all maters where resources were used to achieve stated objectives. It must be applied to government activities as well: stating objectives and outcomes, setting out a time-frame for completion of various activities for: formulating and implementing policies, achieving the objectives, determining and recruiting or training for the types of expertise required, setting out monitoring mechanisms and changing action plans when necessary. Sadly this advise has been forgotten and governments do not use management principles when formulating policies, allocating and spending budgets, nor in implementation. Administrative procedures dominate. Budgets are only about spending money and not reviewing achievement of objectives at each stage. Specialization is not sought. The Boards have no accountability, nor do the administrators. Practically no government activity is completed in time and with quality. Implementation is not an area for which governments set out systems and structures for efficiency and quality.

Education and research at all levels have not had the least attention paid to their sound management. (There are exceptional institutions that have maintained high standards: Indian Institute of Science, TIFR, Delhi School of Economics, BITS Pilani, Manipal Group of Educational institutions, some IITs and regional engineering colleges, ISB, to name a few).

Schools, Colleges, universities, social science research institutions, professional education, vary in quality. Most are of low quality.

Schools are of three types: government schools, aided schools and private schools. They vary in quality in the same order, from poor to unsatisfactory to below needs. All schools consist are recognized (by government) or unrecognized. They need to be registered but many are not and government statistics ignore them. Recognized schools are authorized to issue transfer certificates, but are subject to many onerous conditions including that they have their own building. Many primary schools especially in rural areas remain unrecognized and outside government statistics. Recent data is unavailable. However, household surveys have shown that children attending government schools in rural India are less than one third of the actual number in private schools. For example, a NCAER survey for 1996 showed 30.7% of school enrolment was in private schools against less than the 10% in government data. Government data did not count unrecognized schools. Surveys show that the number of private schools declines as students move up from primary to senior and high schools.

In the age group 5-10, among below poverty line families, 14.8% in rural and 30% in urban households went to private schools. Various studies show that private schools are much more expensive than government schools (mostly free) and BPL families spend a disproportionate share of incomes on education. Teachers are of relatively low quality in government schools, miss many classes, learning outcomes are poorer, teacher accountability is low. A management approach to schools would start with comprehensive data on numbers, infrastructure, and teacher quality, desired and achieved learning outcomes, costs to families, among other data.

This data would then be used to set accountability parameters and aim to improve government schools. Various studies show that learning outcomes in government schools are poorer than in private ones, though not by much. In British days school inspectors ensured in all schools kept a minimum standard. This is not the case now.

Many Colleges also offer a superficial education. This is also true of many that teach professional courses like medicine and management. A result is the proliferation in recent years of private tuition, not only for school education but also beyond. According to NSSO data, 20% of Indians pursuing degree courses and 13% pursuing postgraduate courses and above avail of private tuition. Though private coaching is prevalent across India, in eastern states it is very high. (West Bengl-89% of male secondary and higher secondary students avail of private tuition; national average is 37.8%). These numbers are much higher at the school level. The principal reason is the deterioration in classroom teaching quality while the examinations remain rigorous, demanding supplementation of classroom teaching.

India used to be known for the quality of medical education. There is much deterioration. The murky affairs of the Medical Council of India are known. There are huge under-the-table payments for many medical specialties. The Vyapam scandal in Madhya Pradesh told us that many who get medical degrees have had others appear in the examinations on their behalf. It is rare for professional bodies in any field to take action for indiscipline or malpractice. (The absence of any punishment to the company Price Waterhouse shown to be a participant in the Satyam scam is one example and can be found in all professions).

We have read about pilot licenses given to well connected but unsuitable candidates, clearly subverting the regulatory authority, the DGCA. There are hundreds of recognized (by All India Council for Technical Education) management schools and engineering colleges which have poor faculty, inadequate facilities (equipment, computers, library, classrooms). Our regulatory bodies in education (UGC, AICTE, which are poorly staffed. This starts from the top of their governance. Many times they are also corrupt. The weakness applies to self-regulated bodies with statutory powers (Lawyers, Accountants, company secretaries, doctors, architects, and others), as to those regulated by government bodies (universities, management education, technical and computer education, mass communications). Since each of these bodies certifies a student to work in a well-paying profession, they must be transparent, fair, independent, objective and courageous. They are not.

Colleges are managed by Principals and elected or nominated Boards; universities by vice-chancellors appointed by governments, with Councils; the University Grants Commission has supremacy over all of them. But the regulation is largely ineffective.

Similarly, social science research has the Indian Council of Social Science Research to regulate individual research institutions that have their own Boards. Most of these Boards play limited roes of approving what is put before them. The poor overall quality of colleges is despite such regulation. Nor can we commend the overall quality of social science research in India despite a regulatory body which is also a provider of funds. There is little path breaking research. What are the ills that plague these institutions? There is practically no attempt to train faculty and keep them up to date. Selections are plagued by reservations on account of caste and tribe, without any attempt to upgrade the reserved candidate’s suitability. Faculties in Indian institutions function as democracies, not meritocracies. Everyone is equal and there is no differentiation between the outstanding teacher or researcher and the poor ones. There is automatic promotion from one level to another, after a few years, so that everyone can expect to become more than just a lecturer. There is rarely an attempt to evaluate teachers by the audience of students and if there is, it is a minor factor in evaluation. Performance evaluation of faculty is subjective and rarely with stated parameters.

We need massive faculty development and training rpgrammes to cover all levels of education and subjects. Governance must be by committed Boards that set objective parameters for performance of the institutions and faculty and rigorously review them regularly. Performance must be measured and rewarded or punished accordingly. Boards must be accountable for the institution’s performance.

The Constitution has made education a concurrent subject. State governments indulge in vote bank populism. Appointments of top functionaries are on political grounds, not competence and capability. The way out is wholesale privatization with tough regulation.

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