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The UGC - behind the times?

By Amrik Singh

LIKE SEVERAL other limbs of the Government, the University Grants Commission (UGC) too is planning its next round of activities to synchronise with the Tenth Plan which is about to begin in a year or so. The UGC convened a meeting in mid-May and to it came some of the leading lights in higher education. As far as one can anticipate, we will have a rehash of the kind of UGC plans that have been drawn up every five years. To put it plainly, it will be one more instance of repeating the earlier mistakes. As they say, unless the right kind of questions are asked, it is not possible to get the right kind of answers.

The biggest unsolved problem in higher education today is the astounding disproportion between undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments. According to UGC figures, 88 per cent of students are enrolled at the undergraduate level. Less than one per cent are enrolled for research and around 11 per cent are enrolled at the postgraduate level. Even at that level, 56 per cent of students are enrolled in colleges and not in University departments. This pattern is in evidence more in certain States than in others.

In all fairness, it must be acknowledged that the level of postgraduate education too in the country is poor. Even at the university level, competent staff are not easily available. Lack of academic rigour is responsible for this state of affairs. On top of it, a substantial number of students are enrolled in colleges. The quality of teaching staff whom the colleges cannot but recruit is distinctly lower than in the University departments.

Meanwhile, it is important to raise two questions. What is the quality of performance of those 88 per cent students who are enrolled at the college level? Allied to it is the second question of the number of students who, after completing their senior secondary, go on to join college. According to data collected half a decade ago, the lowest figure, 51 per cent, of those who join college was in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous State in the country. Maharashtra colleges receive 79 per cent of those who pass out from the senior secondary schools

or junior colleges. In Chandigarh, a Union Territory, the transition rate from school to college is 100 per cent. In this situation, if colleges are growing at the rate of 500-600 a year, there should be nothing surprising about it.

Equally surprising is the complete apathy of the UGC to two issues which concern the undergraduate students intimately. The first one is the curricular aspect. In most universities, the curriculum is outdated. Not so long ago, an attempt was made to introduce a certain leavening of vocationalisation at the college level. The experiment did succeed to some extent. About 10 per cent of the colleges have experimented successfully with this innovation. Altogether however, during the last 50-odd years, we have not been able to either enrich or diversify undergraduate education. The second issue is the examination system. It has remained unchanged over the years. In contrast, every single School Education Board has been able to modernise and streamline the style of its question papers. There is something for the UGC to learn here.

Because of the innovation made at the senior secondary level, no student can leave out any portion of the syllabus. The questions asked are generally searching in their thrust and coverage. In consequence, the focus has somewhat shifted away from memory work to an evaluation of the related mental qualities. At the college level, exceptions apart, the kind of teaching done is generally casual and sloppy. The question papers set are traditional and it is possible for students to leave out large chunks of what they were required to learn. No wonder, in almost every single university, students work towards the end of the academic year for a month or so and clear the examination.

What requires to be underlined is that unless the UGC addresses itself to improving undergraduate education, it will have neglected 88 per cent of its responsibility. Of the members nominated to this expert committee to lay down guidelines for the Tenth Plan, hardly anyone is really involved with undergraduate education. All emphasis is on research and problems connected with research. These are important problems without question. But then is it enough to consider only what concerns 10-11 per cent of the student (and perhaps 15-20 per cent of the teachers and leave out the rest?

Today undergraduates outnumber postgraduates heavily. The impact of this startling disproportion is felt in a variety of ways. One half of what is done at the undergraduate level is more or less either a repetition of what was done at the school level or what ought to have been done at that level. This means that the UGC has also got to

worry about what happens at the school level. The Ministry of HRD will, therefore, have to be brought into this exercise if the UGC, in its own interest, is to influence the working of the senior secondary schools.

Odd things happen today. In 15-20 per cent cases, there is downright repetition at the college level of what is done at the school level. Not only that, there is no institutional mechanism of coordination between schools and colleges. The mode of assessment at the school level is professional as well as scientific whereas that at the college level harks back to the 19th century. And this brings us to the second crucial issue.

The mode of assessment has both technical and academic implications. If it is not done thoroughly as well as scientifically, the quality of teaching gets diluted. This is precisely what is happening at the undergraduate level. If the mode of assessment is rigorous, teaching cannot be indifferent or casual. Since the quality of teaching as a whole needs to be improved, the mode of assessment too will have to be modernised. This is something to which the UGC has never given serious thought.

In the early 1960s, inspired by the UGC under the leadership of C. D. Deshmukh who had developed contacts with reputed professional experts, a beginning was made at the school level. Logically speaking, it should have led to changes at the college level in course of time. But then someone forgot what was to be done!

In the early 1970s, prodded by the Ministry of HRD, the UGC launched upon a mode of assessment for which the academic system was not prepared. Within a few years, the initiative petered out. In contrast, the NCERT had resolutely carried out the job of modernising the mode of paper setting. It did not only talk about the issue on an academic plane, it got down to real, solid business. About 3,000 paper setters were retrained. So, today every single School Board has a system of paper setting which is decades ahead of what the universities do.

When students join college, instead of being carried forward, they are sometimes thrown back. As long the numbers at the undergraduate level were comparatively small, matters were manageable but not in the last 10-15 years. Therefore, the UGC is already late by two-three Plan periods if it wishes to remodel the examination system at the undergraduate level; and it has no choice in the matter unless it chooses to fold up. Given the indifference of the State Governments to what has been happening to the colleges, things have deteriorated

to the extent that today it has become an issue of seven million versus one million.

Except for a small proportion of students who go into professional courses, the rest of the seven million are lost for lack of direction. As a matter of fact, the number need not have reached the figure of seven million had the Ministry of HRD played a somewhat decisive role in making the States look at the senior secondary and college education as intimately dependent upon each other. It would be unfair to put the entire responsibility on the UGC. Some of its agenda of work can be carried out only with the help of the Ministry of HRD. However successful the UGC is in promoting postgraduate education and research, which sectors of activity are directly within its charge, a situation has been reached where to neglect undergraduate studies would be to jeopardise higher education as a whole.