

Of the sanctioned 9,054 academic jobs in Central varsities, 2,271 were lying vacant in 2007

JS Rajput



Universities in a mess

Education in India is all set for an expansion. For several decades after independence, the focus was on universalising elementary education. Now it has to be on skilled manpower and greater participation in higher education. However, even now, much remains to be achieved in extending elementary education to all.

The emerging focus on skilled manpower and greater participation at higher education levels comes in the wake of much-hyped economic growth. After the presentation of the Budget for 2008-09, rising inflation and certain global economic trends have punctured the euphoria generated by the 9.5 per cent growth and the Sensex crossing the 20K-mark. The issue of quality education at each stage is also emerging prominently. There is no denying the need for — and urgency of — expansion, but genuine apprehension exists on how it shall be achieved.

The Union Government has announced plans to open new schools, research institutions, new universities and much more. However, academic circles are worried as to how professional manpower will be made available to save these institutions from mediocrity.

A visit to institutions of professional education will reveal the mess they are in. A realistic appraisal of the functioning of the existing institutions could be helpful to plan the new ones. Institutions with reputation and credibility need to ponder over the factors that have led to the non-availability of academics to man even the existing positions. It is the responsibility of the institutions of higher learning to create a pool of young academics to enter and enrich these institutions. This aspect has apparently been ignored during the last few decades.

Not much support is available to encourage research, except in some institutions funded by the Union Government. In a survey conducted in 2005, it has been revealed that while the US contributes 32 per cent of the research papers published globally, India has only 2.5 per cent to its credit. The number of PhDs awarded in one year in the US is 25,000, in China 38,000 and in India only 5,000.

The vacancy position in universities and even IIMs and IITs tells a very depressing story. Bombay University with 38 per cent, Rajasthan University with 69 per cent and Nagpur with 71 per cent vacancies are indicators why India is lagging behind in research. As on March 2007, the vacancies in some of the Central universities were: Aligarh Muslim University —

280; Benaras Hindu University — 527; University of Delhi — 527; and, JNU — 119. Of the total sanctioned strength of 9,054 academic positions in Central universities, 2,271 were vacant. Such systemic apathy and ignorance cannot be covered under the projected achievements of higher allocations of education and opening of more institutions.

The situation in State universities is no different. Some State Governments have not permitted recruitment for decades! If the Central institutions cannot be persuaded to fill vacant positions, the Government of India and its national level bodies have no moral authority to blame State Governments. The practice of getting the teaching work done on 'honorarium' basis, which entails a paltry sum, without appointing regular teachers now extends from the primary to the highest levels of education. The Union Government approves it and the State Governments are just too happy to adopt it to combat the resource crunch.

Bureaucratic solutions of academic issues often create anomalies in education. When suddenly the Government decided to reserve 27 per cent seats in higher institutions of learning, there was considerable confusion in the institutions themselves. The initial idea was to implement it with immediate effect. However, later it was decided that the 'general' seats should not be reduced. It meant that 27 per cent increase will effectively amount to 100 seats being increased to 154!

How could the capacity of a medical or engineering college with an initial intake of 200 students be raised to more than 300 in four months? But they all fell in line. The HRD Ministry announced another concession to meet the shortage of academic faculty: The retirement age in the Central institutions would be 65 and not 62. It could also be increased to 70. Obviously all senior faculty members were overjoyed and the Ministry could claim how well it looks after the 'senior dons'. The seats have not yet been increased. The issue of reservation is still pending in the Supreme Court. So who are the beneficiaries? Not the young aspirants from the OBC category, but the academics of the institutions of higher learning.

It is high time that the Government asks selected institutions to design special programmes of orientation and research for preparing students to join academics. India can no more afford to add to the numbers of below average colleges and universities.

China barks, world obeys

It's not just India which has preferred to go soft on Tibet. Western countries have adopted a similar policy. The slavish attitude of most Governments has emboldened a brutal China to indulge in what the Dalai Lama calls 'cultural genocide' in Tibet

Claude Arpi



During the last few weeks, we have been hearing and reading that the Government of India has been chickening out on each and every issue — whether it is the India-US nuclear deal (after agreeing with the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, it pretended to have 'forgotten' the draft when it met the Left parties on March 14), or the Tibetan issue.

Of course, South Block has an explanation for everything. On the Tibetan issue, for example, it says that when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India in April 2005, the Government had agreed to "recognise the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of the territory of the People's Republic of China and... not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India". This illustrates the wishy-washiness of the UPA regime which allows Beijing to twist New Delhi's arm.

When one reflects on the unrest in Tibet during the past fortnight, it is probably this type of vagueness which has created an immense sense of frustration among the Tibetans. And I am not speaking about the UPA Government's attitude alone. During the last decade, most heads of state have pursued similar policies. Business is more important, they say.

I remember an incident which was narrated to me by an eyewitness. In 1998, the world community celebrated the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Article 1 says: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." A beautiful concept indeed!

Paris, the heart of the French Revolution, had logically been given the responsibility to organise the festivities to which all the Nobel peace laureates were invited. But while sending the invitations, the office of the French President 'forgot' one inconvenient Nobel peace laureate, the Dalai Lama. The French daily, *Liberation*, was the first to break



Raging in frustration: The world is blind to Tibet's plight

the story. Elysée Palace had to quickly backtrack and pretend that the postal service had 'lost' the invitation and that "a 'fresh' one would be sent to the Dalai Lama". The latter then decided to attend the celebrations.

The story is not yet over. During a private function, then French President Jacques Chirac was introduced to the Nobel laureates one by one. When he reached the Dalai Lama, instead of shaking hands, he simply ignored him and passed on to the next dignitary. When I heard this story, I could not believe it, but the person assured me that it was true. A few years earlier, Mr Chirac had openly spoken of "my friend the

Dalai Lama". When I recently interviewed the Tibetan leader, he alluded to the incident: "Your President used to be a close friend of mine... before he became President. Later he did not remember me (he started laughing), it did not upset me; it was his choice (and he laughed again)."

And this is only one story. The Dalai Lama must have lived through hundreds of such affronts. The Chinese Embassy has just to bark and any Western (or Indian) Government obeys. Last year, a large meeting of Tibet Support Groups was held in Brussels, the Tibetan leader was to address the gathering. When the Chinese Embassy threat-

ened to cancel the visit of some Belgian Prince to China, Brussels immediately complied and asked the Dalai Lama to cancel his visit.

The slavish attitude of most Governments has emboldened China to go ahead with what the Dalai Lama calls a "cultural genocide". Hiding behind the most (in)famous of the Panchsheel Agreement — "mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs" — the Chinese Government has continuously removed all traces of cultural identity in Tibet. The latest instrument of cultural purge is the railway line to Lhasa which brought four million Han Chinese to a city of a few lakhs in 2007.

Abandoned by all the great democracies, seeing that the 'negotiations' between the Dalai Lama's envoys and second-rank Chinese officials going nowhere, the despair began mounting in Tibet and Dharamsala. The summer Olympics were their last chance to get their voice heard.

It is true that the 'dialogue' between Beijing and Dharamsala has been one of the most frustrating processes, with the Chinese authorities clearly taking the Dalai Lama for a ride to gain time. China has never had the intention to give any autonomy to Tibet (as it should according to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China). Added to this, the constant insults against the Tibetan leader could only add to the frustration and anger of the Tibetans.

How can a dialogue be established when Tibet's Communist Party chief, Zhang Qingli, calls the Dalai Lama "a wolf in a monk's robe, a monster with a human face but the heart of a beast"?

Further, facts like the interdiction of displaying — or even having — photos of the Dalai Lama increase the discontent on the 'Roof of the World'. The Chinese have mentioned in one of their communiqués that Chinese shops have been burned in Lhasa by the demonstrators. When I visited the Tibetan capital in 1993, there were 12,000 Chinese shops in Lhasa for only 500 Tibetan shops. Fifteen years later, the situation is worse. How can the

Tibetans not be frustrated and upset?

Whatever the motivations of Ms Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, were in meeting the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, she did put the Tibetan issue at the right level: "The situation in Tibet is a challenge to the conscience of the world... the challenge we can help meet." The third-ranking US official added: "If freedom loving people throughout the world do not speak out against China's oppression in Tibet, we have lost all moral authority to speak on human rights anywhere in the world."

Yes, it is a challenge for the consciousness of the inhabitants of this planet when 'nations' such as Tokelau and Kiribati (or Kosovo) are recognised as 'independent' by the UN and Tibet is still colonised. Indians, who have been under foreign yoke for seven centuries, will understand this.

The only solution to the Tibetan issue is a change of regime in Beijing. Interestingly, Communist leaders have not always responded to the unrest in Tibet with the brutality we witness today. In May 1980, the Politburo of the CCP decided to send a high-level fact-finding delegation to the 'Tibet Autonomous Region'. The delegation was headed by the top party functionary, Mr Hu Yaobang, who was then the CCP general secretary. Reaching Lhasa, he was shocked to see the level of poverty in Tibet. During a meeting with the party cadre, he asked "whether all the money Beijing had poured into Tibet over the previous years had been thrown into Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra)".

Mr Hu Yaobang said the situation reminded him of colonialism. Hundreds of Chinese Han cadre were transferred back to China. The situation was better for a few years until Mr Hu Jintao became the party chief in Lhasa. His arrival corresponded to the worst riots and one year of martial law in Tibet.

Will China find a new Hu Yaobang? This is the most important question for its — and Tibet's — future.

Back to the past in Baghdad

Poor beg for food in US-controlled Green Zone, reports Qassim Abdul-Zahra

A woman wrapped in a dirty *abaya* sits beneath a tree in the Green Zone, her palms turned upward awaiting the kindness of strangers. The sidewalks around the Convention Centre are an ideal place for 50-year-old Um Mohammed — a nickname that means "mother of Mohammed" — to hustle for spare cash.

Beggars are reappearing in the Green Zone and elsewhere in the capital, an indication that police seem to be losing interest in carrying out orders last month to round them up. The Interior Ministry's directive followed a series of suicide attacks by homeless or disabled people who had been lured by insurgents.

"This segment of the population is an easy target for terrorist groups trying to deceive them and make them walking bombs," said Brig Gen Qassim al-Moussawi, an Iraqi military spokesman.

Um Mohammed, a beggar who would not give her real name, said she preferred the Green Zone. "I'm getting older and weaker, and I don't have the ability to walk and beg on the streets," she said.

Except for the occasional rocket or mortar, the heavily fortified area is a haven of relative peace in the middle of a city torn by war. Home to the Iraqi Government and the US Embassy, the 3.5-square-mile area is safer than the streets where daily bombings and shootings are an ever-present threat.

And the Green Zone is full of people — Americans, Iraqi officials and others — who can afford the occasional generosity. It is unclear where those asking for handouts are coming — from outside the Green Zone or from within the homes and villas cordoned off from the rest of Baghdad inside the Green



Living on the edge: Streets of Baghdad are full of beggars, which is a cause for concern for authorities

Zone boundaries. The Green Zone is by no means infested with beggars. But a handful do get through regularly — especially when Iraq's Parliament is in session inside the protected zone.

Although entries to the Green Zone are guarded, Iraqis can gain access by producing proper identification cards and submitting to a search to make sure they aren't carrying explosives or weapons.

Yaqdhan al-Dikhil, security director for the Convention Centre in the Green Zone, acknowledges the risk in allowing beggars into the protected area. He said photographs of beggars have been posted at checkpoints.

Thaer al-Zubaidy, a parliament employee, said they often appear at the Convention Centre meeting site early in the morning. "It's a normal sight, but out of sympathy we try to turn a blind eye," he said.

While security concerns are tantamount, some Iraqi officials acknowledge a fine

line separating harsh measures to ensure such security from the compassionate leniency for those who need it most. "The majority of them are professional beggars. They used to beg on the streets. Sometimes when they claim to be sick, we try to help them by calling officials at the Health Ministry," he said.

In the shade outside the Convention Centre, a woman wrapped in black cloth approached pedestrians. Holding the hand of a young girl dressed in dirty clothing, she jabbed her finger and pleaded shyly for help. "Please, please," she said in Arabic. But for others, begging in the Green Zone may just be another scam in a city full of graft.

Fadhil, who declined to give his last name, wore clean jeans and a clean black shirt. He claimed to suffer from heart problems and carried papers for proof. He bent at the waist and his hands shook in a finely honed act. "If I go to beg on the streets, I have to

wear torn-out cloths," Fadhil said. "But when I come to the Green Zone, I have to wear decent clothes. Otherwise the guards would deny me access."

Beggars are a common sight in many cities in the Arab world, including Baghdad before the war. Panhandlers — including women with small children — used to loiter outside fashionable Baghdad restaurants, mosques and at traffic intersections where they would shake down motorists waiting for green lights.

Some lawmakers and Parliament employees object to the beggars, which they believe reflect poorly on Iraqi society. Hassan al-Rubaie, a member of the Parliamentary Security and Defence Committee, said begging near the offices of Iraq's Government is a security flaw and a mark on Iraqi culture.

"Begging reflects the social status of Iraq at large," al-Rubaie said. "It is something that should be stopped." (AP)

Go test your genes

Biotech firms offer to check your genetic markers, writes Marcus Wohlsen

For the price of a good men's suit, a batch of new services will scan your genes and spot potential health risks, from cancer to lower back pain. It's the business world's answer to a deluge of new genetic discoveries pouring forth from scientists' labs. Key investors in two of the companies, 23andMe Inc and Navigenics Inc, are among the biggest names in new technology.

But some analysts and investors wonder if consumers are ready to trust these startups when their own fine print warns against using their information to make serious medical decisions.

"I am a bit skeptical that many people are going to pay \$1,000 for information that's not very useful just for entertainment value," said Mr Douglas M Fambrough, a biotech venture capitalist with Oxford Bioscience Partners in Boston. "I would say that getting your whole genome sequenced is really at this point just a vanity exercise."

Most of these direct-to-consumer services don't actually scan all three billion letters of an individual's DNA, although Knome will for \$350,000. Many more will search for specific genes or clues to your family history for a few hundred dollars.

But serious money has been invested in three companies that charge about \$1,000 to \$2,000 for an analysis of 500,000 to two million points where research suggests connections to specific health conditions.

To take the test, customers get simple kits for taking saliva samples that the companies then analyse. After a few weeks, customers can log into secure Websites to view possible health risks embedded in their genes.

With that information in

hand, patients have a powerful tool for homing in on potential medical problems before they show up, said Ms Mari Baker, chief executive of Navigenics. "Our goal as a company is to improve health outcomes. This isn't about genetic curiosity."

When it launches in April, Navigenics will offer clients a scan of two million genetic markers, along with counselling from experts on how to interpret the results.

The Navigenics service costs \$2,500 for the initial scan along with a year's worth of counselling and updates on the latest research. After the first year, customers can pay a \$250 annual subscription fee for updates on new discoveries related to their own genes.

A disclaimer on Navigenics' Website emphasises that the company doesn't give medical advice. It warns customers not to make any health care decisions based on their genetic information without consulting a doctor.

In recent months, debate has swirled over whether patients will heed that caution. Even if they do, most physicians lack training in how to interpret unverified results from these almost wholly unregulated businesses.

A recent editorial published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* urged doctors to advise skepticism about the companies' tests. Research into genetic risk is still in its earliest stages, said the editorial. "For the patient asking whether these services provide information that is useful for disease avoidance, the prudent answer is 'Not now, ask again in a few years.'"

Nevertheless, the biggest names in Silicon Valley are betting serious money on these startups. (AP)

other's concerns

arab news

Summit of frustration

Substantial progress at Arab summits is rare. Habitual divisions have marked previous gatherings and have been usually papered over by a convenient consensus on generalities. But when half the leaders of the Damascus summit do not show up, the chances of reaching any sort of breakthrough considerably lessens, and the odds are further shortened when one of the principal parties of the very dispute which has kept so many leaders away, in this case Lebanon, boycotts altogether. The non-participation of so many Arab leaders in Damascus is the culmination of a growing sense of frustration with Syria's leadership, mostly over its role in Lebanon, its declared support for Hamas in its battle for Palestinian minds and hearts with Fatah, and not to mention its all but declared alliance with Iran.

The Arab countries who have chosen to send only token representation at the summit, notably the Kingdom and Egypt, have made clear their dissatisfaction with Syria and the fact that a solution on the issue including the election of army chief Michel Suleiman as the new president, a choice approved by both sides and decided unanimously by the Arab League, including by Syria is not being carried out. Thus the call by Prince Saud Al-Faisal for measures to be taken against member states that breach a common resolution. However, the Syrian promise at the summit to cooperate in ending the political crisis in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia saying it saw Damascus as part of the solution is conciliatory language, which eased the tension.

(Excerpted from the editorial of the Arab News, Jeddah, March 31)