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comment

Equip students with job skills

Technological institutes must be in sync with industry's needs

Indian higher education leaves much to be desired, especially in the technical and technological sectors. There are engineering colleges in practically every street corner; and yet the widespread opinion in the industry is that most recent graduates are unemployable without a lot of training. AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education)'s statistics show that the number of institutes offering engineering and technology programmes under the AICTE in 2015-16 is by far the largest of all streams (6431), including applied arts and crafts (66), architecture (171), hotel management and catering (108), management (a distant second at 3,475), MCA (1344), pharmacy (1465), and town planning (8). And yet, studies show that the number of students that are job-ready is less than one-third of those graduating from technical schools.

The AICTE's suggestion to have an industry consultation committee to rework the curriculum of each subject taught in these institutes is certainly a step in the right direction. It would ensure that colleges teach skills and subjects that have relevance to the industry and can help increase the employability of the students. Given the government's push on initiatives such as Skill India, which aims to train over 40 crore people in India in different skills by 2022, it is vital to ensure that more and more students will come into the job market with the right training.

Skills and other vocational training (that don't fall under the technical 'engineering' bracket) in India is looked down upon as a sort of last option if a student has not 'made it' to the 'prestigious' institutes of engineering. This is an attitude that urgently needs to be remedied. And the best way to do away with such prejudices would be to ensure that more and more vocationally trained graduates find profitable employment. This is a task that must involve the industry as much as the educational institutions. In a country standing on the cusp of a substantial demographic dividend, where a majority of the population will belong to the age group of 'working people'; a lot remains to be done to ensure that the working age population is actually put to productive work.

Break the wildlife trafficking value chain

Preying on endangered species at natural heritage sites affects biodiversity, tourism

That the world's natural heritage is under severe threat is old news. But if you want to know the depth of this global crisis, then do read this latest report from the WWF: Halting Illegal Trade for CITES Species From World Heritage Sites. According to the report, Natural World Heritage sites are threatened by destructive industrial activities, over-exploitation and trafficking of CITES species. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement that aims to ensure that transnational trade of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

These natural world heritage sites support large populations of rare plant and animal species, including almost a third of the world's remaining 3,890 wild tigers and 40% of all African elephants, and function as the last refuge for critically endangered species such as the Javan rhinos and vaquitas. From an Indian perspective, the three world heritage sites that are being plundered are: The Western Ghats, the Great Himalayan National Park and the Khangchendzonga National Park. The illegal harvesting of species not only impacts biodiversity but also has social and economic costs. More than 90% of natural heritage sites support recreation and tourism as well as provide jobs. Many of these benefits are dependent on the presence of CITES-listed species in these sites.

It goes without saying that this cannot go on. As the WWF correctly says, "Governments must redouble their efforts and address the wildlife trafficking value chain." There must be more collaboration between CITES, the World Heritage Convention and national authorities to lead a more coordinated, comprehensive response to halt wildlife trafficking - from harvesting of species in source countries, transportation through processing destinations, to sales in consumer markets.

Policing pregnancies is not the way

Errant medical professionals must be held accountable for India's declining sex ratio

INDIRA JAISING



The declining trend in the sex ratio at birth in recent years is evident from the government's Sample Registration Survey data (from 909 to 900 over 2011-15). The biological benchmark of sex ratio at birth is 952 girls per 1,000 boys, thus at least 5% of the girls are not allowed to be born today. Note that the latest Civil Registration data of 23 million births in 2014 also confirms this declining trend. Perhaps we as a country have not got rid of the son preference syndrome like China. China and India eliminate more than 15 lakh girls annually. Any society which consciously discriminates against women to the extent that they are not allowed to be born will suffer social, economic and political problems. This has already led to practices like polygamy being adopted in some states, women being forcibly married off and brides being brought from distant places.

What are the causes of this decline? It seems to be a combination of the lack of politi-

cal will and the criminal tendencies evident in the medical profession, as in other professions: the lure of quick money by unlawful means, which has militated against the girl child. Chandrababu Naidu when he demitted office as the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh in 2002, claimed that one of his main achievements was to increase the number of medical colleges from seven (all government colleges) to 30, such is the march of the private sector in the field of medical education. These colleges are churning out doctors for quick profits. Unsurprisingly, undivided Andhra had the sharpest decline in child sex ratios among the South Indian states in 2011 census. While advertisements in the print media have stopped, thanks to the Supreme Court orders over 2001-2003, they continue unabated on Google search. The Supreme Court is currently hearing a case asking for blocking advertisement of sex selection.

The role of the medical profession is also evident from the fact that the sex ratio is more adverse in urban areas compared to the rural areas. Unless medical professionals are held responsible for this gross misuse of ultrasound technology, the adverse sex ratio is unlikely to change. Heroic efforts by NGOs and civil society have yielded results. Varsha Deshpande secured over 70 convictions in Maharashtra of medical professionals over the past decade. This has shown results in improved sex ratios till 2014 which went up to



A man walks past graffiti in Vakulni village in Maharashtra's Jalna District where the child sex ratio has worsened since the 2001 census

SATISH BATE/HT

914. However, over 2015 and 2016 the sex ratio has declined to 899 because of the lack of focus on the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994 by the present State government. The sex ratio at birth has been increasing in Haryana and Rajasthan also thanks to the aggressive prosecution of doctors, under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Programme of the BJP government.

While discrimination against the girl child existed and infanticide was known, the march of technology has made it easier and clinical to eliminate the girl child before birth. Until the last decade, the most important cause of missing girls in India was delib-

erate neglect after birth, but today, it is sex selection before birth.

UP and Bihar, the states with the largest number of births, will largely decide whether in the next decade there will be an upturn in favour of girls. Given the lack of deterrence against sex selection in these states, the impact will be felt in a further decline of sex ratios in the country.

This is not to make a case for banning all abortions but rather a case to end discrimination against women at large. It is tragic that this country has no law prohibiting discrimination based on sex; similar to the one for HIV/AIDS recently passed by the Parliament. The Public Accounts Committee of the Legislative assembly of Maharashtra has just announced that in all cases foetal sex be determined and pregnancies monitored till delivery. Apart from being a complete violation of the right to informed consent, which is part of the right to health, it is a gross violation of the right to privacy in decisions of the most intimate kind.

Policing pregnant women is not the solution to the problem. On the contrary, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 allows abortion under certain conditions. The new proposal can also have dangerous communal overtones.

Political parties can facilitate a favourable environment for girls, if they avoid polarisation of our society. We need to get our national priorities right for the reversal of sex ratios to normalcy.

Indira Jaising is a senior advocate, Supreme Court
The views expressed are personal

ANOTHER DAY



A row of Ambassador cars lined up for parliamentarians in New Delhi. The red light became a red rag to the bull when the delivery system failed the people

VIPIN KUMAR/HT

Banning the beacon is mere symbolism

This will not curb our VIP culture or reduce the sense of entitlement. We need to reform the system thoroughly

VINOD SHARMA



The Centre's decision to ban the use of red beacons is as symbolic as was their use on top vehicles that carried high officials. The removal of flashing lights won't cure those blinded by power. Or the way they flaunt it.

But the step against this magisterial aura marks a sound beginning. It's in line also with the Supreme Court's advice to discard this practice which is unbecoming of a modern democracy. Such display of authority makes the sovereign, the people, assume a lesser position than their servants.

Yes, servants! Did Prime Minister Narendra Modi not call himself a servant of the people the way the first premier did in his 1947 address from the Red Fort? Beit Modi's pradhansewak or Nehru's first servant, the sentiment remains the same. Primacy vests in the people! But a lot needs to be done to make governmental authority people-oriented. Or to impart to it a benign makeover beyond the bayonets of armed guards used as status symbol, a la beacons, by politicians across India.

The ground reality is that only those with serious threats are actually guarded. The rest are rewarded at considerable cost to the public exchequer.

In the hinterland as also in small towns and cities, laal batti, gaadi, banglaa, bandook have for decades been associated with political and bureaucratic power.

The red light became a red rag to the bull when the delivery system failed the people amid rising graft and injustice. In metropolitan India, beacon-fitted vehicles came to be despised, together with their occupants, for either causing traffic jams or cutting through them as lesser mortals watched in frustration.

Cover as it does the President and the PM, the ban should go down well with the common people. Its populist appeal is highlighted by the fact that it will come into force on May 1, the International Workers' Day.

It means beacons — the blue flasher — will be allowed only on vehicles belonging to emergency services. Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari termed the move historic. Historic — perhaps not, path-breaking — yes!

The Modi government has annulled the very law that permitted such a display of power in the States and at the Centre. Its decision has been welcomed by Punjab CM Amarinder Singh, who prohibited beacons on ministerial vehicles a month ago as part of his poll promise to curb the VIP culture.

Welcome though, such symbolism has to be backed by substance. The answer lies in reforming the system, the mindset of superiority at the expense of service. Short of that, it'll be mere window dressing. The sense of entitlement that our VIPs have should go and hopefully, this is the first step towards that.

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Indian economists should shun their herd mentality

Such an attitude discourages diversity of opinions, a fundamental requirement for this discipline

SOUMYA KANTI GHOSH



In 1999, Nobel Prize winner Ronald Coase said: "Existing economics is a theoretical system which floats in the air and which bears little relation to what happens in the real world".

Nearly two decades later, his statement bears more resemblance to reality than it ever did earlier. But this does not mean that economics as a subject has lost its appeal. In fact, it is now even more fascinating. The problem is regarding course content in the economics curriculum, political economy and 'herd mentality' of economists.

Economics has always been fascinating in terms of the diversity of opinions. In 2013, Robert J Shiller and Eugene Fama were awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics but they had opposite views on market efficiency. While Shiller holds that investors can be swayed by psychology/story of irrational exuberance, Fama contends markets are always efficient with people incorporating available information into prices.

Such a dispute is not merely academic. The deregulation of financial markets beginning in the 1980s was often justified by the notion of efficient markets. The rising home prices in the 2000s reflected the view that prices are inherently rational. However, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the work of Shiller and other proponents of behavioural economics intensified financial regulation. Today, the financial sector is saddled with too many regulations.

My first problem with the economic discourse today is the course content in India's colleges and universities. It is surprising that students in macroeconomic classes today are taught old models of schools of thought with little or no applicability to the real world and real-time data. For example, there are hardly any special papers at the graduation/post-graduation levels that help students to understand how to go

THERE IS NOW TOO MUCH POLITICAL IN THE ECONOMIC THOUGHT PROCESS IN UNIVERSITIES. WHILE IT IS GOOD TO HAVE A FAIR DEBATE ON SUCH OPINIONS, IT IS INCORRECT TO IMPOSE THEM ON STUDENTS

through the RBI's balance sheet, the government's budget and borrowings.

During demonetisation, I saw economists struggling to understand the difference between currency in circulation and currency with the public. This was a reflection of the gaps in our course structure. One way to redress this is to make it compulsory for students to do a practical course with industry practitioners on different aspects of the data applications of economics and integrate that with classroom learning. This could be a fascinating exercise.

The second problem with the course content is that there is an inherent bias towards models and policy-making that have a resemblance to developed economies. For example, there is too much debate on fiscal austerity in India. Unfortunately, the debate on fiscal austerity has stemmed from the euro zone and other economies that had recklessly run up budget deficits and public debt as a percentage of the GDP.

Intriguingly, in the recent Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, 2003, the recommendations submitted to the Centre reiterated that public debt as a percentage of the GDP should be ideally 60%, a recommendation of the Maastricht treaty in 1992 that the EU hardly adhered to. We must tweak the course content with reference to emerging economies.

In fact, some of the economic theories in the context of countries like India are even incorrect. Let us take the example of welfare. Econ 101 tells us that welfare incentivises laziness. But several studies have shown such effects are usually small. This is true in the Indian context, where people want development and not doles and hence it may be incorrect to say that programmes that provide doles are bad.

Next, what about political economy? There is too much politics in the economic thought process in universities. While it is good to have a fair debate on such opinions, it is incorrect to impose them on students. We must agree to disagree, but not use it as an instrument of political anarchy.

Finally, herd mentality. In India, practicing economists mostly talk in one voice. If one economist says inflation will go up, others will follow suit without even looking at the data. This is intriguing and discourages diversity of opinions, a fundamental sin qua non for economics.

It is now high time that economists start looking at the data more often and perhaps refine their thinking in terms of real time data analytics. This could lead to more out-of-the-box thinking, a must for policy regulations and policy makers.

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The views expressed are personal

innervoice
MASTER THE ART OF LIVING TO ADJUST LIFE'S CLOCK TO YOUR OWN PACE

Neha Mehta

Ever wondered how time plays its cards, making us dance to its tunes? When we want it to run fast, it tests our patience by crawling at a sluggish speed, and when we want to see and experience life's best moments, it just flies past us in the wink of an eye.

Given this strange pattern, we fail to comprehend the actual truth behind this phenomenon. Time acts at its own pace, not having any personal agenda against you or anyone for that matter.

We cannot, of course, deny that our lives pretty much revolve around time, both the good or the hard times. But at the end, what matters is how you have lived and dealt with that particular time in life. It is the quality of time that matters, how well the time is spent.

Life is all we have got and in this race against time, where we don't know how the turn of the clock is going to be, the best thing is to just go with the flow and make the most of what you have — in other words the motto should be carpe diem.

We should show life that hard times are not that powerful as to beat us down and that we can fight it out. Be grateful for all the good times and do keep them alive in the soul of your heart so that they come back to you when the hard times are over.

Once you master art of living and making peace with your own time, life's clock will definitely adjust to your speed.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers
The views expressed are personal)
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