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CUT OFF FROM COLLEGE

The Quest for Undergraduate Education

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Late June and early July are a season of anxiety in urban India. Large numbers of students who have completed their Class XII examinations, and their parents, are on tenterhooks. The only exceptions are the few who have already obtained admission into professional courses in engineering, medicine or law through entrance exams that are an almost Darwinian selection process.

An overwhelming proportion of school leavers, however, seek admission to undergraduate courses in social sciences, humanities, sciences and commerce. But undergraduate colleges are mostly poor in provincial cities and simply do not have enough places in metropolitan cities. Declining academic standards, everywhere, accentuate the problem, as talented students migrate intensifying competition for places in good institutions.

At the University of Delhi, for example, those with 90 percent marks, or even 95 percent, cannot be sure about getting admission to a college and subject of their choice, while those with 70 percent marks can be sure that it is almost impossible for them to get admission. Surprise turns into shock and anguish turns into despair. For those excluded, no consolation can suffice. Yet, it is important to understand why this is happening.

It would seem that marks awarded to students in Class XII seem to increase year after year. This is simply grade inflation. For a long time, the school examination system was perceived to be subjective and error prone. In order to address this problem, CBSE tried to make the examination system as objective as possible to neutralise error or bias recognising the reality that the quality, or conscientiousness, of teachers who graded scripts is so uneven. In this endeavour, CBSE did succeed. But the objective nature of questions and answers led to grade inflation.

With the passage of time, students helped by their schools and private tutors mastered the art of writing CBSE examinations. Grade inflation gathered further momentum. Excellence in performance went from 75 per cent to 80 percent through 85 percent to 90 percent and beyond to 95 percent plus. It is not that students got so much better or brighter. Their grades rose steadily, not only at the top but also across the board, even though the quality of the top 1 percent or 5 percent of the students has not changed.

It is no surprise that cut-off points for admission to undergraduate courses rose at the same pace as grade inflation. This was a consequence rather than a cause. As marks obtained in Class XII exams, whether CBSE or State Boards, have climbed over time, so have cut-offs. And it is wrong to blame universities or their undergraduate colleges, in Delhi or elsewhere in India, for this situation. If anything, universities and colleges that adopt cut-offs in school leaving examinations as the criterion for admission are transparent and fair, accountable to both students and parents, in a system that is increasingly susceptible to intervention or manipulation.

The fundamental problem is different. It has two dimensions.

First, the number of school leavers seeking admission to undergraduate courses has increased at an exponential rate. The underlying demographic factor of our increasing young population is the driver. But the growing aspirations of the young also see higher education as the only access to employment possibilities and social opportunities.

Second, the number of places in undergraduate education, apart from seats in sub-standard private institutions, has registered little if any increase. The bottom line is that we simply do not have enough capacity in terms of seats for undergraduate education of an acceptable quality. It is obvious that we need to create far more opportunities in higher education for young people. Until that happens, the situation can only worsen.

The problem of admissions is far more acute in the top ten, or fifteen, established undergraduate colleges, particularly at the University of Delhi, where places are limited but demand is enormous because these few institutions provide an imprimatur. Their brand equity opens up a vista of opportunities for their graduates. They draw aspiring students almost like magnets. Their attraction has become even stronger over time because of the sorry state of institutions that were in the premier league not so long ago. There has been a steady decline in these institutions outside Delhi, in Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Pune, Allahabad, or even Patna. Thus, students from elsewhere in India also flock to Delhi in search of educational

opportunities. It is not that the University of Delhi, or its colleges, have got better. It is just that others have got worse.

What is to be done? The challenge in undergraduate education is to increase opportunities without diluting standards. This means increasing the number of places for students in our megacities. But it is neither feasible nor desirable to expand capacities by increasing the intake in existing colleges or the number of affiliated colleges in existing universities. Both are already stretched beyond limits. And governments, centre and states alike, simply do not have the resources to finance such expansion.

It is imperative that we establish a Central Board, as also State Boards, of Undergraduate Education, which would set standards, curriculum and examinations. These boards would be empowered to grant affiliations to undergraduate colleges, much like CBSE does for schools. Such colleges could be established by the government, the private sector, or public-private-partnerships. The time has come to think big and think long.

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