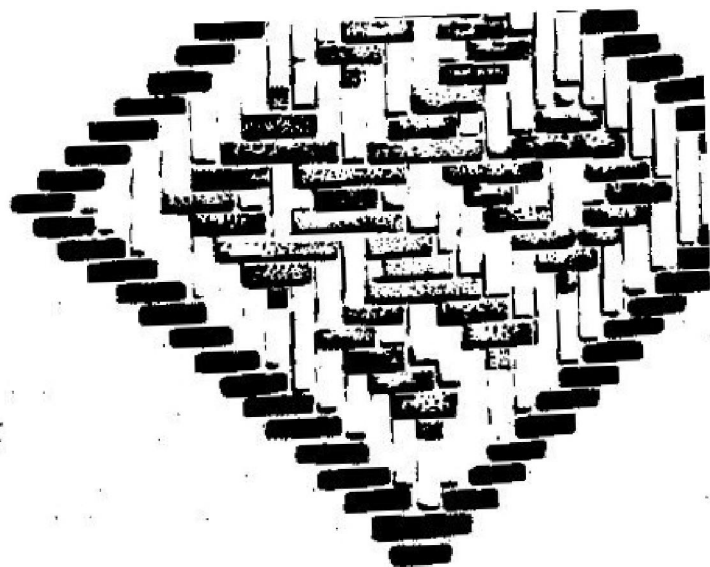


*That Higher Education in India  
is riddled with problems and crises  
is universally admitted.  
But sincere attempts have not been  
forthcoming towards a proper assessment  
of the situation and  
a meaningful solution of the problems.  
Here is a comprehensive,  
though brief, look at the scene.*



## **SOME PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA.**

**PROF. K.A. JALEEL.**

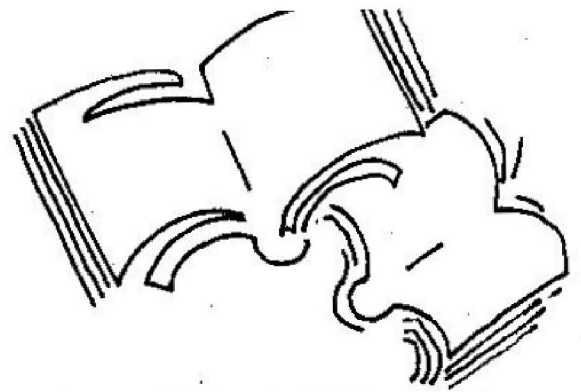
The document issued by UGC entitled "A policy Frame" on the eve of the 6th Plan says - "The system of higher education is now in a state of crisis, due to uncontrolled unplanned expansion, inadequate inputs in terms of money, materials and talents, falling standard in a large proportion of institutions, weakening of student motivation, increase of educated unemployed etc". The list of causes for the collapse of Indian Higher education can be further lengthened with items like the following: the breakdown of the examination system, the failure of the affiliation pattern, the negligence of research, the absence of a meaningful pattern of governance in Universities and Colleges and above all the prevailing atmosphere of corruption and low standards in administration in the outside polity and slow economic growth in the country despite the several Five Year Plans.

### **1. The Colonial origin and its Impact on Quality**

Higher education in India is not a natural outcome of the indigenous system of learning. It is the result of certain policy decisions of the Colonial Government. In 1813, the charter of the East India Company contained a clause to the effect that a sum of not less than Rs. One Lakh "shall be set apart each year to be applied to the revival and improvement of Literature and encouragement of learned natives and for the introduction and promotion of (the) science." The money was spent mostly on teaching classical languages (Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit) and on translations. In 1835 came the famous minute of Macaulay proposing English as the medium of education and creating a class of men "though Indian by birth English in taste", who will be suitable to man the lower rungs of the colonial administration. The focus of the debate at

that time was whether to have Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit or English as medium. Men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy strongly pleaded for English and European Science and did not have any sympathy for the native learning which he thought was largely "empty and vain subtleties". It has to be conceded that enlightened Indian opinion was in favour of English education and European science. The new education became a passport for entrance in Government Service and its emphasis was on literary subjects, not on science or a preparation for life.

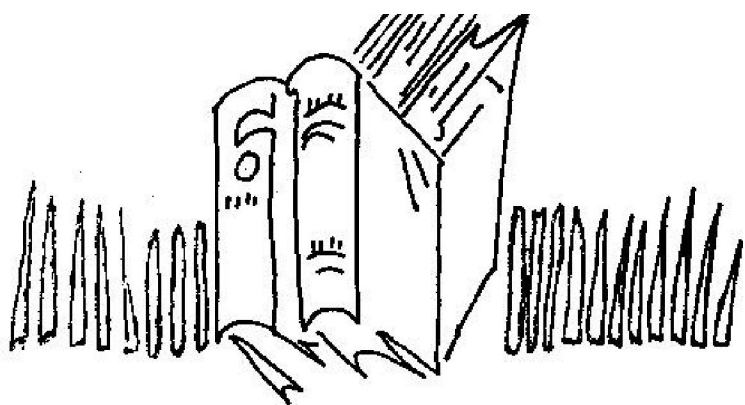
Wood's despatch of 1954 made certain recommendations which led to the establishment of three presidential Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1957. These Universities were not modelled on the traditions of English Universities such as Oxford or Cambridge or Scottish Universities. They were modelled on the pattern of London University (with independent Colleges and the University functioning as an Examining Body). The London University underwent major changes soon, but these were not introduced in the Indian system. They continued to be examining bodies, and all teaching was carried on in the affiliating colleges. Any keen observer at that time would have felt the vast difference between the Colonial Indian education and the Education in English Universities - Lord Curzon was struck by this difference and recorded as follows. "How different is India! Here the University has no corporate existence in the same sense of the term (as in Oxford and Cambridge), it is not a collection of buildings, it is scarcely even a site. It is a body that controls courses in affiliated Colleges. They are not part of it. They are frequently not in the same city, sometimes not in the same province". Some efforts were made to correct, this by setting up Universities such as Lucknow, Benares and Aligarh but by and large the affiliation of University became the pattern for the country. The words in the 1913 Policy resolution of Government of India have been prophetic - "The day is probably far distant when India will be able to dispense altogether with the affiliating Universities". Indeed the day is far distant. Today we have more than 5500 affiliated Colleges whereas in 1913 there were only two dozens of them. It was not merely the affiliating pattern that affected adversely Indian education, but the low standards aimed at, right from the beginning. After matriculation, which meant 10 years schooling, students were given a two years Intermediate course and a two year Degree course. This was of a much lower standard than the Degree courses of 3 years in English Universities. So the Indian Degree was already devalued from the very beginning. Many of the defects of University education today can be thus traced back to the Colonial Origin - the University as an examining body, the dubious role of the affiliated Colleges, the shortened degree course and learning not rooted in the culture of the Land. About this last point, the remarks of Sir Eric Ashby are worth quoting - "This failure of the University to meet the challenge of Indian



Society has many complex causes, but among the causes are undoubtedly the decisions made between 1835 and 1854, the exclusion from University Studies, for half a century, the whole of oriental learning and culture and to purvey to Hindus and Muslims a history and philosophy whose roots lie exclusively on the Mediterranean and in Christianity, to communicate the examinable skeleton of European civilization without ensuring that the values and standards, which give flesh to these bones are communicated too; to set up the external paraphernalia of a University without the warmth and fellowship of academic Society; these are the handicaps against which Indian Universities are still struggling and which prevent the University from becoming the centre and focus of India's intellectual life." (The Bulletin of International Association of Universities, Nov. 1962.)

## 2. The explosion of Numbers

Even though the serious shortcomings of the educational system were very much debated in the country during the Freedom struggle, after independence the system was allowed to expand, without let or hindrance and without any major reform. At the time of freedom in 1947, there were 20 Universities with a student population of about 1.8 Lakhs. In 40 years the number of Universities and deemed Universities and Degree granting Institutes has risen to 160, and the students to more than 36 lakhs. The number of affiliated Colleges has risen from less than 500 to more than 5500. The period can be called the "era of higher education" if quantitative expansion is the criteria. By and large, this expansion has outstripped facilities and has a deleterious effect on standards. The expansion has been too rapid in the arts and commerce courses for the first degree. It was not based on the enrollment capacities of these institutions, nor on the employment potential. It was the result of the pressure of public demand for expansion. The Education Commission had recommended certain controls in the expansion of higher education and the starting of Universities and Colleges. They had projected an average growth of 5.3 per cent and estimated the number of students by 1985 to be 22 lakhs, whereas the actual rise was of a much higher rate and the number stood at 35 lakhs in 1985.



When the Commission Report was published the number of Universities (in 1966) was 66. Nearly 100 more Universities and Institutes came into being in the last 20 years in spite of the cautious growth recommended by the Commission. Another dilemma is the growth of what are called non-viable Colleges, with enrollment of less than 500 students. Such Colleges constitute about a third of the total number and are considered to be a strain on the resources and a drag on standards.

This is one side of the picture. Enrollment in higher education in India is not high in comparison to other countries. In India it is about 4.8 per cent of the age group 18-21. In U.S.A. it is 37% of the age group and in U.K. it is 13.5%, in Japan 27% and U.S.S.R. and East European countries around 7% of the age group. Hence the numbers in the Indian higher education system cannot be deemed to be too high and it is also difficult to stop further expansion. The problem in India is unplanned growth, the paucity of resources for maintenance of quality and the incapacity of the economic system to absorb the trained man-power. There has never been any serious effort, nor does it appear to be feasible, to limit the expansion to the man-power needs. Firstly there is no accurate forecast of man-power needs on a longtime basis, nor is there a determined effort to regulate admission to various sectors of higher education according to need-based projections.

### 3. Breakdown of the Affiliation System

Higher education in India is virtually carried on in the affiliated Colleges. More than 85 per cent of the first Degree students and more than half the students in Post graduate courses are in the affiliated Colleges. The affiliated college is a peculiar phenomenon in the Indian subcontinent. It is an unfortunate creation of the colonial times. It has no parallel in the British Universities, or elsewhere. When they were small in number in each University, they had a functional relationship with the parent University. But as these numbers grew and they became heterogeneous, naturally that relationship became tenuous and mechanical and somewhat illusory. Though conditions are laid down for affiliation, they are rarely fulfilled and the Universities riddled with numerous functions

and a multitude of problems can hardly even take a serious view of the matter. The Universities do little more than lay down the syllabus and conduct the exam as best as they can and the Colleges at best function as coaching establishments. Even this last function is now largely carried out by other agencies like tutorial Colleges and ramshackle "parallel" Colleges in Kerala.

Many proposals have been made for the improvement of the condition of Colleges such as UGC finance for libraries, laboratories, hostels, faculty improvement and improvement of teaching of sciences and the humanities such as GOSIP, COHSIP. While these certainly have helped to prevent the collapse of the system, it is not easy to say that there has been a remarkable general improvement in collegiate education.

The Education Commission recommended and the UGC decided to implement the programme of selecting a good number of Colleges for autonomy in the matter of framing courses and syllabuses, conducting exams and deciding methods of teaching etc. However there were few takers for the scheme during the 5th and 6th Plan. Only 24 Colleges, in Tamil Nadu mainly, were given autonomous status till the end of VI Plan. In the VII Plan, it is proposed to select 500 Colleges for autonomy and liberal financial aid is offered for such Colleges. It is not easy to predict the outcome of this substantial investment in about 500 Colleges, but it should be remembered that 500 Colleges out of 5500 constitute but a very small number and by and large the system will remain unaltered, in spite of this outlay. A more radical approach is necessary if higher education in this country is to be saved - an approach that will alter the condition of all Colleges - in a very short span of time. This calls for more resources and a greater will-power than are available at the moment.

### 4. Low Investment in Education

Starting with the "not less than Rs. One Lakh" syndrome of 1913, India never spent on education enough money commensurate with its importance. Total expenditure on education in 1950-51 was Rs. 140 crores, being 1.2% of the G.N.P. It is now of the order of 6000 crores, about 3% of the G.N.P. Plan expenditure has also not been high. While in the 1st Plan education had a share of 7.6% in successive plans the share became smaller and smaller and in the Vth Plan it was only 2.6%. In the 7th Plan there has been a slight increase, but still it is less than 3%. The provision for education and culture and youth welfare is 6286 crores. About 20 to 25% of the Plan expenditure has been set apart for higher education and science. There has been some criticism of the low share of Plan expenditure for Primary Education. While this is true, it is due to the low allotment in the Plan to the

education sector as a whole and not to high allocation for higher education. The Education Commission had pleaded for a minimum investment of 6% of the G.N.P. for education. There is no country in the world, barring Burma and Afganistan, which spends less than 3% of the G.N.P. on education. Most countries of the world spend 6 to 8% of their G.N.P. on education, both developed and developing nations. Egypt and Kenya spend 8% of G.N.P, Cuba 12% and Norway and Sweden 9% (vide UNESCO statistics).

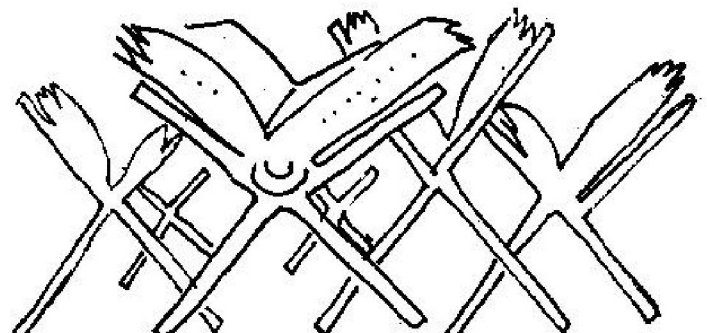
In India the allotment for higher education has always remained too meagre for sustained qualitative improvement. Till 1976 education was a state-subject. The resources of the states have always remained extremely limited and this has adversely affected education. Even after education was placed in the concurrent list, the situation has not changed because there has not been any substantial change in the flow of Central funds for education. The Education Commission recommended the establishment of 5 or 6 major Universities in the country and resort to selective admission to the Universities, so that quality can be raised in some centres with available resources. They also relied on the development of selected Departments as centres of Advanced study. The idea of Major Universities died a natural death, selective admission remains a dream and centres of advanced study are limping on without making much of a mark in the vast concourse of mediocrity. Unless the present pattern is radically changed, there is no likelihood of Indian education making any rapid strides in qualitative improvement to catch up with the rest of the world.

## 5. Falling Standards

Educational standard is a somewhat elusive conception and different people may mean different things by 'standard'. But there seems to be no doubt about the level of our first degrees in arts and science. As noted earlier the colonial rulers who set up the first Universities did not intend to copy the better Universities in England and they devised a degree course of shorter duration, and lesser aims. It was exam. centered. Post independent efforts did not materially alter the situation. In fact more adverse trends developed, such as lack of motivation due to educated unemployed and politicization of campuses and explosion of numbers. In the words of the Education Commission: "In international comparison it would be wrong to compare our first degrees in arts, commerce or science with the corresponding first degrees of educationally advanced countries, what is really comparable is our second degree in arts, Commerce and Science and first degrees in agriculture, Engineering and Medicine with the first degrees given by Universities in the educationally advanced countries." (Vide 12.04(2) page 302 of Education Commission Report 1966) A similar observation was made earlier by the University Education Commission

(1948). If first degree in Arts, Science and Commerce are considered outside the range of University education, then the number of students in the higher education sector will be only less than 6 lakhs constituting less than 1% of the age group. Instead of explosion of members we come to the opposite conclusion, that "the overall expansion of higher education in India is too meagre." (Education Commission Report).

The Constitution of India (1950) had laid down as a function of the Central Government "the Co-ordination, determination and maintenance of standards" in University education. In pursuance of this, the Centre brought forward in 1951 the Indian Universities Bill to establish Indian Universities Council to regulate the working of the Universities with power to issue direction and to cancel degrees if necessary. There was a hue and cry in the name of University autonomy against this proposed legislation. The Centre did not pursue this legislation and instead established the University Grants Commission with power to co-ordinate and determine standards and also to make available Central funds to the Universities. The UGC made use of whatever limited funds were assigned to it, largely for the maintenance of the Central Universities being the first charge on its funds and the rest was distributed to other Universities and the Colleges. The funds were too meagre and the demands too many to make any visible impact upon the system, though, no doubt marginal improvements were effected. But in the matter of determination and maintenance of standards, the impact of the UGC was even less than marginal. In fact some of the efforts of the U.G.C. to raise standards have even resulted in the opposite effect. UGC's insistence on Ph.D Qualification for teachers had led to a sudden spurt in the demand for Ph.D Degree programmes. Soft options were resorted to in many places and this has been a source of anxiety even for the UGC. New schemes such as National tests at the Degree and Post graduate stage are under consideration and nationwide tests for selection of Research scholars have already been implemented. These are desperate remedies and amount only to tinkering with the problem. Ad hoc tests can hardly be a sufficient guarantee for good education.



## 6. The Collapse of the Examination System

The failure of the examination system in the Universities has received wide attention and has been studied exhaustively by Commissions and experts and various remedies have been proposed. There is little sense left in the external examinations, and the way in which they are conducted. There is enormous wastage, which at the Degree stage is even as high as 50%. With the prevailing affiliating pattern, alternative methods such as semester system, continuous assessment, grade system have been difficult to operate with any degree of credibility. Many Universities which have resorted to new methods of evaluation have burnt their fingers and have been forced to make a hasty retreat. Reform of exam is not possible in isolation. There has to evolve one intergrated process of teaching, learning and evaluation.

## 7. The Medium of Instruction

The medium of education is still an unresolved problem in Indian Colleges and Universities. On the theoretical plane, there is wide agreement that the medium of education should be same both at school and college and that it should be the mothertongue or regional language. The development of the modern Indian languages is linked with their place in the educational system, particularly the Universities. It is also necessary to bring the elite and the masses nearer. It is necessary for the wider dissemination of scientific knowledge which is essential for the general development of the Indian people as well as industrial and agricultural progress. Besides the medium of education should be such as to enable easy acquisition of knowledge and facilitate clarity of thought and expression with precision and vigour. The choice of a foreign language as medium compels the student to concentrate on cramming instead of mastering the subject matter. Therefore the choice of the regional language medium is an inescapable necessity. However there are many anxieties regarding this. There is fear about the fragmentation of the intellectual community within the country into regional groups, and their isolation

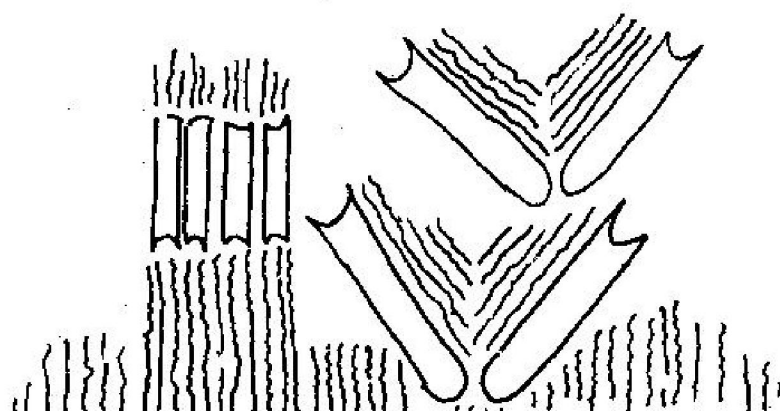
from the international community of scholars and scientists. There is also the grim reality of poverty of literature in the higher branches of knowledge in the regional languages. There is the feeling that a common medium such as Hindi should be developed within the country to replace English. The situation is fluid and uncertain even today with English remaining the more acceptable medium in the central Universities and all India institutions. A further complication is brought about by the network of Central schools, Public schools, English medium schools and now Navodaya Schools which are promoting the English medium even at the secondary level. If intellectual progress and the spread of science and creativity are to be established, there is no doubt that the primacy of place must be for the regional language. The Central Government and the State Governments and the Universities must adopt a firm policy regarding this. Situated as we are today, we have to adopt a policy of bilingualism, English and the regional language the Regional language as main medium of education and expression and English as the link language within the country and for communion with the outside world.

## 8. Universities and Research

In an age characterized by science and technology research is a necessary precondition for all kinds of human endeavour-not only for industrial, agricultural progress. The advanced nations have invested tremendous resources both in money and manpower for scientific research. Some advanced countries spend even more than three per cent of their G.N.P. in research alone. And their rate of investment is still on the increase.

A major weakness of Indian education and research is the relatively small part played by the Universities in research. Before independence there was little attention paid to research in Universities. The very few instances of rare achievements by Indian scientists were the result of lone endeavours, against heavy odds. When India became free, the outlay on Research was merely Rs. 2.5 crores. It has grown in the post independent period and at present it is around Rs. 2000 crores. But it is still a very low figure, being less than 1% of the G.N.P. But more than 95% of this amount is spent by agencies other than the Universities, such as the C.S.I.R., Atomic Energy Commission, I.C.A.R., Defence Research, ICMR, the Geological Survey of India etc..., The National laboratories, which are the main institutions of research are visually grand institutions but the research output is not cost effective

It is not often realised how poorly Indian University Research Departments are equipped, and how small is the investment. In the 7th Plan U.G.C. set apart only Rs. 75 crores for research Development in all Universities together. It is heartening to know that this has been raised further now. The Universities have to play a key



role in the development and improvement of the scientific tradition of the country and the organisation of socially advanced scientific community. It is therefore appropriate that the premier role of research in Universities should be realised by Government and a far greater share of research funds should be channelled to the Universities. They should be brought to the "centre stage in research" as proposed in the new education policy.

## 9. The Governance of Universities

Since Universities began in colonial times, the hangover of imperial legislation for the first Universities still haunts the modern Universities. There is an exaggerated emphasis on administration and a complex formation which prevents a clear view of what is happening. The system of controls is outmoded and the cluster of confused rules lead to red tape and pedestrian and unthinking audit procedures, which stifle academic initiative. It is most distressing that new Universities copy the old statutes and rules of older Universities which were merely public offices for examination and award of degrees.

Gaudino in his book *The Indian University* said:- 'Nobody takes the senate seriously'. Ironically enough, the UGC has come to the same conclusion and has proposed the abolition of the Senate or constituting senates as advisory bodies with nominated personnel. This is a swing of opinion to another extreme. The UGC's own earlier document, the result of the work of a prestigious Commission headed by Justice Ganjenoragadkar entitled "Governance of Universities" however gave very elaborate directions regarding the powers, constitution and functioning of the various bodies. This represented the accepted authoritative position of the UGC till all on a sudden it changed over to nominated Syndicates and Senates and other radical changes. While reform was needed and radical changes were essential in the governance of Universities and in their administrative methods, the present proposals of the UGC are not likely to improve matters. The dependence on present day Chancellors or Ministers for nomination of personnel, with a view to depoliticising University campuses and administration shows only the Commission's innocence and total ignorance of the state of affairs in the country. While the electoral process has led to problems for the proper functioning of Universities, the remedy certainly does not lie in nomination in the present day political culture of the country. A more thoughtful approach is necessary. A new model Act for Universities must be evolved to suit modern conditions, without the hangover of the Colonial Acts. A new set of financial rules and audit procedure appropriate for teaching and research establishments should be devised, without the inhibition of Government rules and regulations.

## 10. The system should be made to work

The Indian Higher education scene presents a very uneven picture of a few good institutions and vast body of institutions where all norms of good academic work are undermined. This is true of teachers and students and the evaluation system and of research. There is great need not only to increase the investment in education but also for discipline in the system. Even in the matter of number of working days, the wastage is enormous. While Universities and Colleges are expected to put in a minimum of 180 days exclusive of exam days, the actual number of days of work is often even less than hundred. In Kerala for example post graduate courses begin only in the second half of the academic year owing to delayed publication of Degree exam results. The Report of the West Bengal Education Commission 1987 mentions the case of teachers putting in only "90 hours" or less in a year (of 45 minutes duration). This may be a very extreme case, but it highlights the fact that our Colleges are functioning far below their potential. There are many Universities which were often years behind the schedule for the conduct of their examination. By and large the system of higher education in the country have broken down. Planned effort on a consistent and a long term basis, say for a period of 15 to 20 years is necessary to put Indian Higher education on an even keel. Apart from diversion of substantially higher resources it is also necessary for all concerned—the Governments at the Centre and the States, the educational administrations, the teacher researchers and students and also the society in general to play their part well for the purpose.

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