

The great exodus

How India's education and employment crises result in lakhs of students heading to foreign universities



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A RECENT REPORT estimates that about 8 lakh students travel abroad for higher education every year and spend \$28 billion or 1 per cent of our GDP on this. Of this, about \$6 billion are fees that go to foreign universities. This is about Rs 45,000 crore, which is adequate capital to start and run 10 new IITs, IISERs or JNUs or any such elite institution every year. And yet, by the recent CAG report, the eight new IITs started in the period 2008-2009 are not doing well at all. The clutch of new private universities too has not managed to dent the above exodus of students and wealth. Thus, even after 70 years of Independence, and the last eight years of vigorous policy initiatives, we neither have *aatmanirbharta* nor a value proposition in higher education. Why is that?

Firstly, it's about jobs. From the income tax department data of the last few years, we see that there are about 3 crore taxpayers. Taking two-thirds of these as the number of salaried people and assuming an average tax-paying life of 20 years, we see that there are only about 10 lakh fresh jobs available each year. This includes both public and private sector jobs. More data from the income tax department show that of these, there are about 3 lakh "good" jobs which pay Rs 5 lakh per annum (LPA) or more, and 30,000 "posh" jobs which pay a starting salary of Rs 10 lakh-plus per annum. Of the 3 lakh good jobs, about 1 lakh come from the IT majors. The posh jobs come from multinational companies and are in marketing, finance, IT and global engineering services. Hardly any Indian company serving the Indian customer offers a starting salary of Rs 10 lakh per annum.

From the MHRD data, we see that India graduated about 30 lakh students last year from about 45,000 colleges. Given the recent employment data, there may be about 1 crore unemployed graduates seeking jobs. This is 10 times the number of salaried jobs, 30 times the good jobs and 300 times the number of posh jobs available every year. Now, it is impossible for companies or state agencies to meaningfully interview such a large number of applicants for every job. The short-listing task for private companies is done by branded institutions and colleges. Good jobs are concentrated in about 800 top colleges and posh jobs in 80-100 elite colleges such as the IITs and IIMs, St Stephen's in Delhi, Presidency College in Kolkata and emerging elite private universities. It is only here that good companies will go and recruit, and where a student has a hope that her CV will be read. And hence the madness of competitive exams, closing ranks and coaching classes in high school and placement and packages in college. If there was an option, no wise parent would want to put her child through this ordeal. And that partly explains the flight of students and capital to foreign shores.

Sadly, the central and state governments also rely on such exams for their recruitment, for example, even the IAS. Can capabilities in science, economics or administrative ability be tested through exams with odds of 1-in-100? The answer is a firm no. The JEE is perhaps the



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single biggest disaster in India's higher education, and yet there is no formal analysis of this exam in the public domain. Students should ask our PM for his opinion on this in his *pariksha pe charcha*.

But it's also about knowledge. Why are there so few jobs? The answer to that, our economists tell us, are outdated labour laws, inadequate investments and bureaucratic cholesterol. That may be, but here too, there is a deeper connection with higher education and it begins with the job description. This is the work that a person on a job must do through the week or month. Consider, for example, a bus driver in MSRTC, the Maharashtra state regional bus service. Her weekly schedule, number of hours of service, the route etc., along with other job descriptions within MSRTC must be carefully designed. Together, they decide the efficiency, profitability and societal value provided by MSRTC. The performance of the enterprise needs to be periodically measured and analysed and the job descriptions updated. Such studies should be commissioned by the concerned IAS officer and done by the regional universities and consultancy firms.

Unfortunately for MSRTC, and for most state agencies such as irrigation, water supply or city administrations, this has not happened and they are now in a deadly spiral of decreasing efficiency and mounting losses. MSRTC itself faces a crippling strike and 93,000 jobs are at risk.

In fact, most job descriptions in the public sector have remained stagnant since independence. Thus, there is no statistician in the district public health department nor an economist in the agriculture department. If these had been there, we would have a much better understanding of the epidemic and its impact on our society.

But the role of our elite institutions is all the more crucial in emerging areas. Take, for exam-

ple, air pollution. An ICMR study estimates that air pollution caused about 1.7 million deaths and Rs 2.6 lakh crore worth of lost output. Ideally, if the professional know-how and business models had been there, this could have been a Rs 26,000 crore industry of measuring, mitigating, and managing air pollution and employing 26,000 people in posh jobs. And yet, that has not happened. There is a National Clean Air Programme that has offered Rs 300 crore to over 100 city administrations across India to initiate a basic study of the problem in their cities. That is languishing because of bureaucratic sloth, incompetence but principally because there is no clear idea on what is to be done.

Thus, there was and is a clear role for the elite central institutions, the IITs, the IISERs, JNU and others. They should look at the problems of the day, formalise them, and convert them into business models and job definitions which offer solutions that deliver value. They should then have supported local institutions and entrepreneurs in the deployment of these solutions. They have missed doing that. Instead, they have chosen to become accessories to the globalisation of knowledge and a highly unequal system of delivering the benefits of science to the people. As a result, they have very little primary experience in solving the hard problems that the world faces today. In short, our professors have very little to teach.

So, it is no surprise that so many of our students choose to go abroad to study and eventually work there. Are *achhe din* here for these professionals to return? To find meaningful work in solving the problems that we face? To come back home and raise a family? The answer lies in our Air Quality Index, an environmental marker of the social reality we have collectively accepted.

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