

A disconnected pedagogy

The gap between jobs, needs and knowledge, and the absence of role models, could be turning India's demographic dividend into a nightmare



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SHOULD THERE BE a National Curriculum? And if yes, what should be its guiding principles? Given our heroic times, we may perhaps demand that it should be “in the spirit of the Constitution, respect the idea of India and serve its people without discrimination”.

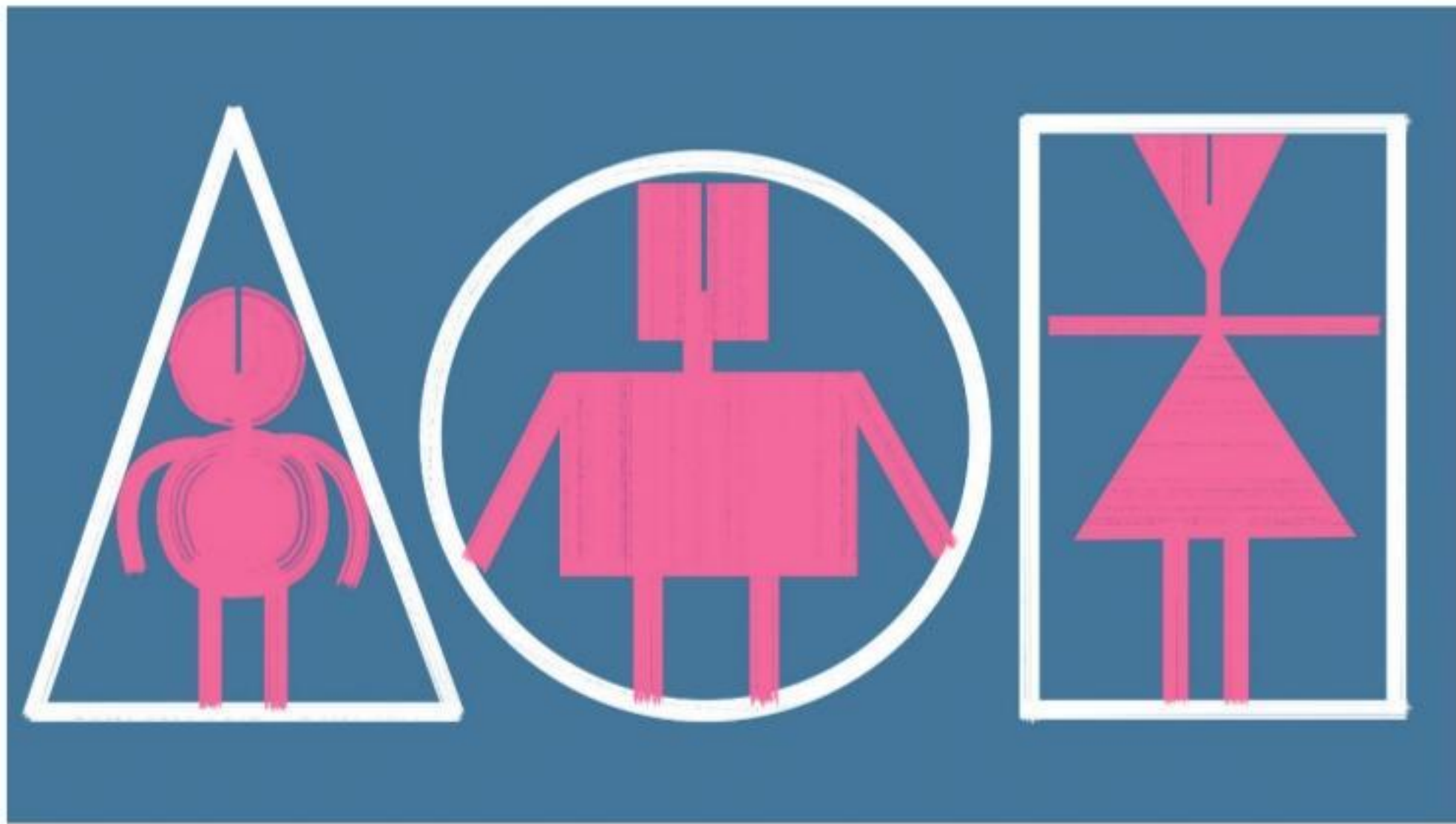
It turns out that we already have a national curriculum. It is a fixed set of topics prescribed in all subjects – from physics to geography, and engineering to planning. And it is taught in English at our elite MHRD institutions. It has not been designed by politicians but by our elite professors and bureaucrats: It is what they believe the nation really needs to know. It is imposed on ordinary students and parents through competitive exams and on colleges and universities through various central regulatory agencies, most egregiously, through the UGC-NET, an objective-type multiple-choice (!) exam that decides who is fit to be a college teacher. Much of this does not apply to elite MHRD institutions. For the rest of us, what is taught and who can teach it, has already been decided. What remains for us is to see how it serves our people.

We already know that the national engineering curriculum fails miserably in meeting regional needs. Engineering for Himachal Pradesh needs to be different from that in Maharashtra or Kerala. And it must address the needs of core industries, local enterprises, the provisioning of basic amenities such as water and energy. None of this is in our national curricula or practised at the IITs. Moreover, there is no mechanism for engineering colleges to work with their communities.

Coming to the social sciences, let us look at the UGC-NET curricula, which is largely what is taught in our elite institutions. At the BA level, it is divided into several disciplines – for instance, political science, sociology and economics. This is unfortunate since much of life in India is interdisciplinary. As a result, many activities such as preparing the balance sheet for a farmer, or analysing public transport needs, and development concerns such as drinking water or even city governance, are given a miss.

The UGC-NET curricula in economics has 10 units, the very last unit is Indian Economics. Unit 8 is on Growth and Development Economics, where the student must know Keynes, Marx, Kaldor, and others. There are various mathematical models, for example the IS-LM macroeconomic model, whose validity in the Indian scenario is questionable. The study of sectors such as small enterprises or basic economic services such as transportation is absent. The District Economic Survey, an important document prepared regularly by every state for each district, is not even mentioned.

Moving to sociology, we see that as with economics, there is no preamble nor a list of textbooks or case studies. Again, there are 10 units, and each unit is a list of about 30 topics. Unit 1 is “Sociological Theory” which is a breathtaking list of 22 thinkers from the



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West, starting from Durkheim, wending through Foucault and ending with Castells. We then have six Indian thinkers – the usual four, Gandhi, Ambedkar, G S Ghurye and M N Srinivas, and two others. Under “Social Institutions”, we have a list of timeless words such as culture, marriage, family and kinship. Peasant occurs two times, but there is no farmer. Here is a sample question: “Who uses the phrase ‘fetishisms of commodities’ while analysing social conditions?” followed by four names.

There is also no mention of important data sets such as the census or developmental programmes including MGNREGA in either curricula.

But why blame a bureaucracy like the UGC. They are merely following what the IAS or the elite institutions ask in their entrance exams, albeit in an essay format. For example, see Question 1 from the 2018 JNU entrance exam for MA in sociology: “How did Emile Durkheim develop his ideas of social integration and structural-functionalism?” For thousands of non-metropolitan students, this is rote learning, unconnected with the practice of sociology or their own situation. If indeed Durkheim is useful, why not ask “Apply Durkheim’s theory to a social context of your choice”. Question 2 is on comparing Marx with Weber on capitalism. Question 3 tests adherence to a pet discourse: “How do caste and class intersect in the field of education and reproduce social inequalities?” The fact is that the bottom 80 per cent, that is, the vernacular society and its caste apparatus, now owns less than 20 per cent of India’s wealth. Moreover, the roots of this inequality lie not in history, but in the construction of Indian modernity.

Indeed, the training at our elite institutions, and consequently, in the national curricula, is not to empower ordinary students to probe their lived reality. Or to contribute professionally and constructively to the development problems around us. Rather, it is to perpetuate a peculiar intellectualism which is divorced from the community in which these institutions are embedded. Hardly any social science department bothers to translate key state government documents, articles or

texts from the vernacular press to English, let alone study them. This shortage of facts leads to a peculiar ghetto mentality which privileges classroom discourse and critique as the primary way of generating knowledge and dissent as an important output of the university. They forget Kosambi, who said the cognition of the material condition and its measurement by the people is the first step to freedom.

Thus, the social science curriculum has the same structural limitations as engineering. The national curriculum today is antithetical to the idea of India as an organic union of intelligent people, diverse in their ways of life and their geography. It diminishes their intellectual capability and hinders their right to pursue their culture and improve their material conditions. That is the real reason why higher education has become a waste of money. As per the Constitution, higher education is the business of the states. The role of the Centre is circumscribed by items 62-66 of Schedule VII. Much of the conduct of MHRD and its institutions, and certainly competitive exams, is against the spirit of the Constitution.

What is to be done? One-nation-one-curriculum certainly has some advantages in enabling mobility of some jobs, especially in the national bureaucracy and a multinational economy. But it is at the cost of the developmental needs of the states and the emergence of good jobs there. This asymmetry is behind the aspirational dysfunction in higher education. It is this disconnect between jobs, needs and knowledge and the absence of role models, which is slowly turning our demographic dividend into a nightmare on the streets.

Our top-down elite bureaucrats and professors are not about to loosen their hold over what is taught in the states. The way ahead is political, perhaps for a committee of chief ministers, assisted by regional experts, to decide how to rebalance the role of MHRD. The European Union offers many models.

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