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NET, IAS, State-SET (KSET, WBSET, MPSET, etc.), GATE, CUET, Olympiads etc. Essay: Education as a Short of Commodity Today

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Over the past three decades, there has been a sea change in the attitudes of people connected with education. Teachers, administrators and planners, students and parents are all looking at education as a sort of commodity that leads on to better earnings and status in society. It is not surprising that it is so. But what is unfortunate is another development leading to an attitudinal change in society. The intrinsic value of education is no longer recognized although pious platitudes are mouthed quite frequently.

The main reason is that the flux of change has caught up with education much more dramatically than with other areas of activity. While the demand for education has been growing steadily in the developing countries including India, quality has not kept pace with it. Another factor, and an equally disturbing one, is the politicization of the campuses. Not only colleges and universities, even high schools seem to be getting infected by this virus. It is not uncommon to find on many campuses pedagogues espousing the cause of one political party or the other, not in any academic sense, but with a fervor that would do a party spokesman proud.

About 30 years ago, student unions and debating societies discussed live political issues. The debates were of a high level with the participants thorough in their home work. Communication skills too were good and even those who set their sights on politics as a career went through this exercise with earnestness and sincerity. Similarly, mock parliaments marked the academic calendar in many colleges; the professors in charge spent a lot of time and energy guiding students and training them in the art of debating.

These debates attracted a large number of students who came to cheer their compatriots. There was on all sides a desire to learn, be informed and to enlarge the mental horizon. This aspect, which made college life in the fifties and sixties valuable, is sadly missing today on a vast majority of the campuses. Yet another aspect is that the pedagogues were by and large scholars who believed in furthering knowledge. They had an abundant love for their students and could spare time for those who came to clarify their doubts. Thus, the mutual bond of affection and scholarship helped cement a lifelong relationship between the teacher and the taught. This is conspicuous by its absence today.

These losses cannot be counterbalanced by an impressive infrastructure in the form of stately buildings and an array of instruments in laboratories. The human material of the earlier years did in a large measure fulfill the task set out for it, namely becoming teachers in the true sense of the word and this was done in an environment of virtual poverty of hardware. It is here that the mentors of the olden days score over the pedagogues of today. Perhaps, the teachers of these days worked in a spirit of self-effacement. An inexhaustible love for learning characterized their daily schedule and this got transformed into an abiding love for teaching, in a way, this was the next best that one could wish for in the place of the ancient gurukula pattern. But the institutionalized classroom instruction has degenerated in the last three decades or several reasons.

The unholy preoccupation with things that are material which, of course, is the result of the present consumerist trend, the craving to get rich quickly, the closing of the avenues for certain fields of study to the youth who genuinely pine for these and the decadence that has set in society as a result of the erosion of ethical values are to blame. Caste considerations in the selection of candidates to courses and jobs are also contributing factors. Educationists, by and large, feel that this type of affirmative action by the Centre and the State Governments has been carried to the extreme and needs to be modified to meet the aspirations of the rising generation.

It is a pity that parents are now intent on pushing their children into certain grooves of academic activity. This is evident from the obsession of parents with getting for their wards seats in the professional institutions. There are instances of middle class parents becoming almost paranoid about seats in engineering and medical colleges.

The proliferation of these self-financing colleges has in a way satisfied this great demand. But the categorization of seats under the labels free or payment-based and payment has led to an anomalous situation. The students selected under the free seat quotas are forced to pay tuition fees as prescribed for the Government or aided colleges. Often, the hapless scholars have to pay something more on the sly, especially while opting for preferred courses such as computer science and engineering. But those selected under the payment category have to shell out three or four times more. Not unexpectedly, this type of differentiation. Two sets of students paying vastly different fees for the same course. Produces in the minds of the youth a distorted sense of values.

To be fair to the private managements, it must be said that the cost of establishing and running a professional college has gone up steeply in the last few years. Also, the pressure on the managements to improve the facilities has increased, thanks to the statutory bodies such as the All India Council for Technical Education and the Medical Council of India. The objective, no doubt, is to make the errant managements who are in the habit of commercializing education mend their ways. This has had a salutary effect in almost every State where the self-financing colleges came up:

The conduct of examinations by different agencies including the school boards and universities is another prickly issue. In the last few decades, the number of candidates appearing for various public examinations right from the SSLC through the higher

secondary to the degree and postgraduate levels has grown up by leaps and bounds. Indeed, it is becoming unmanageable running into lakhs of candidates in certain categories for any centralized agency such as the school boards.

A strong case can be made out for decentralizing the system taking care at the same time that a modicum of uniformity in evaluation and assessment of answer scripts is maintained. What is to be guarded against is the leakage of question papers that has come to characterize the modern scene. The necessary evil of examinations cannot in the present context be replaced by any other system: The only remedy is to make the entire process, right from the setting up of question papers, invigilation, paper dispatch and valuation to the announcement of results foolproof. Whenever a reexamination is ordered, it is the hardworking, studious candidates who undergo greater hardship. The curbing of malpractices is only one aspect, refining the techniques of evaluation and selection of teachers of integrity to be in charge of the process is the crucial part.

Campus watchers are struck by the distortion that has crept into the academic field in the last three decades, namely the neglect of languages, the humanities and the social sciences. A study of subjects such as history, politics, sociology, economics, psychology, philosophy, languages and literature provides for a deeper understanding of human relationships, behavior and social currents. A majority of students go in for sciences and commerce. While this trend is in consonance with the science and technology age, the skewed preference for these subjects may not in the long run benefit society.

There must be some way of making the humanities attractive to youth, both from the point of view of employment opportunities and from a higher plane. Also, the teachers who handle the subjects must be men and women of exceptional ability, capable of sparking student interest. Unfortunately, such teachers are dwindling in numbers all over the country. A vigorous effort must be made to attract talented youth to the humanities which are essential for the evolution of human development.