

## Why no reform is not an option

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### **Coming to teachers and the quality of teaching. Here, I think, we have a massive crisis on our hands**

I watched with increasing amusement and then disbelief as Delhi University (DU) - one of the premier universities of India - went from a three-year to a four-year and then back to a three-year programme, all within a span of roughly one year. Almost everyone I knew was against what was being attempted and, to me, seemed strangely resistant to change. Few I knew actually took the trouble to understand what was being attempted and why it was absolutely imperative.

I spent five years in Delhi University. I slept through my bachelor's course in economics at the Shri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC). In three years, I had embarrassingly low attendance, though I barely missed a day of college.

As far as academics went, SRCC was a joyless experience - there is no other way to put it. In three years, I can't recall the name of a single professor, so that tells you about the quality of teachers we witnessed. Classes were dull; classrooms depressing. Teachers - who were often absent, much to our delight - just read some notes from drab registers which we were, I presume, meant to take down and memorise closer to our exam dates. It failed to instill any love for the subject in me. What was the best thing about SRCC? The canteen, my peers, the friends I found and the life-long relationships I built.

Although SRCC was enough to put me off the subject for life, I still strayed into Delhi School of Economics (DSE) - the tradeoff was between studying further or entering the workforce, so I chose the easier option. I must admit that DSE in those days did have some professors who managed to keep you awake (even if confused). There were even some teachers whose lectures were looked forward to. It had brighter classrooms. Nonetheless, the two years there managed to put me off economics for life. What was the best thing about DSE? Jai Singh's tea stall, my peers, the friends I found and the relationships I built. I never did quite figure whether free trade was passe or not and neither did I care.

Coming back to the reforms that the university was trying to attempt (I keep off Dinesh Singh, the vice-chancellor, as the reforms and the troubles became almost more about him and the silly duration and less about why it was needed), I don't think anything is more needed in India's higher education today than this.

Why? One, the syllabus across subjects is outdated. When we passed out from DSE, students who were interviewed could not answer what GATT or WTO stood for (and I speak of the early 1990s when the topic was at its hottest). If you study a BA Honours in history from DU, the syllabus ends - you are not going to believe your ears - with China and the erstwhile Soviet Union still as communist states. The world may have moved on but, hey, who cares?

Students who pass out from many of these hallowed institutions are usually unemployable. Ask any corporate or consultant who has interviewed a large enough sample. Those who do find jobs are bright in any case and would probably walk off with the assignment even after their schooling. I know children who have dropped out of colleges like St Stephen's and SRCC and left to study overseas because the academic rigour and teacher quality left them cold.

Coming to teachers and the quality of teaching. Here, I think, we have a massive crisis on our hands. Teachers - who are not very highly paid anyway - treat the job as an aside activity and are often found in nearby coaching institutions that have sprung up all over the area. It's not unheard of even principals moonlighting to earn an extra buck. The university sends answer sheets to teachers' houses to be corrected and marked if it wants to declare results on time.

Strangely, absenteeism is usually welcomed because classes, when they happen, are worse. Teaching methods have simply refused to change and usually you are greeted with a bored expression at the front of the room and some dull notes. In some of the lesser known colleges, students spend their time trying to decipher what the teacher has just said; proficiency in the English language is not their strength, although that is the medium they have undertaken to teach in. So, anyone who has spent five years in Delhi University and can't understand why there is a need for reform, come and spend a day with me

