

'Don't send our lads to Britain'

A defense of higher education, R&D in India, the Third World

The following article is excerpted from the April 29 issue of the Indian weekly *New Wave*, where it appeared under the headline "Janata Disruption of Higher Education Very Dangerous." The interview is reprinted by Executive Intelligence Review by special arrangement with *New Wave*.

Every rupee the Government of India invests in education, both at the mass level and higher institutions of learning, is an investment in India's future. This is the assessment of Prof. Nurul Hassan, former Education Minister. Hassan has done an in-depth study of Indian education policy and the pressures it is subjected to. He expresses grave concern for the future of higher education in India. Following is an exclusive interview given by Prof. Nurul Hassan to *New Wave*.

New Wave: Prof. Hassan, you have been involved for a long time with development of education in general, and of higher education, in particular. How do you see its future in India? Is it comparable with any other developing nation?

Nurul Hassan: There have been pressures on the Government of India, in particular, and Indians in general, from the World Bank and those who share its outlook. Very frequently this is expressed in a populist or ultra-left language. It is said that in a country like India, higher education is irrelevant; one should not spend money on higher education; and, the real thing is to spend money on elementary education and on adult education. The advocates of this line think that it is very useful to quote Cuba to Indians and show how Cuba has developed in this regard.

In Cuba I had a long discussion during my recent visit with the Minister of Higher Education. I put straight questions to him and have taken detailed notes of this discussion.

In Cuba, at the moment they have 145,000 university students. In 1985, there will be 300,000 students. Cuba's population is one-fiftieth of India's. If we have to have the same percentage of University students which Cuba has then we should have 80 lakhs [one lakh = 100,000—ed.] of students (multiply 145,000 by 50, it comes to

about 80 lakhs) but we have only 25 lakhs of students and the number has started going down as a result of various curbs imposed—I am myself partly responsible for those curbs.

Rise and fall of undergraduates

When I took over as Minister, the number was 20 lakh students. It went up in my last year, 1976-77, to 26 lakhs. But in 1977-78, it fell to 25.4 lakhs. Soon it will be even less. If you recall the recommendation of the Education Commission, you will find that a growing and developing country like India should have approximately 6 percent of the young people in the age group 18 to 24 in the university. We have only 2.5 percent. I attempted to raise this a little; it went up to 2.9 percent as against 6 percent recommended by the Education Commission. This much for the left leaning elements' criticism.

In regard to secondary education in Cuba, the country has already enrolled about a million students in the secondary stage; again if you multiply this by 50, the number for India should be 50 million. We are near 60 million today. For vocational education at the post-secondary level it is the same level which we should have. Cubans have started very big industries. In our country investment in industries has been actually going down.

I want to make out some basic points. If you take the overall policy of a progressive developing country like Cuba, you realize that it is increasing its investment in higher education in specialization. It has introduced a uniform five year degree course for medicine. The number of institutes of technologies too is going up very rapidly in Cuba while there is a shrinkage in our country.

In the field of research, in addition to what the Ministry of Science and Technology is spending there, the higher education system and particularly the university system, is spending more and more on research and on producing trained research personnel of very high order. In the science and technology plan of the COMECON countries, Cuba has been given an important role in cancer research. So it is the

coordinating authority for cancer research. Without spending money on its university system, Cuba cannot be doing it. So the one thing that the Indian Left knows is that Cuba has liquidated illiteracy, but what they do not know is that Cuba has not done that at the cost of higher education and research.

Backsliding on technical education

New Wave: *Wasn't this Jawaharlal Nehru's outlook?*

Nurul Hassan: The whole country has forgotten what Jawaharlal Nehru used to say about university education, about high quality technological institutions. Today one has to more or less be apologetic for wanting to support higher education. The World Bank people and a very large number of progressive sympathizers, liberals, socialists, communists and intellectuals in the western countries have been taken in by the proposal that research is an expensive business for a country like India. It is too poor a country. Let India feed her millions before going in for a luxury like research. What they do not realize is that if old and primitive technology could have solved the problem of India's poverty, Indian people would not have been poor. As a student of history, I know that the old technology ran out of its usefulness a long time back. A stage came when instead of going forward, the technology started going backward. The World Bank people say "Oh, why are you spending money on research? You should concentrate on other things. If you really want, why don't you send these lads, some of the brilliant lads, to Britain and America and Germany where we have lots and lots of R&D facilities? Why must you attempt to discover what has already been discovered in the rest of the world?"

Basically, whether it is the right wing of the World Bank or whether it is the so-called liberal, progressive, pink, red, ultra red intellectual segment of the western world, there is basic antipathy towards the needs and requirements of this country for higher education and for research.

In our own country, Jawaharlal Nehru was very quick to understand the need for higher education and research and implement a series of plans. And the first to forget this fact was not the right but the left; I do not want to reproach anyone, but I am telling you what I feel about it. Look at the debate in both the Houses of Parliament. Except for some people who were professionally involved with higher education, nobody from any party had a kind word to say in any of the two houses in favor of higher education. This is a very sad state of affairs. Fortunately, while I held the charge of education, I was able to get a substantial increase in allocation for higher education, for Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), for technical education and so on. But in the new dispensation that process has come to a stop....

New Wave: *...What do you see as the key problems in universities today?*

Nurul Hassan: Jawaharlal Nehru University Vice-Chancellor Nag Choudhry was thrown out. Why? He was supposed to have been thrown out by a government which claims to have restored autonomy. How can Morarji Desai, even as the Chancellor, enquire into the affairs of the Jawaharlal Nehru University? Jawaharlal Nehru University is governed by an Act of Parliament. There is no provision for an enquiry in the Act. In the Delhi University, Morarji Desai is not even the Chancellor, and yet he is supposed to be enquiring into the grievances.

What is the whole purpose of this?...

The idea is to sometimes use the students, sometimes use the employees, sometimes use the teachers, sometimes use the local politicians and create such confusion in the universities that no university can perform its legitimate business of teaching and extending the frontiers of learning and knowledge. By raising Centre versus States and other slogans, an attempt is being made to create a situation in which even the few universities that impart quality education are upset and affected.

Case of Swamy

The second aspect of the Janata policy towards universities is to deliberately use communal and revivalist forces, basically to secure greater control over the university affairs. The most interesting example is the Delhi IIT. Subramaniam Swamy was thrown out of Delhi IIT long before the emergency was declared, and his petition before the court of law was also rejected before the declaration of emergency. The entire teaching faculty of the IIT was very happy that this man was thrown out.

Now he has been nominated a member of the Board of Governors of Delhi IIT, by Himachal Pradesh under the provision in which every state government in the region can nominate an educationist of repute to represent it on the Board of Governors. Himachal Pradesh has an RSS Chief Minister and he nominated Subramaniam Swamy. The IIT represented against it and the Janata thought that someone could file a case in the court of law. So promptly the Union Education Minister, in his capacity as Chairman of the Council of IITs, nominated Swamy; under the rules he can nominate any educationist, and Subramaniam Swamy would qualify himself as an educationist of sorts.

Since his nomination the Director has ceased to be effective. The Director thought "Why should I bother, let the IIT go to hell"; and the Dean of Administration feels that the real powers are vested in Subramaniam Swamy. He takes orders from Subramaniam Swamy.

A very brilliant Muslim student, who took his doctorate from IIT, Delhi, was told in so many words that Muslims can now get jobs in Arab countries:

"Why don't you go to one of the Arab countries, you will get a job there? Why do you want a job here?" In IIT, Kharagpur, there is growing harassment of Muslim teachers and students. A news item was published to that effect. Now this revival of communalism is being utilised by the government partly to hound out progressive and secular minded elements in the universities and institutions of higher learning and partly to provide an opportunity to the various actions of the Janata party to establish a tight control over the affairs of universities; IITs and regional colleges.

It was a shocking statement by the Minister of Education that out of 108 universities, only 33 were closed down. The word "only" is very significant. Should one be worried only if 99 had been closed down? This is generally the attitude of the government.

The third major development that has taken place is the reversal, a cautious reversal, of whatever had been done to secularize the education. In Delhi University, for example, well-known members of RSS have been flouting the rules, and even going against expert advice. In the app been openly so. And nobody seems to be worried, "What will the consequences be?" This process of decentralization of education is reflected in the struggle over syllabus courses that have to be introduced from July 1979, but are not allowed to be approved for one reason or another because of the tremendous pressure

from different reactionary elements with the full blessings and backing of the government. In this the RSS has been the most prominent element.

The attempt of the previous government to link up the institutions of higher learning, the research laboratories and actual production units, namely industry and agriculture together, is now being given up by denying funds and making rules more and more bureaucratic. If you have a scandal being investigated every day, who is going to take any risk and why should he? The whole attitude that is developing is: "Why should I care?" It suits all those who are opposed to the idea of working for self-reliance, or for improving the standards of Indian education, or of assuring that an honors graduate of an Indian university can compete on equal terms with an honors graduate of any other university in the world.

Lastly the language issue. Indira Gandhi quite rightly said that along with the policy of making the regional language the medium of instruction, we should ensure that the capability of students in English improves rather than declines. That policy has been reversed. Her policy was that children from the deprived background should be given an opportunity to learn good English. That policy has been totally changed. Now it is regional language for the poor and English for the very rich.

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