

Calcutta Notebook

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Gone are the days of student rebellion. Nor do present generation students know much about the legacy created by the people like Cohn Bendit and Tariq Ali who once stormed campus after campus across Europe in the sixties against the backdrop of all-encompassing socio-economic crisis. Even people like Jean-Paul Sartre believed that society needed to position itself in a permanent state of revolution in order to make progress. His support to the French youth revolt of 1968 was a testimony to his strong belief in social justice as a collective quest. Nearer home students in Kolkata took to the streets in thousands to show their political maturity against the visit of notorious war criminal Robert McNamara who was then World Bank president. And in the late sixties and early seventies bright students and scholars in Bengal and Andhra sacrificed their career and went to village to rediscover the other India with the sole objective of radically changing the society.

What a difference today! Campus politics now-a-days revolves around controlling students union funds, running racket over fresh admission in degree colleges and terrorising professors, principals and administrators for promotion of failed students. Rivalry among politicians in the so-called student organising often leads to violence and it can at worst be described as gang rivalry in campus. Nowhere in the country college students make headlines for noble causes. Outsiders posing as party-deputed whole-timers call the shots and they get their way by perpetually maintaining an atmosphere of fear psychosis. And in some cases fear is real as reports of arson, rape by the hooligans masquerading as student leaders, are not uncommon. There is no difference between left unions and right unions. All are there to mint money.

Getting a degree (or a passport to job market) by any means, fair or foul, is their aim. Things have reached such a pass that college authorities in most cases have no authority over fresh admission—union bosses are the last word. And college teachers look more like contractors as they remain busy round the year to sell notes by openly espousing yearly contract with the taught. Dentists enter into contractual arrangement with patients. So do law- years with their clients. And now teachers do the same. Indian market-driven economy has really come of age.

Government aided education system in schools and colleges in most states is on the verge of collapse. Then nearly 80 percent of all schools are under the baton of government. And this education system is literally in a shambles in the most backward state of India—West Bengal. As privatisation of education is going on at a rapid pace, only elites can afford high quality education in sophisticated institutions. For average students with middle class background higher education means low-grade degree college education that has no future. According to NASSCOM 75 percent of technical graduates and more than 85 percent of general graduates are unemployable! The education industry is delivering huge quantity of output, in the name of educated populace, with very poor quality.

In truth students are least interested in attending classes because notes can be purchased from coaching centres easily. Then most classes in most colleges remain over-crowded and many do not get a chance to sit on a comfortable bench. Surprisingly, students these days look too willing to become guineapigs. They can sit for examinations without attending a single class, thanks to union raj and rampant corruption that has crippled the student community beyond recognition.

What is more most degree colleges, at least in Bengal are run by part-timers. An English Department in a mofussil college, with just two part-time teachers is supposed to cater 45 or 50 honours students and more than a hundred pass students. What a horrible scenario! One can imagine what kind of education these poor students will get after spending so much money with difficulty for 3 years.

Things are equally dismal for the advanced states, not to speak of Jharkhand and Bihar. There is a deliberate official policy to churn out graduates with low-quality that is hardly conducive to securing any decent job. With drastic changes in school-level curriculum also, 'education for all' slogan is a caricature of education that serves the purpose of politicians and bureaucrats. Compulsory primary education up to 14 years is still a mockery. Mid-day meal scheme has arrested the rate of drop-outs but it has opened new areas of corruption.

The point at issue is whether students organisations have any role to play, state-wide or nation-wide, in thwarting the steady decline of educational standards and opposing the segregation policy of the persons in authority. Some left students platforms occasionally protest against fee hikes and some trifle matters having very little relevance to the ground reality. Their revolutionary zeal to do something different ends in pasting a few wall posters vaguely identifying imperialism for Iraq's tragedy or overestimating the importance of 'Occupy Wall Street' movement.

Student community in colleges and universities being the most sensitive segment of society across the world, is expected to react quickly to gross social and economic injustice. No that is not happening. And nation-building itself suffers in no minor way if students remain passive to ever widening inequity in society.

Not that there is no issue of substance before the students. Education, rather quality education for all, is a far cry. Democracy becomes sham unless the authorities honour human rights and civil liberties. But students do hardly come out in the streets in support of the marginalised who are being systematically repressed in the name of keeping law and order.

The situation is becoming increasingly alarming due to unavailability of skilled and efficient teachers, the poor physical infrastructure and a low-level of parental input toward their wards' education. What is ominous is how student politics too is being increasingly criminalised without a murmur from the so-called civic society.

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