

Whither headed TN higher education?



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Three colleges in Tamil Nadu have ranked in the top-10 list of the country's best institutions of higher education and 35 colleges in the list of 100 best institutions. A piece of news indeed which can warm the cockles of Tamils' hearts! But on the flip side, there is the misery of the poor for whom higher education is still beyond their reach – the misery that should also merit a discussion.

Unchanging scenario

The people evicted from their hutments in slums are now living at Kannagi Nagar and in its vicinity. Their children can afford education only at low cost. The government-aided college at Thoraipakkam was the only institution in the area, which catered for their educational needs. But under the AIADMK regime the college management made efforts to get the institution converted into a self-financing college in contravention of the law. Opposing this move, the Left parties and former professors of the college launched an agitation.

After the change of government, Chief Minister Stalin intervened in the issue. A Special Officer was appointed in order to bring the college management under the government control, invoking the provisions of the Tamil Nadu Private Colleges (Regulation) Act. Similarly, a government-aided college's administrators in Madurai tried to bring the college under their control. However, by way of subverting their plan, the teachers' association mounted pressure on the government which, in turn, appointed a Special Officer there too.

Meanwhile, the management of the Thoraipakkam college moved the High Court and got a stay on the operations of the government-appointed Special Officer. It is alleged by the Student Federation of India and former teachers that as the case is still pending, admissions to the government-aided sections in the college have not been conducted in 2022-23 and 2023 -24 as well. Likewise, allegations keep pouring in that in the Madurai college too, though brought under the government control, the old administrators, in collusion with government officials, are still interfering in the administration.

Transgressions by self-financing colleges

There are complaints galore that the government-aided colleges are charging fees from the students much more than what's determined by the government which, however, seems not to have looked into the allegations. The alleged appointments of teachers on bribes running to lakhs of rupees, which fly in the very face of social justice, happening unflaggingly whichever party is in power, are still prevalent in the government-aided colleges.

Way back in 2021 the Madras University came up with an order that curtailed the lesson period for Tamil classes from six hours to four hours in an arts and science college. Consequently, the college, making the most of the order, tried to dismiss a few Tamil professors on the pretext of retrenchment . But the order was

withdrawn after the self-financing college teachers' association took up the issue with the secretary to the Higher Education Department who, in turn, intervened in the row.

It is true, of course, that in this case several teachers of the self-financing college have been safeguarded. But the unethical dismissals of teachers in self-financing colleges still continue unabated. All kinds of malpractices such as exorbitant fees, poor quality of education and undemocratic functioning are the order of the day in those institutions where the teachers are treated like bonded laborers. When teachers are working with the Damocles' sword hanging over their heads, how can they impart quality education to the students? This affects 12.79 lakh students learning in 2,020 self-financing colleges out of the total 2,657 colleges.

Uncontrolled privatization

Kerala has brought in a new law to regulate the functioning of the self-financing colleges. Taking a cue from the neighbouring state, Tamil Nadu too can introduce a law for the self-financing colleges/sections. That is the need of the hour.

Growth of education is viewed as one of the salient achievements of the 'Dravidian model' regime. But the situation is now so worse that the base of the educational structure is threatened owing to the encouragement of an uncontrolled privatization in the higher education sector. So, it must be set right for the long-term good of the state and the new education policy must accommodate measures towards the goal.

What the govt. must do

There are scores of vacancies left unfilled in the government colleges. Though the Government Order was issued under the previous regime, it was put on hold as the case was sub judice. Hence, the teachers in the self-financing colleges and honorary lecturers in the government colleges are working in an insecure

environment. The vacancies were expected to be filled after the DMK government assumed office. But for reasons unknown, the process is mired in delay.

Likewise, the government college honorary lecturers' lot is also miserable as it was in the past. They get a meagre pay only, that too, only for 11 months in a year. Their pay must be increased to be on a par with that of their counterparts in Kerala who earn Rs.43,000 a month. The government must understand that the pay issue is linked to the welfare of 4,65,148 students.

Upgrading the skills of students is the main motto of the 'Naan Mudhalvan' scheme implemented in Tamil Nadu. But at the same time, the government must take into account the viewpoint of several economists that mere skill development schemes will not provide solutions to the unemployment scourge.

If the infrastructure is toned up in the government colleges, that will go a long way in enabling the students to get quality education and thereby the goal of the 'Naan Mudhalvan' scheme can be achieved.

Teacher associations, student organizations and educationists must keep pressuring the government. Only then solutions to all problems discussed above can be hammered out.

Translated by V. Mariappan.