



A worthy journey through two extremities

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Abstract

Often the progress of higher education in India is analysed through a very formal way by taking into account various recommendations of committees, diverse reports/surveys related to the subject matter, government regulations and rules, the issues of regulatory bodies etc. It perhaps presents a top down approach in academic circles where the source of information is obtained from somewhere to compile articles related to the higher education. This vicarious method is generally employed for writing intellectual articles which enlighten the minds of the readers. However a unique bottom up approach in arranging matter related to higher education could be the use of personal experiences and a more first-hand approach. The sources could be limited or even absence but this type of effort shall enlighten the sphere of higher education in a more connected or emotional manner. Such kind of personal analysis can allow the readers to be more nostalgic about their days in the institutions of higher education. At the same time a distinct narrative like this can put forth a new scrutiny in the field of higher education in India that can provide a different perspective to the policy makers. My purpose is to make my experiences at the two contrasting higher educational institutes somewhat more refined and formalised that can throw some light on some very interesting facets of higher education. The article shall attempt a personal touch to the diverse challenges faced by the U.G. and P.G imparting institutes. The crux shall be to unearth the stark quality divide existing among the institutions of India that makes equitable and qualitative higher education meant for students more complex.

Keywords: formal, vicarious, nostalgic, narrative, perspective etc

Introduction

For any journal an intellectual article solely based on one's opinion revealing the diversity of personal experiences can bring a fresh break from the knowledge laden articles which find a place in various journals. Upon some introspection in my life, I could find two extremities which will be worth revealing to the students of higher education and my teaching fraternity working in various government colleges. My insights relating the two same level of educational institutes yet diametrically opposite in qualitative matters can enlighten the sphere of Higher Education in India. My college of graduation was St. Stephen's College at Delhi while my current work place is S.B.R.M. P.G. Govt. College where I am working as an Assistant Professor. The comparison can't be more stark and glaring because both these institutions belong to the same genre of educational sphere that is under-graduation and post-graduation. The debate about quality issue becomes more relevant in the context of poor Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in India which is 25.8% while the figures for US and China are 88.84% and 48.44%^[1]. India has 1000 Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs) and out of which 400 are State Public Universities and about 90% of students graduate from this type of institute. It mandates that the efforts for reforms must be concentrated here as well^[2].

As a well-known fact, St. Stephen's College is one of the premium colleges of the nation where getting admission is a dream for the youth because of soaring admission cut offs. In year 2020 the highest cut off was 99.25 % for B.A. (Hon) Economics for commerce students^[3]. It gives unambiguous idea about the near impossible admission chances. On the other hand, SBRM Govt. College is serving at a semi urban place catering to the social objective of providing UG/PG

degrees to the students of semi urban and rural areas. Admission cut off is not easy to clear but still it can't be compared to the arduous task of the admission process of the former. The two colleges are very divergent yet they belong to the overall structure of higher education of India. Going by common sense, the comparison between them would be extremely odd that runs the risk of being dismissed as illogical because of the distinct contexts under which the two colleges function. Drawing cue from Indian history, this comparison could be akin to finding similarities/dissimilarities between British East India Company and French East India Company. From the point of view of administrative control, style of functioning, availability of resources etc. these two companies were so different yet they had to be compared because they belonged to the same business of expanding empires. In same way, despite the two colleges being as different as chalk to cheese, the comparison could be worth making to understand the dynamics and divide in higher education sector.

The most plausible reason for this odd comparison is my considerable presence in both the colleges that can make this task somewhat acceptable. This is my firm belief that comparing the institutional traditions of the two colleges will serve the purpose of delineating the quality divide in the field of higher education besides the students can become aware regarding the growth opportunities available at the premium institutions of our nation. If the students never had access to the best colleges in India, it doesn't mean that knowing about the functions and management of those institutions wouldn't be worth anything. By knowing this, a student can assess what he could have had more by joining those institutions. Ignorance regarding these

shouldn't be the norm. The idea is not to reveal the toughness of the admission process of the premium institutions instead the right approach is to highlight the inner processes and mechanisms of the college that enable the enrolled students to undergo positive transformations in their personalities. And the cross comparison with my current college in the city of Nagaur shall emphasise the role of educational institutions in shaping the attitude and personality of the students.

The system of committees formed for the various activities of students was radically and qualitatively different at St. Stephen's College. To name a few Hiker's club, Planning forum, Informal Discussion Group, Shakespeare Society (For English play), Hindi Debating Society, English Debating Society (Deb Soc in short) etc. were existing in the college during my stint in that college. To utter surprise of outsiders, these committees were solely handled by the students themselves. There was no direct role or responsibility of any teaching staff towards these committees although anyone could be approached by the students for guidance and ideas. After admission in the college, wards were encouraged to participate in these committees to reap the maximum advantage of the conducive environment of the college. Each Society/committee had elected/nominated President and other cabinet members selected on basis of their talent. This cabinet would take all the crucial decision regarding the activities of the committees. However, many societies had some sort of entrance qualification for admitting new students in these committees but again the surprising fact is that this selection process was entirely handled by the concerned cabinet members. To quote the case of Planning Forum, its task was to invite learned men of various field or celebrities to have interaction with the college students in day time. Many celebrities like Kapil Dev, Dalai Lama, Yuvraj Singh, KPS Gill, etc. were invited during my time in the college. The new members were admitted in the forum based on an Open Essay exam followed by the process of interview at last. As expected the Debating society would test the extempore debating skills of the students as a qualification to join the society.

The crux of the whole argument is that all these were exclusively managed by the students themselves without any assigned role for the teachers. The role of the teaching staff was mainly confined to attend the various activities organised by the committees that too on voluntary basis. This was possible due to the fact that most of the students admitted to the college already had sufficient exposure to this tradition of self-sufficiency. The students from top schools like Doon, Sherwood, Woodstock, MGD, Sindhia etc. were admitted in large numbers in St. Stephen's College based on the merit. It points out to a situation where quality education is more accessible to the people with money, vision, and urban background. To ensure quality, the government also provides subsidy in higher education to make it accessible to the poor segments of our population. However, often self-funded universities are better because with funding the government interference also comes as strings attached. The scope for private funding like leasing out a portion of university land for telecom towers should be explored for revenue sources^[4].

In government colleges, there is heavy and professional presence of teachers in the committees related to the student's development. Without their handling the whole

structure of the committees would collapse. The teachers are made convenor of various students' related committees and they remain officially accountable for the proper implementation of the guidelines. It does promote spoon feeding style of functioning of the committees.

When it comes to student's politics, St. Stephen's college was totally insulated from the adverse effects of politics due to its unique position in Delhi University. The college never participated in the University elections because such elections were marred by bumpy events, youth aggression, dirty campaigning and sometimes violence. How can we forget the murder of a youth leader in Delhi that led the Supreme Court to ban the student's election throughout the country for few years? However, the students of the college were allowed to vote only in the college related election and that was always a peaceful process where the campaigning remained limited to the college premises making it truly democratic way of conducting election. The other election in the college was for Junior Common Room (JCR) which provided various indoor sports facilities and screening of a movie each Sunday. This election was confined to the resident students (hostellers) only.

The process of student election in govt. colleges is often marred by hot headed candidates who look to mimic the campaigning style of our actual politicians. The arguments, and tussle between the college authority and the standing candidates is often deemed as an essential component of winning. Aggressive behaviour of the youth is considered as the foremost quality to be possessed by the candidates and eventually most elections witness a bumpy ride across the colleges. The craze for the student politics can be explained in the believed tradition that it provides the first step for the entry into the real politics of future. To conduct an election at college level is always a big challenge because often candidates quickly resort to legal/illegal means to win elections. The craze for politics is so high that sometimes a student seeks admission in the college through forged documents solely for the purpose of fighting election. Having said this, it must be asserted that the youth politics is necessary training ground for the future political life of the students if values of discipline, ethics, self-restrain are adhered to.

At St. Stephen's college, the discipline among the students was given top priority. Even during strikes in Delhi University leading to shutting down of other colleges, the institution in question had the tradition of getting least impacted by such university level disturbances. As it is known nationally, politics in DU is quite considerable and vocal but as a matter of fact, the college by and large successfully insulated itself from the political questions of the university. At the time of a strike in DU, the mess employees at the college would start giving bread slices instead of wheat *rotis* to the resident students. This was the most *significant* impact of the outside disturbance in the college! Apart from this tiny disturbance, every critical functions of the college ran smoothly during the troubled times in DU.

Another aspect promoting discipline was the mandatory need of regular students' attendance in the assembly and the class room. Less than the required percentage of attendance would certainly mean debarment from the university exams apart from calling the parents of the concerned students in the college. The strange tradition was the punishment of monetary bond for low attendance which was imposed on

the erring student as a warning signal for future behaviour. However, in government colleges ensuring regular attendance of the students is near impossible. Sometimes many students take admission in Govt. Colleges so that doing some parallel work/coaching in some other city would become possible. The University rule of minimum 75% attendance is on paper for all practical purposes. Unfilled posts of teachers, poor student-teacher ratio in classrooms (with official strength of the students in the class), and yearly increase in the number of students admitted etc. lead to a situation where the notion of strict minimum attendance becomes a distant dream. On top of all this, the prevalence of a very active student politics often draws students outside the classes to the streets, rallies, agitations etc.

In terms of infrastructural facilities, St. Stephen's college was supreme. Many sports facilities like sports grounds, shooting infrastructure, lawn tennis court, badminton/squash courts etc. were in fully maintained and functional state. Prevalence of a decent sized golf course was a big luxury!! Any student could withdraw the needed sports equipment by submitting the I-card to the authority. Even medical facility was provided by appointing a full time nurse for the basic treatment of the resident students. However, in govt. colleges such facilities are unthinkable. Even if ground or court is available, it works on no maintenance thereby keeping the property practically in non-functional state. Perhaps the money available for the maintenance is so meagre that it is earmarked for far more critical expenditures. Recently a trend has been witnessed that many reforms originate at the Headquarter while the financial burden of the reforms are totally imposed on the college itself thereby the already insufficient college funds drawn from the part of the fees received from the students bear further strain. Therefore, for most of the novel reforms the provision of finance by the state government is negated; it leads to a situation where the qualitative aspect of the reform suffers the most.

Another major difference is that, the teaching staff at St. Stephen's college was usually involved in the works of purely academic nature. On the other hand, the teaching staff at government colleges spends far greater time out of their college duration in non-academic works like the issuing of I-cards, accepting exam forms and related fees from the students etc. Often the teaching staffs here are practically glorified professors who become expert in window counter operations which ideally should have been handled by the clerical staff. For all practical purposes, this situation definitely reduces the academic output of the colleges. Of course along with high vacant seats among the teaching staff, even greater level of vacancies exists at the clerical level.

Another awesome tradition at St Stephen's college was the organisation of 3 days long annual festival called Harmony which provided much needed source of entertainment and enjoyment to the students. This event was conducted by the president elect and his team. The various events could include Grease pole event, treasure hunt, ice-cream eating competition etc. which were fun filled activities alongside the stalls of various kinds. The college enjoyed a higher brand value in Higher Education clubbed with the fact that many of its students were from some of the best well to do families of India. Therefore, collecting sponsorships for the festival was not very arduous task. The other popular events were karaoke competition for the students, performance by

the famous musical bands of India for the students. The idea was not much about promoting the performances by the students on stage rather to give them a sense of enjoyment and mental refreshment by organising the shows of external famous musical bands. In fact there was considerable scope of the exhibition of the skills and talents of the students on various forums throughout the year through multiple student related committees and their event. The most famous event was the rock show which was organised on the last night of the annual festival. Just like the case with the functions of various committees of the college, the organisation of Harmony was almost exclusively handled by the students themselves. I could hardly witness any role of the teachers in it except maintaining overall discipline during the festival. Right from collecting sponsorships to inviting stalls, every bit of work was done by the dedicated team of the students. Of course, the entry for the festival was strictly confined to the college students only and the efforts by the outside students to enter in the premises at that time were near impossible due to the strict vigil by the authority.

The annual college festival is also organised in the government colleges which basically runs for few hours in a day and involves cultural performances by the college students. The college president elect and his team is very active in inviting guests for the festival but the real organising responsibility solely lies with the teaching staff which implements the nuts and bolts part of the programme. Often, it turns out to be a political event due to heavy presence of politicians of various levels or ex bureaucrats as chief guests. It becomes far more formal event with welcoming ceremonies of the guests clubbed with the long speeches made by the guests. The college authority basically expects and encourages the guests to commit donation to the college so that the infrastructure of the college could be boosted. Such formal tone of the programme perhaps negates the element of enjoyment or mental refreshments for the students.

Another obvious difference is that just like any good private school, St. Stephen's College as a matter of policy provides an environment where students can interact in English language. The bettering of spoken English skills among the students is almost guaranteed in such institutions. Even the students from rural and semi urban background post admission into the college, could get considerable exposure in spoken English skills. However on the contrary, insufficient policy interest in creating conducive environment for spoken English is the lacuna of govt. schools and colleges across the country. This is one field where good private schools excel by far the best. And that makes the former institutions distinctly superior than the later. English, being a global language shouldn't be ignored and proper training to the college faculties should be given or some level of mandatory spoken English skills for the teachers should be tested through the recruitment phase itself. In deed the role of schools is far more critical in imparting such language skills to the students from the outset The College only builds upon the foundational skills developed during the stint at school.

At last, St. Stephen's college had this unique tradition of throwing a tea party at Dean's residence for the newly admitted students and their parents' right after admission. Though during the party the scope of interaction between the college principal and the parents is limited, it creates a bonding between the two concerned parties right at the

outset. It signals that the progress of the ward shall be personally monitored and whenever any issue with the ward crops up, his/her parents shall be informed or called by the college authority. Another tradition to enhance the bond with the newly admitted students was a lavish lunch party which was thrown by the college within few days after the commencement of the new session. Another compulsory aspect about the college is the existence of a good cafeteria or canteen which is a necessary place for the students to let their hair down. Lastly, the college student union also manages the production of college merchandises like sweat-shirts, t-shirts, cups/plates letter pad etc. bearing the name/logo/image of the college. The design of the merchandise is accepted only after the approval by the college authority. During my time, a t-shirt design with the print of a term bill on the back was rejected for obvious reasons. Many known companies like Reebok, Nike etc. have catered to the production requirement of such merchandise clothes. Finally they get sold like a hot cake among the college students because of the brand value of the college. The idea is not to recommend these traditions to be emulated in govt. colleges, rather to understand the ins and outs of the traditions of any premium higher educational institute of India.

After choosing to compare the unthinkable, I wish to assert that the context and the background of these two types of colleges are totally different. The limitation on fee structure, direct government control, lack of autonomy, high vacancy of the teachers, poor student to teacher ratio, general lack of infrastructure, focus on opening yet new colleges without ensuring the provision of infrastructure etc. are the inherent problems faced by the govt. colleges. Fortunately, the premium institutions of India like St. Stephen's college don't witness such challenges. Indeed, there is general lack of investment in higher education in India. Centre and state both spend less in higher education in India. Except few like Tata Trusts, Infosys Foundation etc. private funding is wanting^[5].

The reason of this unorthodox comparison is only to detect the desirable components of quality in higher education. The long term goal of higher education is to provide qualitative education in equitable manner. The quality divide cutting across various institutions of higher education must be minimised in order to realise the full potential of our nations' demographic dividend. As per India skill Report only 47% of graduates in India are employable^[6]. Therefore, a debate on the contents, nature, and framework of quality in graduation imparting institutions must be started. Cross comparisons can certainly become a handy tool. This uncanny and dare devil comparison undertaken in this article can perhaps be justified only in the context of desperate need of quality in higher educational institutions. After all every government policy aims to ensure quality in all its ventures which usually becomes a typical Tom and Jerry game where the constant effort towards seeking quality turns into a never ending chase reserved for Tom to nab Jerry.

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