



Interview

'Infrastructure not up to expectations'

Professor Dr. T. B. Subba

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Professor Subba spoke extensively to CMA Dibakar Kanunjna on different aspects of higher education in India today, as well as his vision of building Sikkim University as an institution of national importance.

MA Please give a brief outline of your perception on governance and management system in education sector in India.

Professor T. B. Subba: Good morning! The governance in higher education sector, particularly the one funded by the central government about which I have some knowledge, is not something to feel

proud of. It suffers a lot mainly because its management system is not responsive enough to the changing times and also because the employees have many rights but few duties. The situation is worse in universities funded by the state governments. I guess the governance is far better in private universities and colleges compared to the government funded educational institutions, although I cannot vouch for that because I have no personal experience of working in a private university.

MA The market size of Indian education sector is increasing gradually due to

the strong demand for quality education. As a result; many private operators including few foreign universities are entering into this business. Do you believe all these universities will maintain the desired standard of quality education? What is your expectation from the Indian government in this context?

TBS: The objective of foreign universities behind opening campuses in India is essentially profit. The quality of education provided by them in their home countries is far better than what they provide in their

off-shore campuses but such campuses survive on the basis of their brand values and a short trip for the students to their home campuses before they complete their courses. Many Indian students are happy to join the off-shore campuses to have this experience.

MA Do you think present higher education system is effective in producing sensible and accomplished human being to build our nation?

TBS: I do not think so, because the aim of the higher education system today in India is to train the manpower for the industry, for employment, etc. and not to make them good and responsible citizens.

MA What are the infrastructural strengths and weakness of Indian education system?

TBS: They vary hugely across the educational institutions in the country. In most parts of the country the infrastructure does not meet the minimum level of expectation of higher education system, whether one talks about class rooms, laboratories or other teaching aids. Toilets are unhygienic and libraries are either devoid of quality books or are ill-kept.

MA Indian government provides huge subsidy in education sector. Many students, in spite of being financially sound, take advantage of this subsidy. Do you believe an efficient and prudent pricing mechanism can solve this problem? Do you have any personal opinion on it?

TBS: In India the income of the individuals is what they declare and they rarely declare their true income, especially if the sources of income are other than government service. Income certificates showing the required income are easily available. Unless the true income of each student's parents is known no prudent pricing mechanism will work.

MA In this complex and competitive scenario, cost effectiveness is a burning issue. How do you evaluate the education

sector in India in this context?

TBS: In a country like ours everything cannot be guided by the cost factor. The country has certain responsibilities towards the weaker and deprived sections of the society. If higher education has to be truly cost-effective only the affluent can afford it. This is not acceptable under the Constitution of India. Therefore, cost-effectiveness is not and cannot really be an issue in institutions run by the governments.

MA Do you think performance evaluation / appraisal of educational organizations is the need of the hour?

TBS: Appraisal of educational institutions has been going on all the time ever since they were established, but such appraisals were not codified and formalized in the country till NAAC was established by the University Grants Commission. What is unfortunate about such appraisals or performance evaluation is the over emphasis on numerical points, as everything, including perceptions of people, is converted into some numerical figure.

MA What are your views about the recent trend of adopting performance management system in education sector in India? Does NAAC play an important role in this regard?

TBS: The criteria which NAAC follows to evaluate the higher educational institutions in the country are quite different from the international criteria for evaluation are. Therefore NAAC can play a greater role if its criteria are in conformity with the international assessment criteria followed by THE or QS. There is no doubt that performance should be evaluated, but once done so, it must be followed by reward or penalty, which does not happen in Indian universities funded by the central government. Unless we bring in reward and penalty based on performance it has no relevance.

MA How proper Cost Management system plays an important role in the overall growth of education sector in India?

TBS: I am not an expert on cost management but even common sense tells us that if cost is managed properly it will certainly help the education sector anywhere in the world.

MA How do you compare and benchmark the regulatory aspect and the teaching-learning environment in India with that of the advanced countries?

TBS: The universities in advanced countries are far advanced than ours not only because our universities are over regulated but also because their universities are several hundred years older and hence evolved for several hundred years more. They are also not obliged to reserve seats for students and employ teachers belonging to categories like SC, ST, OBC, and PWD up to 50%. Each university must have proper eco-system to grow and evolve, but that will not happen if universities come into existence for political reasons, as they often do in India, instead of academic needs.

MA Do you believe online education system can add value towards quality education in Indian scenario?

TBS: Yes, I think so, as the youths today go online most of the time.

MA What are the basic differences you find in the teaching-learning environment under public and private education system?

TBS: I do not have any idea about teaching-learning system under private education system. Hence I am not able to compare.

MA How do you look at the ranking of Indian Universities done by the international agencies? How relevant are their parameters for Indian institutions?

TBS: Many Indian scholars have criticized the parameters of international ranking, but I am of the view that the parameters are not worked out with the ill-intention of excluding Indian universities from the top 200 universities in the world, or to benefit some universities of China only, as some would argue. Some of the parameters

are not relevant even for the developed countries like Japan and they are unhappy about the changes they have to bring about in their system so that their rank does not slip down. If we wish to be ranked internationally, and ranked in the top 200 universities, we must set our priorities according to the parameters of international ranking and not NAAC ranking.

MA What are the major initiatives being taken during your tenure with Sikkim University?

TBS: Thank you for this opportunity. Some of the major initiatives I have taken during the past 17 months of my tenure with Sikkim University are as follows. One, the revision, updation and standardisation of syllabi at the undergraduate as well as postgraduate level has been taken up during the Monsoon 2013 and Spring 2014 semesters. Two, the Schools have been reorganized with the aim of (i) drastically reducing the establishment cost, and (ii) make them meaningful arenas of academic exchange and synergy. Three, the process of establishing a hundred percent residential, earthquake-free, green and disabled-friendly campus at a place called Yangang located 56 kms away from Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, has begun.

MA How do you evaluate your existing faculty quality and strength of your institution?

TBS: A disproportionately large number of our faculty members come from one of the best universities in India, viz., Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. It is expected that they have received one of the best academic trainings available in India. They are young and energetic.

MA Technology has a big role to play in teaching-learning process these days? What is your call on this aspect?

TBS: Technology is useful if it is used as a means and if supporting facilities like uninterrupted power supply and stable voltage are available. It should however not be taken as a religion; instead we must

continuously look for more user-friendly, environment-friendly technology.

MA What are the major academic challenges that demand early action and intervention of regulatory authorities?

TBS: Some of the major academic challenges today are as follows. First, there is lack of good teachers to teach in colleges and universities. A large many teachers in the colleges and universities are not proficient enough in their subjects and/or the medium of teaching. While passing NET has made them eligible many of them do not possess either the aptitude or motivation to teach. They take teaching as a job and not as a profession. They are busy collecting API scores allowing quality to be compromised at every step. As a result they are not able to inspire the students to excel. Second, one of the reasons why they are not able to do so is lack of adequate teachers in colleges and universities. A large number of posts are lying vacant on account of the reservation policies of the government of India about which no one wants to talk. Third, the syllabi used in various universities vary in quality, scope, credit, focus, orientation, etc. making credit portability virtually appear impossible. Finally, I would think that the international emphasis on “interdisciplinary approach” has made our students incompetent about their respective disciplines. It is time we realize that interdisciplinarity cannot succeed if the knowledge of their own disciplines is hollow and superficial.

MA What is your vision of Sikkim University in 2020?

TBS: I will not be around in Sikkim University in 2020 and my successor may not share my vision of the University. At the very least, I see Sikkim University in 2020 functioning from a campus of its own with departments achieving the minimum faculty strength not only to teach about their disciplines but also to teach some add-on certificate/diploma courses in emergent/job-related fields as value addition to their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. I see the University functioning in a transparent and participatory manner on

the basis of the Ordinances and Regulations that are being drafted. I see a great deal of interaction taking place between the faculty members and students of our university with those of other universities on our campus. I see a large number of academic, cultural and sports activities taking place on our campus and the campus emerging as a major tourist destination for its unique architecture, its animal house, its horticultural farms, its botanical garden, its water-shed, and its broad walkways. Finally, I see the University linking itself with the people around and making itself relevant for them.

MA How much change have you experienced in the Indian education scenario in past few decades?

TBS: Quite a lot and almost paradigmatic I would say. To give some examples, the annual system has given way to semester system; the marks system has given way to credit and grade system; the blackboard has been replaced with white board and chalk with marker pen; teachers’ explanatory skills are rendered less useful by their power point presentation of class lectures; external examination has been replaced with internal examination; and so on.

MA Finally, your last words on the future panorama of higher education sector in India?

TBS: I am optimistic about the future of higher education sector in India. After all it cannot remain in a state of confusion and chaos for too long, which is largely a result of frequent change of policies related to higher education. Even a subject like eligibility criteria for Assistant Professorship has undergone several changes since 1996. The key word in higher education system should be “flexibility” and not “frequent change”. The latter will only result in confusion and chaos.

The future panorama of higher education sector in India will change if the NDA government comes to power. Whether that will lead to further confusion and chaos will be for posterity to judge.