

## Deteriorating higher education: Heavy price for inaction

It is beyond doubt that the higher education system (the colleges and the universities) has deteriorated considerably in recent times. There are many reasons for this downfall. While most often this downfall has been ascribed to factors outside the given institution itself (like poor funding and the consequent inadequate infrastructure etc.), the impeding factors that originate from within the institution have often not been seriously considered. Bardhan's letter (*Curr. Sci.*, 1997, 72, 689) about situation in universities has brought to focus one such very serious factor that contributes to declining academic standards.

The purpose of a university is not just to teach, examine and award degrees to its students, but to also create new knowledge through research. Theoretically, research continues to be an important component of the university system since all appointments and promotions seem to rely on 'research activity' of the candidate. However, in real practice, this emphasis on 'research activity' is on quantity rather than quality. As a result, we have the most unfortunate situation where majority of university teachers are really not serious researchers and therefore, the exponentially declining rate at which new knowledge is being generated in our universities has not received the alarming attention that it needs. It is just being taken as another 'fact of life'.

One would not agree to Bardhan's sug-

gestion, which has apparently resulted from the anguish and frustration of a sincere person, that those institutions which cannot provide adequate academic ambience, should be debarred from receiving funds for research etc. Actually that would be repeating the same mistake that he has pointed out! Similarly, one would also not like to accept the sincere advice of well-wishers in research institutions to their serious teacher and researcher colleagues in the university system to move to 'better' places. Although such steps may, for the time being, eliminate the source of frustration for sincere teachers and researchers, these will pronounce the death sentence for any academic activity in universities. If the universities and colleges do not function as they should, none of the other research and technological institutions can survive very long.

What is necessary is that the agencies that provide the support and the bodies like UGC, who have to monitor and regulate institutions of higher learning, must not remain mute spectators just because universities etc. are autonomous bodies. A glaring example of the so-called 'autonomy' of colleges and universities can be seen in the 'who cares' attitude of nearly all teaching institutions in our country to UGC's 'directive' of a minimum of 180 teaching days in an academic year. With so many scheduled (and unscheduled) holidays and vacations (and

the additional *sine-die* vacations!), one wonders if any university or college really has a teaching calendar of 180 days. But the UGC has never stepped in to see that its directive is followed or at least some serious attempt is made for its being followed.

All those who are seriously concerned with maintenance and improvement of academic standards and values need to take the issues in right earnest rather than glossing over it because of the 'it does not concern me' attitude! Therefore, it is necessary that more effective and positive monitoring of the academic and other activities of 'autonomous' bodies like universities is practised by the various academies, the funding agencies and the UGC. If they cannot and if the institution itself is not willing to take steps to improve, we may be forced to pay heed to Bardhan's anguished suggestion of total stoppage of research (and other creative) activities and pay a very heavy price for our inaction!

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## Microbial pathogens – Identification and surveillance

The 'Plague epidemic of 1994' (*Curr. Sci.*, 1996, 71, 781–808) made an absorbing account of how the etiologic agent of Surat epidemic was finally nailed down by a group of researchers under the able stewardship of V. Ramalingaswami along with inputs from international experts. From this account two inferences can be drawn: one, our expertise in isolation and identification of uncommon/unconventional microbial pathogens is far from satisfactory, a point already well emphasized<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, at times, because of a

variety of reasons, unequivocal identification of a microbial pathogen may pose formidable problems even if the pathogen happens to be one discovered long back. Thus, one can very well imagine the problems in isolation and identification of newly emerging or exotic microbial pathogens. I wonder how much expertise our microbiological laboratories have in identification of pathogens like *Leptospira* (causing leptospirosis) and *Burkholderia pseudomallei* (melioidosis), both of which are considered to be emerging pathogens

in India<sup>2</sup>. This applies, as well, to *Yersinia enterocolitica* (gastroenteritis) and *Cryptosporidium* (persistent diarrhoea), both of which are considered to be emerging pathogens in several parts of the world<sup>3,4</sup>. Thus the need to develop our own laboratories with state-of-the-art facilities for isolation and identification of microbial pathogens cannot be overemphasized. Such facilities will help not only in the isolation and identification of microbial pathogens but also myriads of microorganisms which may have industrial,