

Rise and decline of India's state university system: neglect, design or neglect by design?

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As teachers, researchers, academicians and citizens who are deeply troubled by the present state of our education system, we make an attempt to (a) describe the current state of health of India's education system as evidenced from the condition of the state universities and the higher education system, (b) analyse why and how the state universities have come to this state, (c) probe consequences of this downhill evolution if it continues unchecked, and (d) describe possible solutions for reviving it and setting it on the right path. These are our personal views that have evolved over the length of our careers as teachers and researchers. Respecting the complex nature of the problem, we have made no attempt at completeness or scholarliness. We have tried, however, to maintain objectivity and neutrality as much as possible, with the hope of bringing out the essence of the problem (as we understand it) as sharply as possible. We further hope that this will provide enough grounds for introspection and for healthy debate in the community, which will, in turn, result into widespread and far-reaching corrective measures aimed at salvaging our education system in its entirety: It is not a matter of choice when it comes to securing the future, personal or collective.

Keywords: Education policy, globalization, higher education, reform, state university system.

We do not even know what skills may be needed in the years ahead. That is why we must train our young people in the fundamental fields of knowledge, and equip them to understand and cope with change. That is why we must give them the critical qualities of mind and durable qualities of character that will serve them in circumstances we cannot now even predict.

John W. Gardner, *Excellence*, 1961¹

MOST of us, if not all, agree that the above point of view summarizes the purpose and spirit of an educational organization well. Written way back in 1961, it is even more pertinent in today's world that is changing not only at a faster but perhaps at an accelerated pace. Most of us agree, again, that there is also a need to distinguish between education and training, and that the primary focus and loyalty of a university should be on the former, not the latter². Training is necessarily geared towards a specific niche or skill set and, as such, its relevance depends heavily on specific socio-economic contexts and needs. Education, on the other hand, emphasizes those facets of

learning that appear to possess a universal or long-term character in the personal as well as in the collective/social spheres.

Majority of us will concur that education should be seen as a long-term investment by a society in its own human resources for the purpose of ensuring its own survival, stability, and well-being. It should not be considered a lucrative commercial venture³ that benefits only a part of the society. In the Indian context, education can also serve as an effective instrument for channeling social reforms and for strengthening our already weakened social fabric. The society that either does not recognize this, or chooses to ignore it, and thereby resorts to myopic and populist short-term measures is bound to pay a rather heavy price, sooner or later.

The higher education⁴ scene in India has undergone serious and fundamental changes over the past 15 years or so. During this time, a lot was said about our education system by almost everyone⁵. Finally, the Central government appeared to have woken up. About two years ago, the Knowledge Commission put forth a grand report resulting in the formation of a few more IITs, IIMs, and IISERs, a few tens of central universities, plus a grand-scale talk on visions of tomorrow based on private universities and the open-door policy. More recently, the Yashpal Committee has proposed radical organizational reforms in the bodies that govern our higher education system. These reforms are being projected as India's sure-shot key to becoming a 'knowledge society' that will

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in turn make India's (pipe)dream of becoming a super-power come true.

Grand dreams are enticing. However, they are often designed to make the society conveniently forget ground realities on one hand, and on the other, the value system that needs to be established and maintained for their realization. One such time-tested value appears to be excellence:

We must learn to honour excellence in every socially accepted human activity, however humble the activity, and to scorn shoddiness, however exalted the activity. An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

John W. Gardner¹, *Excellence*, 1961

Furthermore:

A society whose maturing consists simply of acquiring more firmly established ways of doing things is headed for the graveyard – even if it learns to do these things with greater and greater skill. In the ever-renewing society what matures is a system or framework within which continuous innovation, renewal and rebirth can occur.

John W. Gardner⁶, *Self-Renewal*, 1964

While the motivation, appropriateness, relevance, and adequacy of the reforms initiated by the Centre can be debated, it is clear that there is a definite change in their perception about our education system, and reforms are being pushed seriously. In complete contrast, the fate of the state university system in India remains unaltered: abandoned by the Centre and unwanted by the State. To make things even worse, it is supported *minimally* by the State so as to ensure that it neither withers off completely nor flourishes to realize its full potential. The role of state politicians and state governments remains at best questionable. For example, even in the (supposedly) progressive and highly industrialized state of Maharashtra, the government's actions⁷ have routinely displayed a complete lack of foresight (i.e., beyond the next election at hand), confusion, and a lack of political/administrative will and seriousness to put things on the right path. In contrast, central universities appear to have always operated in a far superior fashion.

Most of us agree that the decline of the state university system in India started more than a decade ago. The onset of this decline appears to be correlated with that of economic reforms and liberalization, but the root causes

were already present in the very structure and nature of the system. This decline has reached alarming proportions especially during the last five years or so. State universities have almost come to be considered a decaying, rotten, decadent, outdated institution beyond salvage, and therefore abandoned by the central leadership (of all kinds, i.e. political, scientific and technological, and most certainly, enlightened academic) that shapes government policies.

Many of us would agree that this is not exactly a desirable situation.

What is thus required is an introspection of these 'new age' policies preferentially by people at the grassroot level, that is, by teachers and the academia in general. Ironically, this very section happens to be the least influential section when it comes to shaping policies for higher education. Sadly enough, it is also the most apathetic one.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: Let us first get a quick feel of what our state universities have become. We then present an analysis of why state universities have come to such a deplorable state. Next, we discuss a possible scenario for the future of our education system if the present trend continues, followed by a discussion about possible directions for its revival. This is followed by an argument as to why our state university system should be revived. We end this article by presenting an assorted collection of disconnected thoughts that do not fit anywhere else in the flow of this article.

On a personal note, we are aware that our perspective may be somewhat limited and is shaped by where we stand, namely, as faculty (current or former) in the University of Pune⁸. We, however, believe that the situation elsewhere in India is not too different. The discussion in the next section is *not* intended to be a public outcry of personal grievances.

The disease: symptoms

The failure of our university system can be seen in every aspect of a state university's operation, and on all four counts; namely, purpose, vision, governance and accountability. To list just a few from a long list of symptoms: academic stagnation, extreme rigidity of procedures, serious lack of motivation in faculty, academicians having no say in the decision-making process because of outdated statutes and acts, complete absence of dynamism in curriculum design and introduction of new subjects and courses, absence of recognition for academic excellence in research and teaching, abysmal state of infrastructure, We are sure that teachers, researchers, academicians⁹, and the academic community at large can add a lot more to this list from their personal or collective experiences.

The most alarming symptom is the declining quality of manpower (academic or otherwise) and even worse, the

system's inability to *attract* and *retain* quality manpower (including faculty): some earnest and honest introspection into the reasons why academicians chose to leave a state university (say, over the past decade) would be quite revealing.

What's worse: it feels as if university bureaucracy, as a whole, has grown so highly decadent and comfortable with itself that it has simply forgotten that academics is the primary cause of its very existence. Naturally, supporting academics is not in its list of priorities.

It is no wonder that power-hungry politicians masquerading as academicians or bureaucrats find ample scope for exercising their talents and for pursuing their private agenda through opportunistic and often not-so-ethical means. This is precisely the class that stands to gain most from the near-complete lack of accountability and governance in the system.

It should come as no surprise that the ultimate sufferers are the students, the academicians, and hence all academics as a whole.

The disease: causes

A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within. The essential causes of Rome's decline lay in her people, her morals, her class struggle, her failing trade, her bureaucratic despotism, her stifling taxes, her consuming wars.

Will Durant¹⁰, *The Story of Civilization* (Vol. 3, Epilogue: Why Rome Fell), 1944

Although by no stretch of imagination can our university system be compared to a 'great civilization', the reasons cited for Rome's fall do ring a bell. It is clear that the symptoms presented in the previous section cannot be considered signs of health of any organization. It is, therefore, both urgent and important to understand the fundamental causes of this decline. We discuss here what we think are the most relevant ones.

The great divide: institutes vs universities, research vs teaching

It is well known that the state university system in post-independence India was fraught with a second-rate status right at the outset because of the great divide of institutes vs universities, strongly advocated and pioneered by Homi J. Bhabha and embraced wholeheartedly by the leadership and governments of independent India. In this model¹¹, all teaching was relegated to universities and all research to institutes. Moreover, teaching was considered counterproductive to research, and research was considered esoteric and unnecessary for universities. This is perhaps

one singular reason for sucking life out of our university system.

By some estimation, the Indian university system never really 'took off'. The decline of the Indian university system started too long back in history, and the decay we witnessed over the last decade is just a continuation of the same phenomenon (except for its steeper speed). The (limited) success of the university of Pune as an organization can be attributed to the personal commitment and dedicated efforts of extraordinary academicians and visionaries like Irawati Karve, R. N. Dandekar, V. S. Huzurbazar, M. R. Bhide¹², and many others – this is perhaps an exception and a story of battle against all odds. It is unfortunate that, of late, the scene has come to be dominated by anti-visionaries.

More recently, as if to continue with Bhabha's elitist vision with even greater gusto, all major government agencies (including the UGC), instead of strengthening the university system aggressively, seem to have taken an escapist approach: This is evident in the creation of their own private academic kingdoms and showcases such as the IISERs and the IUCs¹³.

Academic leadership at the national and university levels

The powerful people – our representatives and people at the helm of the affairs (to whom the government listens), such as the vice chancellors, directors of research institutes, chairpersons of bodies such as the UGC and, of course, all the wise people who decorate committees, have never been outspoken on this issue. Management skills and acumen and, in particular, a balanced view of macro- and micro-management, is often seen lacking in the top management of a state university. For example, how many vice chancellors over the past few decades might have made it their business to go on an active hunt for dedicated, quality faculty? We believe that this number would be depressingly-low – perhaps far less than a handful.

Mismanagement coupled with the lack of able and sincere leadership with vision are obvious: the system just does not respond to the needs of academics, let alone in an intelligent, efficient, and timely manner. There is strife and frustration in the ranks at all levels. General neglect and 'why bother?' or 'couldn't care less!' attitudes abound. Clearly, these are not the signs of wellbeing of any organization.

Apathy within the academia

It is futile to blame our academic leadership alone. The academia in this country have never acted as a proactive vigilant force and a pressure lobby that helped shape education policies from time to time. Even a mechanism of mature debate amongst our academicians, and a process

of consensus that would lead to policy frameworks to guide the evolution of our education system has not evolved in this country. This is also a sad reflection on the quality, outlook, and conscientiousness of teachers employed in state universities and affiliated colleges. Ideas should ideally spawn at the grassroot level, evolve, and get distilled as they travel upwards in the hierarchy towards the level of policy-makers through participatory democratic processes. Instead, we have always had an inverted pyramid in this regard.

The government: ambivalence and tyrannical control

The dichotomy in the state government's attitude is clear: on one hand, they wish to support higher education at a sub-sub-critical level and, on the other, they wish to exercise complete and tight control over universities via acts and ordinances. It almost looks like the government wants education to be 'a state-controlled manufactory of echoes'¹⁴. For example, the Government of Maharashtra has explicitly stated on numerous occasions that due to financial problems, education – and especially higher education – is *not* their priority and that the government wants to get out of it. It might be worth questioning why faculty recruitment at the University of Pune was stopped for about 15 years until 2007: were the state government's coffers so empty when needed for education purposes?

Yet, at the same time, the consistent failure of our higher education/university system to produce quality output¹⁵ is conveniently lamented upon, and academicians are made a convenient scapegoat for the failure.

UGC and the LCD syndrome

The blame for the decline of state universities also should go squarely to the role played by the UGC – or to be precise, the role *not* played by the UGC. Perhaps the root cause of this has something to do with the fact that education happens to be in the purview of the State as well as the Centre – as a consequence, it gets the worst of both the worlds. A case in point is the governance of central universities, which is far superior to that of state universities, and is nearly immune to state- or centre-level political fluctuations.

Did you know that the eligibility criterion for a university lecturer is just a Master's degree with NET/SET certification? This applies even to university departments that endeavour to build creative, cutting-edge research programmes. Such has been the wisdom of UGC, and understandably so: the UGC must take care of a few hundred universities and a few thousand colleges in the country. As a consequence, it is perhaps compelled to take lowest common denominator (LCD)¹⁶ decisions. No wonder we have LCD universities and LCD academics.

The point we wish to make is that there is hardly any positive role that the UGC could play in improving our university system because, in spite of the fact that it is a well-intentioned government body, it is overly constrained and, specifically, has no teeth to enforce anything.

Near-impossibility of weeding out mediocre and rogue elements

Competence and incompetence, academic or otherwise, are treated at par in the present system. Neither is excellence encouraged, or rewarded, nor is mediocrity punished or weeded out. The system shows absolutely no recognition of the fact that academic excellence originates in the quality of its manpower, academic or otherwise. As a consequence, university leadership and management follows rigid and outdated norms dictated by the state government to hire faculty that turns out to be mediocre in many cases. Moreover, state universities have become infested with politics based on caste, class, factions and sycophancy. There are also serious issues related to admission practices (e.g. insufficient screening), especially for highly technical courses.

Disregard for core values and guiding principles

The structure of any education system, not only higher education, should follow certain guiding principles at its focus. Such guiding principles should include considerations such as:

- The core value system of academics and research, namely, commitment to pedagogy, authenticity, thoroughness, perseverance, excellence, and to whatever extent possible, originality and creativity.
- Quality of manpower, academic or otherwise.
- A proper teacher-to-student ratio for effective instruction.
- Optimal organization size (as measured by the numbers of students, faculty, support staff, affiliated colleges, etc.). What we need are lean and efficient structures that are able to respond fast to the changing needs of the society and the times.
- Adequate administration that is geared to support quality academics in an efficient and proactive manner, so that academicians can focus on academics (instead of wasting energies on insensitive bureaucrats and procedures).

Organizations that disregard, actively or otherwise, such core values and guiding principles are bound to become failures sooner or later, and irrespective of the amount of resources pumped into them.

As an example, IITs are organizations with excellent support structures that do not dare to demean academics. They do an excellent job on the core value of (undergraduate) teaching. On the other hand, by some estima-

tion, they seem to miss out on other core values; e.g. doing (and that includes building) good technology.

Where is the present path taking us?

It is evident that India's state universities are rapidly degenerating into what can be described as 'municipality schools of higher education'. It does appear that this is precisely what the government wants. If the present trend continues, then, ultimately, the scenario of higher education will become compatible with the divided society that we see around. That our society was *always* divided is a fact, but we have come to witness a sea of (not-so-desirable) changes after the open-door policy was deployed: As in every other sector of development, the social gap is widening.

Specifically in the context of education, we believe that in the absence of social discontent, an equilibrium in the form of a two-(or multi-) tier education system will come to prevail, as described here: A class of people, small in proportion to the population but certainly very large in terms of sheer numbers, does not want to be tied up with the average growth rate. This class, primarily the upward-mobile rich urban middle class with a changed value system, together with the new and upcoming high-tech industry, is driving private schools and universities where education is expensive (and may be exclusive as well). This, incidentally, is also the same class that is able to send their own children abroad for education or employment.

This suits the government: The Centre establishes a few high-profile institutes of excellence to take care of the needs of state-of-the-art frontier research/education, and private schools satisfy the needs of the industry and the rich middle class. What is left for the masses is a neglected third-rate state education system that, ironically, *does* serve the purpose of providing comparatively affordable education (disregarding its quality) to a large number of not-so-rich and rural folks.

Elitism is resilient: it has always been there throughout human history, and is bound to stay. It is not a problem so long as the quality of opportunities available to the common man is not disproportionately low. Highly visible disparities in, e.g., quality of life and available opportunities, are bound to lead to social discontent and instabilities, sooner or later.

Directions for revival

Excellent universities are built by excellent minds

After all, who will disagree with the vision of building world-class, top-of-the-line institutions for higher education and research? It is, however, necessary to realize that world-class universities are *not* created overnight by wishful thinking or vision statements alone. First of all,

one needs to allow a comparatively long time period for their maturation (at least half-a-century, say, provided everything else is as it should be). Most importantly, world-class organizations are world-class because of world-class minds. Specifically,

- The most crucial prerequisite for building a quality academic institution is the quality of its faculty.
- An excellent university also needs excellent administrators, excellent support staff, and excellent support structures.
- Moreover, an organization that cannot strike the delicate balance between institutional goals and personal growth of *each* of its individual members – by creating, nurturing, and sustaining an environment that respects human dignity and is conducive to personal growth and excellence – is most certainly condemned to mediocrity.

It is a sad fact that mediocrity is the hallmark of the state universities in India. It is an unfortunate fact that such mediocrity is tolerated by academicians. Further, mediocrity and tolerance of mediocrity are tacitly encouraged by the politicians. No matter how much resources and expensive technologies are deployed, without able and motivated faculty, our educational scene is not going to change at all. After all, machines and mechanisms do not create, but minds do – if at all. Most certainly, the faculty must be very carefully selected, nurtured, and given an environment conducive to excellence – only then is it reasonable to expect dedication, originality, creativity, innovation, and cutting-edge research. Let us understand that excellence can neither be guaranteed by mechanical, standardized processes – just as good teaching and quality research cannot be ensured by demanding that a muster be signed everyday – nor can it be measured by any external standards – excellence is a characteristic of the mind. Excellence at personal and organizational levels requires careful nurturing.

Let us also not forget that the quality of the incoming students is perhaps the most singular determinant of the quality of the (human) output of an academic organization. Pathetic counter-examples are seen everywhere around us: even mediocre colleges and university departments are able to thrive only because of excellent students. Characteristically enough, our organizations are quick to capitalize on their students' successes¹⁷. What is ignored is the sad fact that the same students who excelled despite the system could have done even better had they been trusted to the hands of capable and excellent faculty.

Fundamental problems need fundamental resolutions

It is obvious that radical and fundamental changes are warranted if state universities are to flourish again and

become meaningful entities in our society. What is necessary is serious and honest introspection by the corporate world, the government, and the society at large (i.e. all of us). Further, deployment of well-thoughtout, long-term corrective measures to ensure the future of our state university system will need political will to set things right and to act in an intelligent, fundamental fashion. In short, what is required includes:

1. A radical and fundamental reorganization of the entire university structure that originated in outdated acts, statutes, and ordinances.

For smooth operation, this must include (a) an upper bound on the size of a university (including affiliated colleges), (b) complete autonomy for university campus without loss of financial support – from the government or otherwise, (c) no control with, and no interference from, our state governments (and thereby our politicians and state bureaucrats) especially with reference to recruitment, promotions, and assessment of faculty, (d) sanity mechanisms, both internal and external, for safeguarding accountability. Governance of the university must be controlled by the academicians, which is not the case currently.

The operational guidelines for running an academic organization must be decided on the basis of time-tested academic principles, and not by headcounts alone.

2. A conscious effort to bring in – at all niches in the organization – young, fresh, capable, wise, creative, and dedicated minds that are capable of thinking differently. In fact, our education system will never improve unless it is recognized that the quality of the faculty (and students) decides and limits the quality of academics and education.
3. Altruism on part of industry/corporate world, more vision on part of the government, greater social involvement in the form of NGOs, pressure groups, and mass movements, and some long-term thinking by everybody:

- It is in the interest of the corporate sector to take a more mature and long-term view on social welfare, and to support the cause of education to have a well-established, evolving, and responsive education system at all levels. This sector has, by and large and so far, taken a rather myopic view by emphasizing only skill-set-based training, with immediate employability as the only guiding principle. We do see signs that this sector is shifting its views for the better¹⁸, which makes us believe that it can (and will) play a proactive role in shaping our education policy. We also envisage that it will act as a sentinel for maintaining sanity in our education system, in our government's behaviour, and in our self-engrossed politicians who appear to think only as far as the next election at best.

- We also need fundamental measures to end the isolation of education from society and people's lives. The impetus for radically different modes of disseminating education can come only from NGOs¹⁹ and mass movements. Mass movements and pressure groups can also force the government to accept that education, in the long-term interests of the society, *cannot* be treated casually as a for-profit commercial venture and thus be neglected: like public transport, it must be supported aggressively even while allowing for privatization.

Till such times, all reforms enforced from the top will always be dictated by the ruling-class interests. For example, isn't the governments' investment in the form of IITs and IISERs primarily driven to satisfy the needs of a limited sector (i.e. emerging high-tech industry and research establishments) while the aspirations of the average student, ever-increasing in numbers, are left to be taken care of by state universities?

Our lop-sided education pyramid

We have focused exclusively on higher education and state universities in this article. However, we must not forget that the woes of our higher education and state university system clearly have much deeper roots, and are not isolated from similar problems in other related domains. For example, negative characteristics common to all government organizations clearly point to common and fundamental flaws in their structure. We also need to recognize that higher education needs to be considered in the perspective of our entire education system as a whole; we elaborate on this point here.

Universities are institutions at the top of the education pyramid. They represent the society's effort to 'gleam into the future and chart the path today'. The 'success' of a nation depends on its university system, and the success of its university system depends on the success of its primary education system. For too long, we seem to have nurtured the erroneous idea that good universities will somehow breed a good nation without necessarily good schools.

Unless lower structures of the pyramid respond to two main issues, namely, (a) preparing individuals for fundamental human capabilities such as rational thinking, self-awareness (for want of a better word), etc., and (b) employability, there will always be a pressure on the university system to respond to 'current market demands'. Even when these structures do satisfy these needs, the university system should still be responsive to employability needs to some reasonable extent, for this would provide its faculty with a firm grounding in reality (which is yet another reason why university faculty should be teaching undergraduate classes as well).

Visible symptoms of failure of the lower levels of the education pyramid include problems in the learning abilities of an average postgraduate student, and the social need for acquiring higher degrees without innate interest in the subject: this has clearly led to the inflation of grades and degrees, and the devaluation of education. Effectively, in this country, almost all education has become 'the inculcation of the incomprehensible into the indifferent by the incompetent'²⁰, with the end-result that 'men are born ignorant, not stupid; they are made stupid by education'²¹.

Financial considerations

Often the argument is made that people should pay for their own education. This is only partially true. Good education, at all levels, is an investment by a society into its own future. Therefore, the society and hence the government, must invest adequately in establishing and maintaining an affordable and high-quality education system. However, it must also be emphatically mentioned that the private-sector players and foreign educational organizations must be allowed to establish schools and compete. We believe that these are not contradictory. In fact, the government should make sure that our public-sector education system provides stiff competition to all players in the field. Private organizations can also support the social cause by offering inexpensive quality education to economically weaker sections of the society.

The government should also realize (or perhaps stop ignoring) the fact that payoffs of public investment in quality education are not so hidden, they are almost immediate and direct. Case in point: a student's entrepreneurial abilities can be fostered, enhanced and supplemented by quality education, and the hard taxes paid back to the government by such mature, capable, and successful individuals are a *direct* result of the quality of education they received.

To revive or not to revive

Why should the state university system *not* be abandoned in favour of a new and seemingly powerful paradigm for higher education? It is important to have clarity on this.

1. After all, there is nothing wrong, per se, with private universities and the open-door policy, and academics will, ideally speaking, benefit from cross-pollination brought about through such winds of globalization. Also, there is no reason why a well-intentioned and responsible private university cannot support, at least in part, the social welfare cause and function in a sufficiently altruistic manner while ensuring its own survival and sustainability.

2. From a pure 'market' perspective, the supply-side competition introduced by privatization can act as an effective market force that can, in principle, help improve the overall quality of education – this, of course, assumes a firm commitment and will on part of the entire education system, private or public, to excellence, quality, and the social cause.
3. It could be argued that perhaps our entire education system has grown so unwieldy that it must fall under its own weight, and it perhaps makes sense to let it die its natural death for failing to evolve. This will make room for fresh, lean-and-clean alternatives to grow outside of it.

There are at least three reasons why our state university system should be revived:

1. If education is considered a long-term investment by a society in its own future, then our state university system is still the single largest enterprise that has the potential for reaching out to the masses, even when it is inadequate and in a bad shape.
2. This institution has been around for more than half a century (ignoring the pre-independence era). It is probably quicker and economical to revive it instead of investing in a completely new and untested paradigm that may be driven by opportunism more than anything else. To quote John W. Gardner again:

When organizations feel they need an infusion of new talent, they look to their recruitment process. But the largest untapped reservoir of talent is in people already recruited but thereafter neglected.

The quickest road to renewal is the mining of that untapped resource. Among other things it would solve the problem of maintaining an organization that is responsive to both leaders and the people it serves. Vital people, using their gifts to the full, are naturally responsive. People who have stopped growing, who no longer have confidence in the use of their own powers, build bastions of procedure.

John W. Gardner²²

US Civil Service Commission Anniversary Speech, 1996

3. Like Humpty Dumpty precariously balanced on the narrow wall, it may not be possible to revive our state university system *after* it has fallen.

We conclude this article by simply saying that as a society, we must weigh all possibilities wisely and make the right choice considering its long-term consequences and implications. After all, soap and education are not as sudden as a massacre but they are more deadly in the long run²³.

Appendix. Assorted thoughts

Quite clearly, there are a number of important issues that have not been even touched upon. We present below a loose collection of thoughts on some such issues and possibilities.

Separation of undergraduate from postgraduate education. There are over 5000 colleges affiliated to over 200 universities in this country. The bulk of undergraduate education is handled by the colleges, where the quality of education is, by and large, a suspect. Is this a correct model, and do we have any better alternatives?

The real problem with privatization. Basic laws of economics imply that competition is a prerequisite for quality. However, it must be emphasized that the competition must be on the *supply* side. Suppliers of a service – education in our context – must be the ones to compete for providing the service. In contrast, the ‘License Raj’ mechanism uses all state power to ensure that the competition stays on the demand side (i.e., the people who have to compete amongst themselves to access the service). If competition shifts to the supply side, even with the profit motive, the supplier cannot be *casual* about the service offered.

The real problem with privatization of education – at least in the Indian context and in the current state of affairs – is not the profit motive, but the fact that profits can be achieved while being *casual* about the quality of service provided.

Vested interests. There is a reason why our power brokers are unlikely to change the state of affairs vis-a-vis the university system, state or otherwise, without external pressures. Our state is characterized by an attitude of ‘taking from Peter to pay Paul’. Its sense of power and existence is crucially dependent on the eternal existence of the poor so that it can assign itself the purpose of ‘correcting the wrong’ by distributing resources. This, in turn, implies controlling the resources, their production, and their distribution. As long as control is exercised over the education sector, mass illiteracy will always result, even if the rest of the economy is liberated. Power-broking is then easy since the competition is a demand-side competition. In contrast, the moment the electorate is wise, it will exert performance pressure on the State!

Mass movements. As a possibility for a mass movement, it is tempting to speculate if there can be, in principle, a *sustainable* equivalent of the open-source movement that radically transformed the software world.

To have a sustainable equivalent of the open source movement in our education system, we need to find a crucial ‘law that is invertible’. The genius of Richard Stallman²⁴ lies not only in the concept, but more in the fact that he saw the then copyright law in its inverted

form – as ‘copyleft’. While the existence of an invertible law was *necessary*, the existence of the internet and the social awareness of what freedom means was *sufficient* to disseminate the idea and thus gather momentum eventually. This legal window of opportunity was useful in raising the scale of the movement to the extent that today, after a quarter of a century, it is a formidable force and is still growing.

It is not clear which invertible law could become the foundation of an open-source education movement in the Indian context. One candidate is the constitutional guarantee for education of each and every child, but the mechanism to disseminate the idea of contributing for freedom is not effective because we, as a society, still do not know what freedom means.

As a reflection on our national character, we Indians happen to be one of the largest *consumers* of open-source software and, at the same time, the most insignificant *contributors* to the open-source software movement.

1. Gardner, J. W., *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?*, Harper, New York, 1961. For biographical details on John W. Gardner (1912–2002), see <http://www.pbs.org/johngardner/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_W._Gardner
2. An extreme and purist version of this point of view goes as far as saying that the purpose of a university is ‘to give the society what it needs, and not what it wants’; see Dijkstra, E. W., *The Strengths of the Academic Enterprise* (1994), available as <http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/EWD/ewd11xx/EWD1175.PDF>. A problem with this view is that it is at best difficult to draw a clean boundary line between *needs* and *wants*.
3. Over the next two decades, the country’s middle class will grow from about 5% of the population to more than 40% and create the world’s fifth-largest consumer market. *The McKinsey Quarterly*, August 2007; http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Tracking_the_growth_of_Indias_middle_class_2032. See also: Baensch, R. E., India: Demographics for Publishers, *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 2007, **23**, 262–269.
4. We consider all post-10 + 2 education as higher education.
5. This also includes many extensive discussions by serious individuals who are deeply concerned about the situation. See, e.g. the *Education in India* blog; http://prayatna.typepad.com/education/higher_education/, or <http://www.deeshaa.org/>
6. Gardner, J. W., *Self-Renewal: The Individual and The Innovative Society*, Harper and Row, New York, 1964.
7. Case in point: recent fiascos over the attempted deployment of the ATKT and the 90 : 10 admission policies with an eye on the upcoming assembly elections.
8. The University of Pune is generally considered one of the better/best State Universities in India. For example, it has the NAAC (<http://naacindia.org/>) 5-star status, and it is No. 2 for technology amongst Indian Universities according to the THES-QS 2008 World University Rankings; http://www.topuniversities.com/worldUniversityrankings/results/2008/subject_rankings/technology/
9. The word ‘academician’ is used throughout this article with the following connotation: Academician is to academics what mathematician is to mathematics. By academics, we imply ‘scholarly activities of a school or university, as classroom studies or research projects’; <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/academics>
10. Durant, W., *The Story of Civilization* (Vol. 3: Caesar and Christ; Epilogue: Why Rome Fell), Simon and Schuster, New York, 1935.
11. A critique of this model of academics can be found in a perceptive article by Sunil Mukhi that appeared in the *Times of India*, Pune

- Edition, 15 January 2006. As of the date of this article, this article can be found at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/SUNDAY/SPECIALS/All_That_Matters/Academic_partnership/articleshow/msid-1372152,curpg-1.cms. It is interesting to note that Sunil Mukhi, well-known physicist/string theorist, belongs to the very institute, the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research, that was founded by Homi J. Bhabha himself.
12. Irawati Karve (1905–70), anthropologist. R. N. Dandekar (1909–2001), vedic scholar and indologist; V. S. Huzurbazar (1919–91), statistician; M. R. Bhide (1923–94), physicist.
 13. This is intended as a statement of fact and not of judgment, and we harbour no enmity for the Government or its agencies, or the IISERs and IUCs. In fact, even isolated pockets of excellence are welcome in the present state of affairs! The key point here is the neglect of the state university system, and not the formation of additional elite institutions.
 14. Quote attributed to Norman Douglas (1868–1952), British writer.
 15. The Nobel prize, yet another Indian (pipe)dream, provides (to those in power) a convenient, popular, and unfalsifiable proof of lack of quality output from our scientific community. What is either not realized (or conveniently ignored) is the fact that a Nobel is an incidental statistical outcome of a sufficient-sized, quality-driven system that enshrines excellence as one of the core values.
 16. The credit for coining this apt term, to the best of our knowledge, belongs to Prof. Padmakar V. Panat (1943–2009), physicist and teacher par excellence.
 17. Which is as pathetic as Suresh Kalmadi covertly claiming credit for Abhinav Bindra's Olympic gold medal: see, e.g. <http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Give-credit-to-SFI-too-for-Abhinav-success-Kalmadi/363022/>
 18. The Knowledge Commission (<http://knowledgecommission.gov.in/>) reports are a clear example. Another example is industry-supported community efforts for education; e.g. a Forbes-Marshall-sponsored community centre for underprivileged children in Kasarwadi, Pune, another similar effort supported by Veritas/Cognizant, the Aundh area, Pune, etc.
 19. Highly respectable and well-known examples of such NGOs include Eklavya (<http://eklavya.in/>) in Madhya Pradesh, and the Kerala Shashtra Sahitya Parishad (<http://www.kssp.org.in/>) in Kerala.
 20. Quote attributed to John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), British economist. An acerbic variant of the same, but specific to the Indian context, reads ' $10 + 2 + n = 0$ for all $n > 0$ '.
 21. Quote attributed to Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), British philosopher, logician, mathematician.
 22. Gardner, J. W., in his 1996 US Civil Service Commission Anniversary Speech, as quoted at <http://www.pbs.org/johngardner/>
 23. Quote attributed to Mark Twain (1835–1910), American writer and humorist.
 24. Richard Stallman (1953), American software freedom activist and founder of the GNU Project (<http://www.gnu.org/>) and the Free Software Foundation (<http://www.fsf.org/>). The word 'free' here is to be interpreted as in 'freedom'. For more information, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Stallman and <http://www.stallman.org/>

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We dedicate this article to the memory of our teacher, long-time friend, and colleague, Prof. Padmakar V. Panat (1943–2009), who always held a deep concern for the state (and fate) of our education system.

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