

UNDERGRADUATES: A PLEA FOR REVERSE DISCRIMINATION

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An important factor that contributes to student unrest in our universities is the widespread feeling among undergraduates who are underprivileged that many of the teachers are at best indifferent to their problems. While there is often a communication gap between the teachers and the students, the diverse problems facing the students are not fully appreciated by many teachers. The result is that teachers and students are unable to establish a rapport. This, in turn, results in the gradual but steady breakdown of the moral authority which the university lecturers in general had over their students.

This state of affairs reinforces the anxieties, frustrations and sense of despair among the students caused by such factors as poverty, lack of proper accommodation, and poor prospects for employment after graduation. Many undergraduates suffer in silence while others express their feelings through organized protests and other forms of overt behaviour.

The situation prevailing in today's campuses necessitates a fresh approach to student problems. The provision of basic educational facilities and student bursaries alone is grossly inadequate. Most students need much more than that if they were to overcome the serious handicaps originating from their impoverished backgrounds and make full use of university education.

Many students from poor families in the peripheral areas have had no opportunities for acquiring life skills which are usually available to their more fortunate urban counterparts. Given their poverty and social background, they are unable to acquire such skills on their own while they are at the university. The result is that, most often, many of them do not obtain anything other than the university degree certificate which alone is not sufficient to secure a place in the changing social structure of our country.

It has become increasingly evident that many university students also suffer from serious psychological and personal problems owing to such conditions as tensions and conflicts within their families, political victimization of family members, and alcoholism in the family. Our universities are ill-equipped to offer any worthwhile support to such students.

Given the above background, universities can no longer persist with the conventional arrangements for teaching and student welfare. There is an urgent need to review the existing situation and to develop strategies to deal with the changing circumstances. This would no doubt require certain changes in the allocation of resources and the organizational structure within the university system.

From the point of view of social justice, there is in fact a need for a policy of 'reverse discrimination' in favour of the disadvantaged undergraduates who constitute the bulk of the university population. Programmes of welfare, skill and cultural development, and personal counselling have to be developed and implemented so that they can make full use of university education. It is only on the basis of such a strategy that the concept of social justice can become truly meaningful in the context of the present day universities of Sri Lanka.

Implementation of these programmes requires resources, organizational development and a certain degree of commitment on the part of the university staff; all of which are scarce at our universities. The need of the hour is to mobilize resources, effect organizational changes and promote staff participation to formulate and implement innovative programmes of reverse discrimination in favour of disadvantaged students. This is perhaps the only way to prevent many rural students from returning home disillusioned after three or four years of university education.

Pravada welcomes contributions from the university community on significant events and issues ON CAMPUS

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