

The recent Supreme Court judgment declaring the establishment of Private Universities as illegal has evoked varied responses. The educationists have by and large welcomed it as a timely corrective to the mushrooming of teaching shops while the thousands of students who are enrolled in these institutions have expressed anguish over their uncertain future. The recent piece (Open Page, The Hindu, March 8, 2005) by Mr. K. Venkata Reddy is along familiar lines of lauding the judgment and launching a harangue against “privatization of higher education”. His arguments though, are not quite logical, though there can be no doubts about the good intentions behind them. Let me elaborate.

Mr. Reddy’s basic point is that these private universities were nothing but “teaching shops” which will “devalue the status of public-funded universities and place the captains of industry in charge of the frontier sectors of information and knowledge”. From this, Mr. Reddy goes on to argue that the establishment of private universities is “but to pave the way for privatizing the present Central and State universities”. I am not quite sure I understand the logical reasoning behind such an assertion. Is it obvious that the State wants to abdicate its responsibility in higher education by allowing the private sector to open “teaching shops”? By the same logic, allowing the establishment of private medical colleges (many of which are even worse than teaching shops!) should really be seen as a way for the State to exit the field of medical education!

Of course, there cannot be any logical connection between the two assertions. And that is what they are- assertions about assumed intent on the part of the State as to its motivations and future course of action. It is nobody’s contention that the private universities were beacons of excellence or anything more than teaching shops. But is it necessarily bad to have “teaching shops” when by Mr. Reddy’s own assertions, the total enrollment in the higher education is only about 6% of the population? Of course, the State should significantly enhance the resource allocation for higher education. However, experience has shown that this is usually done at the cost of the primary and the secondary sectors.

I have not analyzed the enrolment patterns of the private universities but I suspect that the majority of students in the private universities are primarily those who cannot get admission in the State funded universities. It is hard to imagine middle class students opting to pay huge amounts to an unknown teaching shop if they could get admission in a well known State University. In this case, the choice is really between getting a degree and not getting one.

The other reason why some students might choose a private university over a State university could be because of the wider choice of courses being offered. While the quality of these courses could be suspect, they at least provide the students with some choice to pursue off-the-beaten-track courses. These could include courses in cyber crime or television script writing or accessory design! A globalizing economy would presumably need skills of a much wider variety than

those offered at our Universities where even the existing syllabi are usually hopelessly out of date.

Private Universities are teaching shops- but then so are most of the private medical and engineering colleges. Does it mean that we close them down? I am sure Mr. Reddy would agree that the solution lies in tightening the regulatory control (as is presumably the case with Medical colleges)to ensure standards and not in declaring them illegal.

The public universities in our country need to be strengthened. There is a need for rationalizing of the fee structure with ample money being provided for means-based financial assistance or a student loan scheme. The students who pay thousands of rupees as school fees should be made to pay the actual cost of higher education at the tertiary level. The State should continue to subsidize higher education through improving the infrastructure and providing a safety net for the economically weaker sections in the form of free-ships and low interest loans. It should also expand the reach of higher education, though not at the cost of the primary and secondary sectors. But how does the proliferation of private universities threaten any of these laudable goals is something which defies logic?

It is not a question of whether we are allowing the private sector to enter higher education. That is already there in the form of huge “trusts” and “Societies” which run the money making machines called professional colleges. I see nothing in principle wrong with private universities being allowed to operate. The State should ensure that proper regulatory mechanisms are in place to make sure that these adhere to certain norms and standards. Apart from this, if the elite of this country want to pay enormous quantities of money for their wards to go to private universities of dubious antecedents, so be it.