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### The Status of MSU Colleges: A Study of the System, the Students, and the Teachers

#### Introduction

Access to Higher Education is more a desire than a right. Every institution that offers higher education has limitation pertaining to the number of seats per course, availability of classrooms, labs, and other infrastructure. Therefore, more number of institutions – colleges and universities – are said to be required to cater to the demand. In spite of establishing 40,000 colleges in the nation, we still find inadequacy, as statistics point to just one-fourth of the potential learners have the access to higher learning. Although the Report of the National Knowledge Commission points to the failure of the college system against the university system, the universities in Tamil Nadu are shrouded with controversies as a day to day basis putting the viewpoint of the Commission upside down. Universities were established to remain as role models to the public in fostering moral values and national ideals. This can be effectively done only through establishing the link with the deprived sections of the society. At the same time, the limitation of resources and demand for specific subjects has to be taken into consideration. Way back in the year 2000, the Manonmaniam Sundaranar University located in Tirunelveli established its first college at Sankarankovil with undergraduate courses such as English Literature, Commerce, Business Administration, Mathematics and Computer Science.

Establishing a new institution is an extension of power for an administration which seeks to expand its sway. For the beneficiaries such as the students who intend to study and the teachers who derive salary for livelihood, it is a holy site that has potential to alter their lives. If this view of the beneficiaries is shared by the administration a harmonious environment of overall learning would emerge. The present article seeks to explore whether such a harmonious environment has been introduced or not. In view of the controversies that marked the university administration in the state these days based chiefly on money power, it

becomes important to view the colleges from an economic deterministic angle and find out whether the colleges also reflect the general trends in the university. Therefore, a hypothetical statement that reads ‘the MSU Colleges have adequately contributed to the development of the marginal sections of the society’ has been framed to guide the course of the enquiry. The sources for the study include Government Orders, Court Judgments, University Acts, Public Opinions, and etc. Though the article discusses the detail of all the colleges it takes two colleges – Nagalapuram and Sankarankovil – into purview for assessment. Moreover, it is a kind of participative method that has been applied to the study as the present researcher is an insider of the system. However, a broad framework of the system, in general, is drafted first in which the outline of the problems of the students and teachers are discussed.

### **The System**

A university has a social responsibility. Unlike a unitary university, an affiliating university has to necessarily look externally for its very prestige is derived from the influence it has on the public in general and degree offering colleges in particular. Moreover, its growth and achievement are linked with the mission of including the deprived. Whether the higher education that still follows – after independence as also the emergence of the multi-polar world – the Western model is really useful to the culturally bound rural beneficiaries is a debatable one. Yet, their exclusion would lead towards unequal competition not only in the assumed site of social status but also in the job market wherein the predominant requirement is for a degree. Considerable time, human resource and money could be saved if the distance mode of spreading higher education is effectively handled for the ultimate motive of higher education – as outlined in the National Knowledge Commission – was the development of knowledge. Knowledge as such is an enlightened awakening in search of truth and understanding the purpose of life in its entirety through select disciplines like literature, economics, mathematics, technology etc and when the search of truth takes institutional form it should logically create groups of potential people with competence to lead the society in their immediate neighborhood and eventually the nation at large. In such a context, the icon of Manonmaniam Sundaranar in itself is unique and distinguishable from other personalities such as Bharathiar, Bharathidasan, Periyar, Kamaraj, and MGR. These personalities did not benefit from the institutionalized form of higher education unlike Annadurai and Manonmaniam Sundaranar and the latter alone devoted himself to the cause of higher education throughout. A university was founded in his name by the state government to stand for the ideals for which Sundaranar stood as a teacher and creative writer.

There had been a lot of confusion in knowledge dissemination that ranges from even government and teachers looking down a degree gained through the distance education mode as there remained a mismatch in the number of papers vis-à-vis the regular mode to the poor quality of study materials offered to the students by the universities themselves. Further, in the recent past the UGC ordered the universities to confine their student admission to the 'university area' mentioned in their Acts, and subsequently, authorized only a few universities (Madras, Bharathidasan, and Alagappa) to conduct distance education courses. Strangely, the Indira Gandhi National Open University which has been considered role-model in distance education has stopped offering many undergraduate courses and remains reluctant to startup courses in regional languages. The decline and fall of the Annamalai University which had been popular among distance education learners through its innovative programmes like linguistics, music etc and standard study materials at the least in select disciplines has closed the student community of choices. By and large, the system does not favour knowledge development by making the students read and think in unconventional methods against spending three years in class rooms gathering bits and pieces of information reflected in a mark-sheet. Over and above the historical problem of the government delinking its responsibility over the universities by seeking the latter to generate its own funds by conducting distance education, the Manonmaniam Sundaranar University in its turn has converted its ten colleges into centres of distance learning with the promise to share the revenue that otherwise goes to private stakeholders though with poor response.

As part of the social commitment, the colleges were started in educationally backward areas and the target group was the economically marginalized people. But ironically, the fee structure does not reflect the social commitment which comes close to that of a self-financing college. Therefore, hardly a few give first priority to these colleges and only knock its doors when admissions are closed in other government aided-colleges. Admissions remain open till one month of other colleges closing their admissions. This year (2018-19) the Higher Education Ministry of the state government has ordered to increase 20 percent of existing seats in view of the demand in all colleges and the casualty of this decision are the university colleges. Working out a proportion i.e. 20:80 (higher share for the university) in the fees collected from the students the university pays rent to the building where the college functions. In the case of low student admissions, the rent amount goes down and there also remains no scope for an annual increase of rent in the agreement. Therefore, those who provided the built area for rent have severe dissent not only on this count but also because of the failure on the university side to settle the rent amount on time. In Nagalapuram, the

landlord locked the gate of the college and stopped the students from entering the campus. In fact, this is an erstwhile match industry with rooves predominantly of white asbestos sheets thought to generate cancer. Until 2017, the members of the staff and the students unable to bear the heat – particularly during summers – preferred to sit under the few neem trees where classes were conducted. Since Nagalapuram is a constituent college government provided funds to build own structures which partially relieved the stakeholders from the problem. Yet the majestic building failed to attract the students who still give last priority to the college possibly because of the comparatively higher fees collected.

The budget allocation meant for a college is a meager amount and for a year it arrives at Rs 1.5 lakh (goes marginally up and down with students' strength). A 25 percent of this amount can be utilized for travel and dearness allowance by the principal, teaching and non-teaching members of the staff while they visit the university on official purpose, to meet expenses on minor repair works, buy toilet cleaning material, making the photocopy, repair of computer and photostatting machines and buying stationeries. Another 25 percentage can be spent on buying books (for all the 6 departments in the case of Sankarankovil College). A 20 percent can be used for purchasing sports materials, attending sports meets in outstations and conducting of sports day. A 10 percent shall be used for college day celebration and the remaining 20 percent will be provided for the 'National Service Scheme' and the 'Youth Red Cross.' Although the amount can be spent by the official in-charge such as the Physical Director, Programme Officer of NSS, Programme Officer of Youth Red Cross, and etc with the concurrence of the Principal, the interference of the university officials delay every process. The Principal cannot initiate a 'Note Order' and it is the Director of MSU Colleges who does that on behalf of all the 10 Principals of the colleges. As such his office is one that assumes a 'demi-god' status. Usually, a professor at the university holds that position. The highest responsibility of this office is to coordinate and conduct an annual convocation function. For the past few years, it was alleged that the amount collected from the students is disproportionate to the expenses meted out. It was also widely suggested to conduct the 'Convocation Ceremony' in the respective colleges itself for it will motivate the on-roll students and the general public and contribute in eroding conventional ways of thinking and approaching life.

### **The Students**

The colleges as trajectories from the pursuit of knowledge have failed to make the students realize the purpose of learning and their first loyalty is to the caste to which they

belong, and more so, in the case of the male students. In Sankarankovil (assumable with its proximity and similarity in cultural setting also in Kadayanallur and Puliangudi) many students have thread tied around their wrist indicative of their caste and view teachers as representative of a caste rather than an impartial and objective personnel with command in the subject. In most of the colleges, the uniform has been issued to evoke the idea of equality but in vain. The female students hardly view education offered here as a liberating force and they chiefly understand the system as a period of respite till marriage is arranged and some even get married during the degree course and either continue or discontinue after attaining married status. The bane of the system is the examination pattern wherein students were assessed through internal tests altogether three in a semester. Textbooks (most of them cannot be distinguished from a guide) are issued from where direct questions are asked. Malpractice during the exams was common and girl students were no exemption to it. The teacher who is vigilant and attempts to prevent malpractice becomes unpopular and cooperation to such teachers in the classroom is only minimal. The scripts of the internal exams have to be valued and marks should be awarded. Here again those teachers who do not follow a liberal approach becomes unpopular. Easy scoring of marks through a liberal evaluation pattern is the expectation of an average student and a realization about hard work having correspondence with better socio-economic status in the future remains a matter beyond imagination.

The unions of the students' have failed to provide proper leadership. The Students Federation of India (SFI) is the largest organization in the Southern Tamil Nadu region and popular among the students. It has the history of utilizing every opportunity to spark fire – regardless of whether the issue is consistent with their ideology or not – and gather the attention of the neutral students. The need of the time is for multi-language proficiency whereas the SFI had supported. However, it most often functions through the influential office holders of the MUTA than the proper party leaders and the former used the fire in the students union to espouse their cause. The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) is gradually attempting to create a momentum among the students and some of their leaders are themselves teachers in the university colleges. Both SFI and ABVP have never missed an opportunity to negotiate with the university administration and secure their interest and protect their members underplaying existing rules, law and justice. The administrators of the university also establish a friendship with the students' wing of the political parties so that they could contain the waves of unpopularity with an ease that at times attempt to submerge

them. One of the SFI office bearers who caused the closure of the Nagalapuram College three times through strikes later made the administration to create the Economics Department in the same college and became its first member and head of the department to the dismay of the members of the faculty there. Although unions are considered only as hooligan elements by the administration in general and they do not have public sympathy, they were able to meet their goals at the cost of dissemination of the ideology.

Procuring admission into a college – irrespective of the course – is considered as arriving at a key milestone that would revolutionarily alter the fortune of a family by many a parent. In some cases the parents are reported to discourage the students from attending the college possibly they know the reality of the job market and little use of higher learning. Whatsoever, physical arrival to a college in itself remains a challenge for some students. One male student of mathematics undergraduate course attends Sankarankovil College every day from a place located North of Tirunelveli city. Once after reaching Tirunelveli bus stand he goes straight to the Amma Unavagam (a government-run subsidized restaurant for the sake of the economically deprived sections of the society) and takes breakfast only if it is available. On several occasions, he attends class without his hunger being quenched. Most often fellow students – usually generous-minded girl students – come forward to share their food. In the evening he goes to a restaurant in Tirunelveli and accompanies his mother in cleaning utensils and earns a little money that is used for transportation and college fees. It is not that the union of the students does not know the struggle of individuals like this but they do not want to spend their political energy in counteracting such realities unless issues like ‘suicide of Rohith Vemula’ spark.

Innovation in curriculum competitive with the emerging players in higher education sector like the Jindal group is only a distant dream although traditional extension and extra-curricular activities are commonly followed in all of the university colleges. In Sankarankovil, a female student’s talent in poetry writing was encouraged by two teachers who caused the publication of her collection. The motive is to help the student make a breakthrough in educational and intellectual spheres and reach higher levels of learning and further contribute to the creative world. Nevertheless, the student preferred to get married and leave further academic pursuits once for all to the disappointment of the teachers who encouraged her. The teachers of these kinds are role-models to the students. But apart from contribution for personal development students also look into the pay structure and lifestyle

of the teachers, and often, they wonder how they could overcome problems of poverty when their teachers at late 30s and early 40s could not do that despite being talented. Many teachers (in certain cases this include also female teachers) remain unmarried despite crossing the average marriageable age in the realization of the insufficiency of the income they receive. The situation is quite different in Nagalapuram. The vulnerability of the students is used to lodge sexual harassment complaints and foster caste chauvinism. In such a context, one student even went to the extent of attempting to murder a teacher making a mockery of the quality of education, the system of administration and usefulness of learning.

### **The Teachers**

If performance is taken as an indicator, a teacher cannot be distinguished as qualified and unqualified. In a department with mixed members of these types of teachers, a so-called unqualified staff had produced good results and many have demonstrated their sincerity in teaching and development of co-curricular activities. The system does not give recognition to the hard work they have infused in the place of a Ph.D. degree or an eligibility certificate. Even the confusion in prescribing the qualification remains fully unsettled regardless of these teachers. Between the eligibility certificate issued through National Eligibility Test as well as State Eligibility Test and the Ph.D., the government of late has placed much importance to the latter degree. The quality of Ph.D. theses, elaborate and confusing norms meant for the research degree that is changed every now and then which have to be learnt separately and the corruption that has crept into Ph.D. related administrative aspects are separate issues apart from the challenge of finding a guide in the subjects like English Literature, Computer Science, and Business Administration. The scope for the independent pursuance of Ph.D. research is also closed for these teachers who are branded temporary despite more than 10 years of service. Even those who completed Ph.D. degree through part-time mode are harassed by new employment norms that tend to lay down Ph.D. degree 'under regular mode' as an essential criterion for appointment. Thus entangled in a perplexing situation their employable period is spent in the colleges where they placed all their hopes and together they strengthened the MUTA which they believed will protect their future.

The MUTA was viewed as mischievous element by the university administration over the years in general and of the present in particular. The administration kept waiting for an opportunity to weaken the Association. A golden opportunity arrived with the litigation filed by Prof. Ananthakrishnan (a leading unionist) at the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court. In this case – it is said that the targets were a few teachers serving in the Muslim Arts

College, Thiruvithancode – Prof. Ananthakrishnan challenged the appointment of unqualified teaching staff in the entire university area while qualified candidates were available. The Court decreed in his favour and the university administration which has violated court orders on several instances took a serious stand to obey the judgment this time and sack the unqualified teaching members of the staff. As fixed by the Court, 31 March 2018 was announced as the date of reforming the college faculty and also undertook to increase the pay of the qualified staff to Rs 20,000 from 15,000. The news was received with a mixed response by the unqualified faculty members. They believed that the university administration will not underestimate their services and sacrifice their interest. Even if they divorce their interest, they believed strongly that suitable candidates will not be available. It took time to realize the seriousness of the case which they thought had been filed by the Bureau of NET holders. But lately when they realized it was by one among their union members, they neither did request the litigant to file a ‘Set Aside’ petition nor they collectively filed a ‘Review Petition’ in the High Court to consider their plight. In its place, the aggrieved resorted to appealing to the sense of mercy for which individually and in groups, they visited various authorities of the university administration. Whatever, they were sure that the qualified colleagues and the students who benefitted from their services will not make their cause with them.

The teachers have hardly cultivated an atmosphere characterized by camaraderie, tolerance, mutual understanding, and peace in the colleges. They have come to view everyone as a potential competitor and vaguely constructed an abstract hierarchy based on their ability and aspired to occupy postings meant for co-curricular development. Defaming petitioning indiscriminate of age, gender, caste, and religion was the order that characterized many colleges. Every teacher believed that by quality he is superior and better than others – irrespective of distinction as qualified and unqualified division – and the unqualified remains convinced that it was only the fortune that has enabled a few to hold the approved qualification. It is also alleged that even SET certificate can be bought by corrupt means. There were vague attempts to publish their writings and similar aspiration to equip oneself. Rather, each one of them evolved a seniority list with their favourites at the top which has no place in the gaze of the university administration and it maintained a good book on its own and considered the employment of these teachers as a temporary stopgap arrangement until they find qualified employment elsewhere. Unfortunately, these teachers either because of the corruption present in the appointment of permanent teachers or owing to the self-convincing

attitude continue in the job for several years although the pay is lesser than that of a last grade worker in the government sector.

In such a context, the news of the government taking over the administration of more than 40 constituent colleges was announced. As said already, just a few days before that, the university had announced a hike in salary by Rs 5,000 for qualified teachers along with the ouster of unqualified ones. Increase in pay as also the news of the government takeover was believed by many as going to solve their problem of under-employment. Even the unqualified members of the teaching staff expected the 'face of the divinity' of the government to look into the affairs and treat them with an accommodative spirit, consider their services and provide a lien period to qualify themselves. But further information of the government went beyond expectation and it disowned even the qualified staff and indirectly made it clear that the qualified have to take the route via the Teachers Recruitment Board. The latter body announced a vacancy of 1883 college teachers in its schedule wherein it declared the first week of May 2018 for releasing advertisement for the post and last week of July 2018 as the date for announcing results. But even the advertisement has not been released by the first week of August 2018 and even if it is made issues like court cases, election code of conduct etc would delay further progress. Moreover, corruption for which the recruiting body was well known in the past added to the worry. Hence, the TRB route suggested by the government has caused severe strain and suspicion in the minds of the teachers who started preferring administration by the university. All these apart, with the excuse of government takeover, the university rolled back its earlier announcement in salary hike.

### **Conclusion**

Without a doubt, the system has to be reformed. It appears as if the officials have imprisoned themselves in the system insofar the exercise of the Right to Information and growing defamatory writings in social as well as mass media are put to practice. But what has to be observed in the case of MSU Colleges vis-à-vis the university administration is the need to improve funding. Some of the Physical Directors have expected well-performing players to get defeated for lack of funds to support participation in the next level. Students on their part like the mathematics student mentioned above belong to the economically marginal segment of the society and deserve to be institutionally supported. Although it so appears to be a waste to have published the poetry collection of a girl student who preferred an early marriage, it is only a sowing of a seed which may give results in the future. The teachers who selflessly

encourage such activities ought to be paid best salary in the field and should be made to be followed by other colleagues. It is the development of the students which consoles the teachers and the hard work of the teachers that set the milestone for the students both of which are inseparable. Hence in a poetic sense, the hypothesis that reads ‘the MSU Colleges have adequately contributed to the development of the marginal sections of the society’ has been proved.