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Central university as development pill

CHITTA BARAL

IN the old Sufi story about the wise-fool, Mullah Nasruddin, the mullah, is seen searching for a key under a street lamp. Helpful passers-by join in, but to no avail. They ask the mullah if he is sure he lost the key there. The mullah replied that he actually lost it yards away but since it was dark he thought of looking for it under the street lamp. For close to 60 years, India has had reservations to help SCs/STs, who are severely under-represented among Indians, with higher education. Yet it has reservations for them in institutions far away from where the target population lives.

India seems to have missed learning from the American experience with respect to the higher education of African-Americans, Hispanics and native Americans. Together with affirmative action in universities across the US, the higher education institutions that significantly impacted these populations were the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). HBCUs were situated in towns and cities with a very high Blacks or Hispanic populations. For example, more than 80 per cent of African-American doctors and dentists were trained by the two traditionally Black colleges of medicine and dentistry, Meharry and Howard. In other words, even

though all institutions in the US provide affirmative action, the impact of the HBCUs on the higher education of African Americans is huge.

While outside of the Northeast many lists of backward districts, many of them tribal dominated, have been made and special programmes targeting them have been formulated, none of these programmes have had an adequate impact. In this regard, let us take the example of the ill-famed KBK districts of Orissa. They show up in most lists of backward districts and have a very high tribal population.

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After it was realised that short-term 'band aid' solutions did not quite do much to address the backwardness of this region, several special programmes, both Central and state, have focused on the KBK districts since 1995. However, none of them have had an operational higher education component. This has restricted their effectiveness. More often than not, teachers, doctors and other professionals treat a posting in these districts as a punishment and do not show up.

The problem of not having enough home-grown doctors, teach-

ers and other professionals cannot be solved just by having quotas for STs in various Central institutions in far-flung places like Delhi. This is because, having reservations in Delhi University and hoping that tribals from KBK will go there, get education and come back to KBK, is not realistic. Obviously, what is needed are more higher education opportunities in backward areas.

This is also supported by data that shows the success of Central funding of higher education institutions in the Northeast and Delhi. According to the NSSO figures, at-

tion about the need for a multi-campus Central university for the KBK region. In general, following the establishment of Central universities in each of the states of the Northeast, which is scheduled to happen very soon, the HRD ministry and the Planning Commission should establish multi-campus Central universities in the backward and tribal district clusters.

The Central universities should have disciplines beyond the traditional liberal arts, such as education, medicine, nursing, sports, sciences, agriculture and engineering. They should have linkages with the primary and secondary education initiatives in these districts and have associated colleges imparting vocational programmes. They should have significant reservations, perhaps for a certain time period, for the targeted groups. Above all, their locations should be based on impartial criteria. It is important that several such colleges distributed across towns in a particular district cluster are grouped together as a Central university — like Delhi University. The Central university tag will attract faculty from all over India.

*The writer is professor,
Arizona State University
chitta@gmail.com*

EMAIL

chitta@gmail.com

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