INDIA NEEDS BETTER COLLEGES

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(Mains GS2: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.)

Context:

- As many as 12 Indian institutions have achieved top 100 positions in the QS World University Rankings by Subject 2021, with three Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) making it to top 50 this time.
- With the applause and the spotlight, there couldn't be a better time to look within.
- Acknowledge that India has many colleges offering higher education but typically they are not very good, and that the road to improvement seems long and hard.

Performances of Indian colleges are not good: systemic reasons:

- The ultimate driver of quality in education is desire within the student.
- Today, with a huge number of students going to college, education is tied strongly to career prospects.
- If studying and thinking harder do not lead to even a decent chance of career improvement, it is natural for most students to lose academic ambition.
- Very few jobs actually require the highest quality education like the best academic and research jobs.
- A limited number of jobs are fairly challenging, and for them a reasonable education from a good college serves well.
- There are such jobs in consulting, data science, and other growth areas that presently cast a wide net.
- Many jobs require lower skills, and pay poorly like ordinary sales, delivery, and small factory jobs.
- In such a system, it may not be worthwhile or even practical for a mediocre college to unilaterally improve itself.

The IIT system:

- Many students work extremely hard to secure admission in IITs, but then they lose motivation and drift towards near-certain graduation.
- IIT admission is a value signal to future employers who do not see much relevance in the actual syllabus.
- The entry wall is high, the exit wall is low, and the four-year syllabus is an obstacle course between the student and an employer with whom eye contact was made from atop the entry wall itself.
- Students of varied subjects thus remain uninterested in their core syllabi.
- They focus on social activities, organise college events, build coding skills, and so on, and seek jobs in the hot area of the day, such as data science.
- Lower-ranked colleges may attract a slightly different mix of employment prospects, some in core areas.
- But as we move away from high ranked colleges, career prospects become rapidly poorer.
- In many colleges, both good and bad ones, high grades correlate only loosely with career outcomes.

Problems faced by colleges:

- For college to be improved, it needs to convince society that it deserves to displace the pre-eminent colleges at the top.
- Those top colleges are backed by history and enjoy incumbency, attract the best faculty and students, and are working hard, too.
- The arithmetic is plain. Out of 1,000 colleges, 900 will not be in the top 100.
- For the 400th college to improve itself, its students must first see useful value in a better education.
- That requires system-wide growth in opportunity. Such growth cannot be legislated from above. It must occur organically, from below.

Stake holders for organic growth of the colleges:

The policy makers:

- At the top are policymakers. They could steer the country toward greater growth.
- They are trying and have achieved many things.
- In recent years, however, our demographics have caught up with us.
- We have more than 650 million people under age 25.
- No other country is close. We need more than policies.

Industry:

- It faces a learning curve for technology. Countries that wish to lead must develop their own technology, even at high cost.
- Indian industry can often choose between importing slightly older technology from outside or developing things in-house.
- A slow growth in the latter has begun and may pull our college system upward over time.
- This path is long and slow, but also welcome and desirable.

College teachers:

- For a college to flourish, it needs many students who compete to enroll. The competition to get into our few good colleges is strong.
- Our nationally renowned degree colleges which admit based on board marks are frequently forced to set very high cutoffs.
- The need for more engineering colleges, for many students who are clearly good enough, has led to the creation of several private colleges that teach well in large volumes.
- Quality is improving. College teachers raise their game as their employers aim higher, and as their students bring more into the classroom.

The students:

- If students demand better instruction, colleges will sooner or later supply it.
- For example, a multitude of students writing on social media, saying lecturers in a certain college are subpar, would probably force the college to improve its game.
- Similarly, a student writing widely that a college has better lecturers than others may help it attract better students and, eventually, even better lecturers.

Demand for Higher quality education:

- It is very rare that a student seeks knowledge purely for joy.
- Multitudes of students will demand better education only if that betterness is valued by society.
- If there is value in the education institutes provide, it is also task of teachers to convince students of that value.
- If that value lies in economically rewarding benefits to society, then so much the better.
- Training must offer value to society, and students must see a path to that value.
- Institute must teach students not only subjects, but also how to think about both existing applications and future ones.
- Students must aim to relate their learning to society.
- They must see their learning not as an obstacle course leading to a rubber stamp, but as an initiation into a process that yields tangible long-term value.

Conclusion:

- Indian society does not merely have people looking for work.
- It also has work looking for people: Work in food, health, design, manufacturing, transport, safety, garbage, water, energy, farming, and a hundred other things that we can do better.
- Room for improvement is plentiful, though the market models may not be efficient or mature yet.
- The walls between our classrooms and our lives must be broken, if our colleges are to flourish.