

NOT JUST AWARDS, *India's Passionate teachers need better pay too!*

I grew up hearing the idiom, Mata, Pita, Guru Daivam, which means that one has to respect one's parents first, then teachers, and lastly god. Talking of Guru, or teachers, one is reminded of the term 'gurudakshina' – a term unique to the Indian civilisation.

It is a tradition wherein a student/disciple repays one's teacher in cash or kind after the completion of education. A student would pay according to his or her abilities. The most famous gurudakshina story is that of Ekalavya, whose guru Dronacharya asked him to cut his thumb and give it as gurudakshina.

However, in today's world, if you were to audit the pecking order, the gurus come way behind. The starting salary for teachers could be as low as Rs 15,000 - just a bit above the unskilled wage group. This is for college lecturers who have to have not just a bachelor's degree but need at least a master's degree. This is the plight of the college teachers who are caught in the heavily-regulated and political soup.

I started an earn-and-learn initiative in a college for Biotechnology students, where our company taught healthcare coding to students from the first year. Even before the completion of their final year, the students started drawing a handsome salary of Rs 35,000 per month. When I called the professors of the department to congratulate them, one of them commented that BSc students were getting more than PhD, I asked her what she meant. She said teachers with PhDs were just ladders.

This got me thinking that if we pay our teachers C-grade salary, how can we expect A-grade teachers. Isn't India doing a disservice to our future generations?

In the Gurukul-style education, we had different people paying differently in the same Gurukul. Today, a millionaire's kid pays the same as a labour's kid. The governments regulate college fees, and the majority of the college expenditure goes towards salaries. The main reason for this is that the college fee in some states in South India is fixed and

regulated by the government at Rs 50,000. How do you expect good education at this price?

The very same politicians, who set college fees, send their children overseas because they know good quality education cannot be provided in India at the pittance fee that has been set by them. The central government agencies like the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and University Grants Commission (UGC) come and audit the college to see if the Pay Commissions salaries have been provided. The colleges filled the basic pay. If the full Dearness allowance is provided the salaries will be more than the total fees provided. How are the colleges managed?

Looking at the recent National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) data, the average starting salaries for the IIT graduates are Rs 12 lakh pa, and in top colleges, average salaries come to around Rs 4.5 lakh pa. But the fees charged by these colleges are a fraction of the salaries that the graduating students earn. This should be the single biggest benchmark for colleges to set fees. In a free country where a coffee shop can charge Rs 500 for a cup of coffee, why castigate college fees?

It is common for a hiring agency to charge one or two months salary as Placement fee. Colleges should ask a months salary towards Gurudakshina as the pains and struggles the teachers and the training faculty along with the Placement teams take, to find jobs for students. The public needs understand that teaching faculty are humans to and have to have a decent standard of living.

The effect of this can be clearly seen in India's higher education system, which is corroding. Admissions to the Master's program, which is the first step for teaching, is abysmal. More than two-thirds of our post graduate program seats lie vacant in India. Looking further, if the interest in the Master's program is so low it will show up in low interest in Ph.D. program as well.

We need to relook at the whole system and see how we can get our best to work. Perhaps,



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a closer look at China would help. The dragon has overtaken even the US in paper publications. India's Asian neighbor produces over 600,000 papers in technical journals, compared to India with just 155,000 papers.

This disparity will only increase if India continues to disregard the academic faculty and underpay them.

There is a big gap showing in India between the States and the Centre, and this has become acute with the National Education Policy. The accredited colleges are stifled with state politics. The Centre should come out with a National Technical University, where top 100 colleges are allowed to affiliate with and given total autonomy. If International schools can function charging hefty fees of nearly a million a year and providing good education why not colleges?

India needs more teachers than any other country in the world as 40% of the Indian population is less than 18 years of age. UNESCO says worldwide, there is a shortage of 69 million teachers that needs to be filled rapidly and in India alone needs 1 million schools teachers. And for this, we need to take a relook at the economics of running a well staffed education sector that is viable and teaching remains an attractive career option.

The icing on the cake -- the 'Best Teacher' awards still goes to the many of teachers from India, which gives us hope that the colleges can afford to pay better salaries to teachers in a market oriented education sector. Only when we pay them well so that we can win the global race.