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The prime minister's announcement that a handsome fund of Rs 10,000 crore would be allocated to the nation's top 20 universities for their upgradation to global standards has not come a day too early. The intriguing element in this otherwise laudable idea is the inclusion of 10 private universities in the list of 20. This is manifestly ill-advised. It dilutes the idea of the government driving the agenda of educational excellence. If we are to make any progress at all, we must break the dogma that the government is incapable of practising excellence in education or health. Instead, the government must be the exemplar of excellence, as in Japan where 99 per cent of educational institutions are run by the government.

This is not to disrespect the prime minister's intentions, but only to insist that good intentions must be matched by right steps and strategies. For millennia, we have known that while funding is important, money alone will not buy excellence. When it comes to education — in which brain and soul walk hand in hand — cultural and spiritual software is more important than hard cash. Educational excellence, like artistic genius, cannot be bought with money alone.

While the availability of generous funding helps, it is crucial to develop a culture of pursuing excellence in education. It is like buying a dream car, spending millions of rupees. What will you do with it if you have to drive it on bullock-cart tracks and maintain it in prehistoric garages? Surely, the prime minister, insofar as he is earnest about his goal to boost our higher education, would be open to considering a few factors that must complement funding. What, indeed, are the essential ingre-

Excellence matters

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dients of educational excellence?

Excellence cannot be imported; it must sprout from local roots. This is not to say that we should not accept ideas and systems from sources external to us. Sustainable excellence results only when education is geared to the blossoming of the genius of a nation. It is dangerous to equate this with a regressive flight to a presumed golden past where outlandish exploits of science and technology abounded. Not even lunatics will equate excellence with regression.

Yet, we shall do ourselves no good by disowning our past: our tradition, our heritage, the grounds gained. Problem arises when they are turned into fetishes for vainglorious adulation. They need to be valued as the foundation on which we may build. Admittedly, the passion to excel illumined the soul-scape of India in the past. But we failed to sustain, broad-base and continually renew this heritage. The benchmark and emblems of excellence, impressive a few millennia ago, cannot be showcased as trophies of today's achievements. What needs to be revived is the passion for excellence which was surely obtained in pockets in our country.

Why did this sublime thirst of the human soul wilt and wither? The customary answer points to conquest and colonialism as the vil-

lains. While this did us much harm, the question remains why we fell easy prey to invading armies and itinerant merchants. Our spiritual-cultural decline was the cause, not the consequence, of our subjugation. We weakened and nearly destroyed ourselves principally in two ways.

First, we kept knowledge in zealously guarded enclaves. The vast majority of our people was excluded from it. Pursuit of excellence did not ever become a way of life with us. It was the exclusive preserve of a microscopic minority, under whatever pretexts. We failed to build the bridge between pursuit of excellence and our shared destiny. If this mindset of exclusion and social trenching persists in the sphere of education, pumping of even astronomical investments may not yield the results we expect.

Second, the mindset of exclusivity implies an attitude of negativity and intolerance. Excluding 'the Other' from the charmed circle of knowledge — or homogenizing the clientele of education — goes against the logic of excelling. The spirit of excellence withers when it is cut off from the nourishment of diversity and all-round stimulation. The disservice we have done to ourselves *via* education is by way of substituting 'stimulation' with 'competition'. Excellence results when

individuals and societies attain their best potential. Competition aims at outstripping the rest of the pack which is contrary to the goal of excellence.

It follows from the above that the pursuit of excellence will be defeated by intolerance. Intolerance vitiates the air with fear and circumspection; whereas excelling is like a joyous flight of the human genius in an unbounded sky. Violence, even of the subtlest kind, blights excellence. No society ridden with violence, in which energies are wasted on self-inflicting wounds and disabilities, has made any headway in any respect, except in impoverishing itself.

Finally, attainment of excellence without a robust work culture — based on a way of love, nourished by love and nobility of service — will remain a pleasant illusion. A dishonest attitude to work is the foremost dirt that we need to sweep out of our country. The connection between dishonesty at work and accumulating dirt of all descriptions is too obvious to need persuasion.

The most enduring legacy that Narendra Modi can bequeath to India is a tradition of pursuing excellence, not by way of catching up with global leaders but as enabling the dormant genius of India to wake up and attain full and glorious self-expression. To that end, we suggest he consider setting up a new university, which can serve as a role model for all Indian universities and centres of excellence in education.

Setting up a new foundation is less daunting than building on old and rickety foundations. If the prime minister knows the ground realities in our universities, even the best of them, he will agree.