

Off the Record**Teaching of Economics**

THE Educational Ministry of the Government of India have many things on hand. Among its not so important activities is a conference held every year on the teaching of one of the principal university subjects. The first conference of this type was on psychology and philosophy, held in 1951. The subject chosen last year was history and this year, it was economics. From the wide representation at this conference, it could be seen that not only the universities but many others are also keenly interested in the teaching of the subject.

Besides the professors of economics, there were representatives from the Planning Commission, the Ministries of Food and Agriculture, Commerce and Industry, Production, and Finance. Since economics enters so largely into national life, the professors who attended the conference fully utilised the occasion to give a good boost both to the subject they teach and to their own association, 'Nothing like leather', and 'Catch them young', were the slogans. Since it is so useful, as many of the young people as possible should be initiated into economics when their mind is still plastic and can be moulded the way the professors want to mould it. The agenda was ambitious, ranging from a consideration of the place of economics in general education, and in particular whether it should be taught as a compulsory or optional subject "in elementary, secondary, higher and technical school for the training of administrators diplomats" (*sic*) to drawing up a syllabus for University courses in economics.

The big dent made on the teaching staffs of the universities by the various Government agencies which now engage economists, not so much for their assistance in formulating the right policies but for the added prestige they confer on the departments concerned and their help in finding plausible arguments for wrong policies. This appears to have received some attention at the conference. The press note on the conference, however, only mentions that by raising the salary of teachers and lowering their teaching load, the universities would be able to specialise and take up research. This is a matter of vital importance on which the Economics Faculties

should have something to say. For it is not a question of money alone, to price out the Government departments and international organisations. Of course, university teachers should be paid enough to be able to do what they are supposed to do and given the minimum facilities for their work. This means books, journals, research and statistical assistance as well as less of lecture work. But surely we do not want either the universities or the Planning Commission and the Research Department of the Reserve Bank to get only the second-raters?

The right solution is not to create another cadre of civil servants composed of economists who in that case would have to be recruited fairly young and put through the mill which would grind out of them what little economics they may have learnt. A more elastic arrangement is necessary which will enable the Government agencies and other public bodies to avail themselves of the services of economists without converting the hither into regular civil servants. The most fruitful means for fostering such association would be some sort of exchange arrangement, by which the universities would release members of their staff wanted for a limited period for specialised work in Government departments and the Government departments would release their economists for teaching and guiding of research. The conference, it is understood, did pass a resolution on these lines.

The most solid piece of work the conference did was to draw up a proper syllabus for the degree examinations in economics. This is intended to make the courses in the different universities uniform and to remove much dead wood that has accumulated, thanks to the particular predilections of teachers not primarily interested in rigid analysis and systematic exposition. The institutional, sociological, historical or other bias that has crept into the teaching of economics will be removed, if this syllabus is adopted by all the universities, as it is hoped to be, through the good offices of the inter-University Board which is expected to do the rest. The bias in the reformed syllabus is in favour of developing a feeling for classics, not Indian classics of course.

These are, however, all matters pertaining to teaching at the highest level and research. What about the primary aim of the conference, a proper grounding in the principles of the subject for those who take up economics, whether or not they want to specialise in it for the rest of their lives? Those who have had the misfortune of wading through the cram books which are most popular with students must feel deep concern. Like the Bourbons, these cram books forget nothing. One finds in them all the discarded ideas that litter the history of economic thought. But one will not find any attempt even at a systematic exposition of the basic ideas which may help the student to get introduced to economic analysis. One senses a danger in the demand put forth at the conference that "instruction in elementary economics should be given a practical bias, for those problems of applied economics", and, believe it or not, for "adequate emphasis" on Indian economics in the curriculum.

The Secretary of the Education Ministry must be an exceedingly busy man. He did strike the right note, nevertheless, when he pressed that it was necessary to develop economics "with a more intimate awareness of Indian conditions and developments", never suspecting that the conference would take him at his word and plumb for greater emphasis on Indian economics in the curriculum. When would our university professors stop blessing this mis-alliance between India and economics? Until they do, economics will remain a wholly imported product and economic studies will never take root. The whole of it has to be informed by an intimate awareness of Indian problems. This is not helped by segregating 'Indian' economics from the rest of it.

If anyone stops to consider why these cram books and text-books of the wrong sort are so popular, one would not take long to find the answer. Supply may also call forth demand but that requires a lot of pushing and high pressure selling. Demand calls forth supply more readily and when the output of cram books is so large and continues to grow from year to year, surely it could not be except in response not only to a 'felt' need but

to a demand which, is so insistent that it is certain to carry off the supply. Even a cursory glance at the questions set at the examinations for the intermediate and undergraduate students will corroborate these statements. Partly the success of the cram books may be explained by the use of a foreign language as the medium of teaching but this cannot be the whole story. The junk heap of all the discarded ideas and notions would have no attraction unless it offered a rich reward to the patient collector.

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Vacancy Unfilled

Replying to the budget debate, pointing to the difficulties of the tasks ahead of finding resources not only for the first but for subsequent Five-Year Plans, Shri Chintaman Deshmukh mentioned in passing that these would have to be faced and resolved, one could almost add, by his successors. Now this is the sort of thing that gives a handle to reporters looking for a 'story'. And what a handle! After him, the deluge. The gap is left uncovered. Changes in taxation are left to be taken up at a later stage, after the Matthai Committee had reported. Whatever changes may be effected, Shri Deshmukh demonstrated by *reductio ad absurdum* that soaking the rich could not conceivably bring in the millions for implementing the present and the subsequent plans. What can, is left to be discovered. Since the unemployed or under-employed are subsisting somehow, the income that goes to their maintenance has to be deployed, so that subsistence is brought to them through productive work which will add to the nation's capital. The formula for bringing about this deployment had to be found, by implication, by his successors. Could it mean that the Finance Minister was thinking of laying down the reins of office, in the near future?

Newspapers did not play up this hint or try to read some meaning into it but they splashed mud when Chanda's report came out. If Shri Chintaman Deshmukh wants to quit, the proper time for it could well be after the budget had been passed. Purely personal reasons may induce him to unburden himself of this heavy responsibility which he was reluctant to assume in the first instance and could be prevailed upon to assume only after a great deal of persuasion. But those who have

followed the trend of developments will find other reasons equally, or even more, plausible. The inability or the unwillingness of the States to toe the line, the difficulties of the Congress Party because of past commitments or individual predilections to take a rational view of the situation and desist from fads which fritter away revenue are troublesome enough to drive a sensitive person of Deshmukh's temperament, with his keen sense of responsibility, to exasperation. However naive? his faith in arithmetic and index numbers, neither his sincerity nor the clarity of his perception has ever been questioned even by the most carping of critics. To continue to shoulder such heavy responsibility can indeed be trying when action on the lines he thinks to be right is frustrated at every step by political and party considerations with which the Finance Minister can have little sympathy. But surely, financial control could not be one of them?

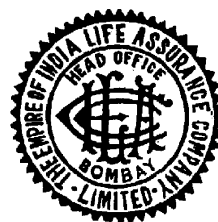
So high is the esteem in which the Finance Minister is held by everybody and so greatly has he risen in stature after he assumed office that the immediate reaction of everyone, should Deshmukh quit, would be one of complete despair. There is no one in sight to replace

him. But since nature abhors vacuum, men have to be found and will be found for jobs that need to be done. The question of rinding the right incumbent for the Finance portfolio in the Congress has always remained an unsolved mystery. The party has not been able to produce a proper Finance Minister. That none of the top-ranking Congressmen, because of their various pre-occupations, had the time and opportunity to apply their minds to the problem of finance is only a part of the explanation. Parliamentary Government is run on the principle that ministers need not be experts; on the contrary, an amateur at the top, would do better than one who has pretension to expert knowledge, other things being the same. There are experts enough in the departments concerned. Governments have wide opportunities and have perfected the techniques of availing of expert opinion without leaving the final decision to others. Even in the detailed formulation of policies and certainly in the execution, the departments concerned have enough time and experience. It is in the task of co-ordination and securing agreement that qualities of leadership and the political stature of the minister count.

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Total Claims Paid	Rs. 13,24,80,080
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