

EXPLOITING THE WEAK AND UNORGANISED: THE TEACHING AND NON-TEACHING STAFF IN SELF FINANCING COLLEGES

Praveen P.

Research Scholar, ZHCES, SSS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

It was in 1990s that the government started to invite and encourage privatisation of higher education in the State of Kerala, India. As a result self financing colleges (SFCs) flourished in the state initially in professional and later in all sectors. Along with increasing the opportunities in higher education, these colleges became an easy option of temporary jobs for the educated youth in Kerala. But the colleges became, on the other side, avenues of exploitation to a large extent, not only to students but also to its teaching and non-teaching staff. It was revealed in the survey that most of the teaching and non-teaching staff appointed in these colleges is women. Women labourers, particularly, have a tendency to continue in the job as far as possible due to family, distance and societal compulsions. These labourers are neither organized nor members of any trade unions. When privatisation opened new avenues of development within higher education sector, the same led to massive exploitation of students, teaching and non-teaching staff mainly because the rules and regulations are not implemented effectively. The lack of knowledge regarding labour rights from the side of exploited, their adjusting mentality, the financial plus political support for the managements and absence of competing public sector made things much worse. The paper is a qualitative study into the role, relevance, growth, economy and working conditions of SFCs in the state.

Key words: Self financing colleges, Exploitation and Regulation.

INTRODUCTION:

More than 20 years have passed since the State of Kerala has introduced self financing mode of higher education.¹ This new finance oriented, than academic, colleges transformed the landscape of higher education itself. These colleges behaved as like as any other ordinary market firm and hence they operated with the business principles like maximum revenue, minimum cost and profit maximization. Best performing self financing colleges (SFCs)² are able to attract large

¹ It was in 1989, the first SFC came in Kerala. Institute of Human Resource Development (IHRD) started an engineering college affiliated to CUSAT. Again more colleges were started in 1994 in self financing mode.

² A self financing college (SFC) can be defined as one regular and affiliated college, wholly owned by private, public or quasi-public agency; which does not receive aid from any government agencies for its capital and revenue expenditure. But it does not mean that a SFC cannot receive any financial support from government like subsidies, project funds etc. The SFCs enjoy complete freedom in the appointment of teachers and other non-teaching staff.

number of applications beyond their capacity; so that the price of admission is so high which ensure revenue maximization.³ The mediocre colleges cannot command this revenue maximization. Likewise there are courses which are high in demand than others. The mismatch between demand, for particular courses and colleges, and supply encourages the existence of capitation fee (even though legally banned, still continuing in different names) widely. In all these circumstances, the profit motive is forcing the managements to minimize costs as much as possible for attaining maximum profit possible. Cost minimization, as happens everywhere, became a threat to the employees of the college. The lack of competency in the sector and the characteristics of higher education behave as an encouragement to the management to continue with these measures. Even though the paper is about the exploitation of employees in SFCs in the state of Kerala it has its universal applicability considering the ongoing privatisation drive in the higher education sector worldwide.

ROLE, RELEVANCE AND GROWTH OF SFCs:

Considering the developments in school education, the performance of higher education sector was a very depressive one in the state of Kerala up to 2000s. The opportunities for higher education was comparatively very poor in the state compared to others and the financial paucity of government restricted it to address the matter by opening more and more colleges in the public sector, whether government or aided. It was in the 1990s the government of Kerala decided to invite private parties for starting unaided institutions, both in professional and non-professional sector in higher education. In the beginning many quasi-government bodies like IHRD, CAPE, LBS etc along with universities responded to this initiative and started SFCs. Simultaneously, private parties also entered the picture first in professional and subsequently in non-professional areas. This resulted in a phenomenal increase in the number of colleges (Kulavelil 2001). It should be noted that the Kerala higher education system was unduly in favor of arts & science colleges up to the end of twentieth century which forced a vast number of students to take admission in neighboring states for professional courses (George & Kumar 1999). This disparity in demand for and supply of higher educational facilities was highest in the nineties and this

³ Now applications are invited through online only but it is restricted for merit seats. They comprise 50% seats in the total admission. Students need to approach colleges individually for admission under management quota for the remaining 50% seats.

deficiency of supply for professional courses set the level playing field for SFCs in the state of Kerala in 2000s. Out of the total 1065 colleges, 786 are under self financing category at present in the state (up to 2012 December).

The following table shows the infrastructure of higher education sector of Kerala in 2000s.

TABLE - 1
HIGHER EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE OF KERALA*

Colleges	2001-02	2002-03	2004-05	2005-06	2010-11	December 2012
Arts, science & commerce colleges	224 (38)	286 (100)	353 (167)	189 +	380 (196)	437 (249)
Engg, Technical & arch colleges	43 (29)	66 (52)	66 (52)	99 (85)	125 (111)	161 (146)
Medical(allo/ayur/homeo/ unani/ nursing/pharmacy) colleges	23	40	40	125	166 (143)	184 (158)
Teacher training colleges	---	---	---	21	159 (140)	170 (151)
Law, MBA, MCA, IT, agricultural, Vetinary, Forestry, Agri. Eng, Dairy Science, Oriental title etc colleges	---	---	---	82	81(49)	106 (82)
Total	---	---	---	572	911 (639)	1065 (786)

* The figures given in the bracket are SFCs.

Source: Selected Educational Statistics 2005; Economic Review (various years), websites of State universities of Kerala, Mahatma Gandhi, Calicut, Kannur, Agricultural and CUSAT.

From the table it is evident that over the years the number of colleges increased and by 2012 SFCs became around three fourth of the total number of colleges in the state. SFCs became majority in the professional sector. It is unfortunate that neither universities nor the government have data on how many teaching and non-teaching staff work in these colleges. Similarly, the college websites or brochures do not reveal such information. It is difficult to calculate the number of teachers from the AICTE norms or number of intake. There are several colleges with only one stream and batch where as some others have two batches or more than one stream. Several SFCs have around 1500 to 2000 students where as some of them had only 240 students maximum. In addition to this is the non-fulfillment of seats in several colleges. There are

approximately 197054 students in the SFCs of Kerala in Engineering and it means there should be 822 departments in total if we are taking 240 students on an average in each department. We can approximate that there are 4000 to 4500 teachers in total in engineering colleges. If we calculate that there is at least 10-15 non-teaching staff per college there will be 1600-2415 in total. But, definitely the real number will be less than this figure due to the cost minimization strategies that they follow which we will discuss in the subsequent parts.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Lack of sufficient opportunities in the public provision compared to the big and growing demand ensures huge rewards to those who invest in higher education and this is the crucial reason for the entry of market oriented private firms into the field of 'knowledge creation'. Other claim like higher education is a private good hence it can manage the sector more efficiently and such in this context are not acceptable. No one accused that it is SFCs that started monetisation of the higher education but these colleges give unnecessary importance to such financial aspects without giving the same attention to academic or infrastructural aspects. This is rather not so different for SFCs started by agencies like semi-governmental or university. In the whole process the casualty is not only on the knowledge and skills of the students (Praveen 2013) but also on the motivation and efficiency of teaching and non-teaching staff. This is becoming more alarming considering the enlarging tensions in the labour sector like job insecurity, contractualisation etc.

A situation like exploiting and least regulated plus massive and growing self financing mode of higher education is not tolerable for any society. We are considering SFCs as an ordinary business firm because it is collecting revenue from its customers particularly students for its capital and revenue expenditure. They are not receiving any aid from government agencies and hence operates according to their own rules. As they are not receiving any funds from the government, they are not bound to follow government rules like aided colleges. Several such colleges are run by religious and community organizations and big industrialists and politicians of the state. This makes effective intervention by the concerned agencies, whether it is universities, regulatory bodies, related ministries etc, really difficult.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

In the light of observations made so far the broad objective of the study is to explore and identify the status of teaching and non-teaching staff of SFCs particularly women. The economy of SFCs with emphasis on cost minimization techniques will be discussed. The different arguments and debates by different stakeholders will be considered. The research questions are

1. How do SFCs ensure cost minimization?
2. How do different stakeholders, here teaching, non-teaching staff and management representatives, respond to the cost minimization methods of SFCs?

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

The study is exploratory in nature to map out the problems faced by women staff of SFCs which they do not reveal usually in a public space. We used qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to get a better picture. The ethnographic study of an engineering college as a faculty helped to sharpen the observations. The participatory observation helped to collect the usually invisible tensions of these colleges. A survey was conducted in the engineering colleges within the Thiruvananthapuram district of state of Kerala. We collected data only from engineering colleges.⁴ Field based information was collected through open ended questionnaire which was separate for students and teachers. The questionnaire was administered in a personal face to face manner rather than class room settings. We took sufficient care to cover a wide cross section of teachers as possible across streams. We need to depend on these sources because the managements will not give such information. Colleges, except one, did not give permission to do survey within the college premises. The different tuition centers also refused to co-operate. So a lot of time and energy was spent on meeting interviewees. The data was collected mainly from public spaces. Surveys conducted in towns like Attingal, Kazhakuttom, Balaramapuram, Nedumangad and Chirayinkizhu; and in the neighbourhoods of colleges. Home visits, discussion

⁴ Within the self financing colleges, we are taking only engineering colleges for this study. Engineering degree is considered to provide a status to its holders because it is expected to offer a high paid job for sure. When the trend of self financing colleges started in 2000s it was associated with engineering colleges. At present in the professional sector of self financing category, after teachers training colleges, most of the institutions started are from engineering side

forums, focus group discussions etc were used in order to collect data. We interviewed totally 43 teaching, 29 non-teaching staff and few management representatives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

We divide this section into two. In the first part the various methods of cost minimization adopted by the management will be explained. The next part is the responses of teaching and non-teaching staff at one side and the managements on the other regarding the working conditions of the SFCs.

METHODS OF COST MINIMISATION IN SFCs:

The SFCs are following some unique techniques to reduce cost of operation which ultimately leads to the distress of its staff among them women particularly. In general the costs of a college can be classified into two namely capital and revenue in addition to the maintenance expenditure against capital depreciation. Capital expenditure refers to the spending on fixed assets like buildings and machine. Expenditure on infrastructure and other fixed assets come under capital expenditure and they serve a long term purpose. Revenue expenditure is related to the normal running of an organization. It includes the salaries of teaching and non-teaching staff, pensions, and all such recurring expenses.

In the beginning, management only needs to fulfill the land requirements (in addition to the fixed deposit) and need to ensure other requirements like college building, labs, library etc only at the end of sick period.⁵ Compared to public colleges, most of the SFCs were started in remote areas where price of land is comparatively low or it is started in the existing land by replacing or converting the existing building, farm, godowns etc. Even though there is no solid evidence we can expect that the amount received from students under different titles used for the construction of buildings. Another source is bank loans which provide sufficient time for authorities to repay the amount. Maintenance expenditure is already considered while fixing the fee.

⁵ Sick period is the minimum time period in which the first batch of students are expected to pass out of the course. It depends on the course. When a new course is introduced in an existing college, the sick period refers to the minimum expected passing out time for the first batch of its students. But if it is a new college, in addition to the facilities of the courses, the management is expected to finish some minimum requirements like building, hostel, offices, playground etc as per the stipulations.

Among this minimisation of capital expenditure have its own limitations. Considering the possibility of converting a college building (due to any reason) into any other commercial establishment like hospital, hotel etc for maximizing the returns the quality of basic infrastructure must be good. So that, for the management a compromise is possible only in the expenditure on revenue head. The exploitation of teaching and non-teaching staff and among them women particularly, accounts in this context.

The biggest running expenditure of a college is on salary. So that techniques of minimization of expenditure is usually evident in the case of appointment of teaching and non-teaching staff and in their payment. We can see most of the staffs in SFCs are women and it is heard that managements prefer married women for jobs. SFCs appoint maximum number of contract teachers. Very few people are continuing in a college for a prolonged time period. Even in the case of those continuing that is not a permanent appointment. SFCs start with several senior as well as experienced people who are mostly retired from public colleges particularly to the posts of Head of the Departments and Principal. They are joining colleges not in expectation of any pensions, DA etc but for extra income which is otherwise absent. No management need to provide social security measures to its contract employees. This helps colleges not to pay the staff anything other than salaries. This adversely affects women staff particularly due to their vulnerability by low salary, absence of alternative income resources and better placements, family expectations etc.

SFCs are not giving the stipulated amount as salary as per the AICTE norms. First of all there will be no written job contract or salary agreement between staff and management; the agreement will be oral. Most of the staff particularly teachers is contacting only principal at the time of joining job⁶ and not anyone from the management who decides everything related to finance. A SFC has two chairs of power – one is the visible principal and the other is invisible manager who represents the interests of management in the college. Even though principals are

⁶ The staffs of the SFCs are appointed either by principals or by the management even though the management is taken ultimate decision in the appointment of all. Appointments to the post of Principal, manger, HoDs, non-teaching staff etc will be decided by the management. The manager is initiating the appointments to the posts of security officers and other menial level staff. The appointments of teaching staff at the entry level are decided by the principal after getting permission from the management. Sometimes management will appoint teachers too. We can observe a very close relationship between principal and manager. The post of manager in SFCs is almost like registrars of university or bursar.

the head of a college technically, in SFCs they are not able to decide anything financial without consulting the management or their de facto representative namely the manager. Some big and wealthy colleges have director but usually his office will be closed. The entry level teachers are getting very low amount of salary but they usually are not complaining because of the expectations regarding the job. Most of the young teachers, including women, are joining colleges only for experience. Those who didn't get any job elsewhere also join these colleges for temporary engagement. Most of the employed people in SFCs are women and several of them belong to nearby areas of the institution. Several respondents observed that managements, too, prefer women particularly married as their staff. This, at the extreme side, makes them to stay away from complaining or get in the bad list of management. Several women teaching staff interviewed agreed that complaints regarding working conditions and salary will invite severe difficulties for them in the form of abuses, salary cut or even dismissal. This is never mentioned by any male staff. The family pressure or children will keep most these women faculties to continue in the job year after year even with all these difficulties.

Several teachers leave SFCs voluntarily for joining highly paid jobs or higher studies.⁷ But the female staff mentioned that it is mostly male staff or female staff with higher degrees and experience who leave for other jobs and higher studies. Anyway throughout the year teachers will join and quit colleges. So that, in order ensure presence of teachers throughout the year, some colleges will appoint teachers only with contracts or bonds. It is interesting to note that teachers and non-teaching staff to some colleges are supplied by private employment agencies. Their salary will be paid through the agency only. The normal date of salary distribution is 10th of the month. If a teacher wants to quit college s/he has to work up to 10th and collect salary for the previous month. Then if s/he quits the management can save the salary of ten days. Different colleges pool their teaching resources and share together.⁸ In the engineering colleges, syllabus

⁷ Most of the teachers at present have just passed their degrees courses only. AICTE stipulates minimum M.Tech to become a teacher in an engineering college. That means the eligibility conditions of teachers are diluted in appointment.

⁸ In order to minimize costs SFCs pool their resources. We can call them 'neighbourhood colleges'. Managements which start different colleges in neighborhoods will share the facilities of playgrounds, auditoriums, college buses, canteens, hostels and even libraries and lab. Similarly, the teachers also are shared.

has language paper and a social science paper. The teachers for these courses are not even a faculty of the college. They come, teach and receive salary in honorarium basis. Rarely some of them will be in charge of placement cells or hostels. Managements which have both Social Science College and Engineering College will use teachers from both for the purpose of other one. For example, language teacher, generally English, will take class in the engineering college or computer faculty will be in charge of updating software or maintenance in the social science college.

CONCLUSION:

One of the most mistaken belief about SFCs in Kerala is that its staffs, teaching and non-teaching, are getting very good financial rewards. The truth is that the unprotected staffs, particularly women, of SFCs are one of the most exploited categories by the profit making managements. The condition of non-teaching staffs is more miserable; they are more discriminated than teaching staff. Only those senior level staffs, whether teaching or non-teaching, are benefitting by good amount of salary. The social security measures are completely absent here. The study tries to explain that in SFCs it is not only students but staffs are equally exploited. The staff has to play the role of facilitators of exploitation on students which makes them disliked by students and parents at the other side.

SFCs are trying to retain its employees as much as possible and produce more and more output per worker without compensating adequately. This is the core of labour vulnerability in these institutions. Higher education is more or less a labour intensive sector. The state has no labour shortage for teaching and non-teaching kind of jobs. The reserve army created by the growing educational move at different levels, without adequate creation of job in other sectors, ensures sufficient supply of labour which supports the managements. The participation of women is very high in this sector at least in lower ranks. The peculiar characteristics of the sector or the lack of interest shown by political parties make labourers least organized. All these mounting together are making SFCs a volcano of tensions between labour and managements which can erupt in the near future.

Here the only possibility is the effective measures to protect and enhance the working conditions of SFCs's staff by university, national regulatory bodies or government. The solution is not banning or state takeover of SFCs but proper regulation on them (Praveen 2013). Considering the growth of the SFCs in the context of increasing importance to higher education, the government has to develop policies and programmes in order to accommodate the capacity and possibilities of private investment without compromising on the rights and welfare of its employees.

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