

THE BANKRUPT UNIVERSITY

Any university that includes colleges like Stephen's, Hindu, SRCC and LSR must be good. Delhi University, therefore, is a good university. But how long can it and its colleges survive solely on the strength of their reputations? DU is on the brink of a precipice. It can survive but only if it thinks up some innovative survival strategies, reports Rajat Pandit



FUNDS CRUNCH: Students wonder what's in store for them. (File photo)

November," says a senior university official.

Remember education in India is essentially a state-funded activity. Along with cuts in allocations, the share of higher education in the total expenditure on education has also been declining over the years.

The University Grants Commission, the apex body for higher education in the country, has constantly been advising universities and colleges to generate resources on their own. But Delhi University, like other central universities, has failed to mobilise enough resources from non-government sources.

The approved budget for Delhi University for 1999-2000 was Rs 97.39 crore, of which a whopping Rs 88.50 crore was earmarked just for salaries thanks to the fifth pay commission, leaving little for developmental activities.

The UGC, which gives funds in quarterly grants, was supposed to allocate Rs 94.70 crore towards this budget. But there is a shortfall of Rs 23.48 crore — the third quarter began on October 1 — in the funds released by UGC so far.

The university has borrowed heavily from other heads like the development fund (collected annually from the 2.5 lakh students of the university to develop infrastructure and the project fund. These funds have touched rock-bottom now. "The fund crunch is real. But mismanagement of funds, wrong recruitment policies, overstaffing, wasteful expenditure and failure to generate resources have also led to this bad situation. The UGC is sending a message that it cannot foot the entire bill forever," says a senior professor.

Be that as it may, the situation in colleges, which also get more than 95 per cent of their funds from the State, whether from the UGC, the Union government or the Delhi government, is equally precarious.

For instance, the 1999-2000 budget for St Stephen's College was Rs 3.47 crore, of which Rs 3.26 crore was earmarked for salaries and pension. Though its share came to Rs 3.18 crore, the UGC has actually allocated just Rs 1.93 crore.

"The situation is desperate. If you can't give salaries, how can you ever think about augmenting libraries and labs? A permanent solution with a radical transformation of policies, is needed," says St Stephen's principal Anil Wilson.

His neighbour across the road is equally worried. "As of now, we have no funds to disburse salaries next month," says Hindu College principal, Kavita Sharma, jostling with a huge deficit.

If the government cannot give enough funds, several college principals feel the other source — students — must be allowed to be

tapped. Some colleges had tried to drastically hike fee in the name of generating resources last year, but they had to roll back in face of a backlash. Hike in fees is a very emotive issue.

The overall annual charges for an

undergraduate, depending upon the course and college, vary from around Rs 2,000 to Rs 10,000 annually. This when around 70 per cent of the students entering colleges are from private schools, where they pay much more.

"Tell us that a certain number of students should get freeships. Then allow us to charge the rest rationally. The present subsidy system is helping students who don't need help," says Mr Wilson.

St Stephen's and Hindu are two of the best colleges in the university. Imagine the plight of others. Several colleges have diverted money meant for providing academic facilities to students to pay salaries.

"The crisis will be at its peak in January. By then, the money taken from students will be exhausted," says Delhi University Teachers' Association president S S Rathi.

The worst affected are the facilities considered essential for any institution for higher learning.

Laboratories: The "GM Counter Experiment" is very basic in nuclear physics. All students of BSc (Hons) Physics are supposed to perform it in the third-year. But almost all the 20 colleges who offer this course are simply not able to conduct it for want of funds.

Professor P C Jain, head of the university department of physics, says: "It takes around Rs 30,000 to set up one such experiment. None of our postgraduate students have done this at the lower level."

Science students in colleges, says another professor, can barely perform 50 per cent of the experiments prescribed in the syllabi. And, that

too with outdated, and often defective, equipment. "The situation is pathetic. It is not strange to find chemistry labs running out of chemicals," he adds.

Adds Hindu College principal Kavita Sharma, "The lab funding is very less...Rs 210 is allocated per student per year in physics and chemistry, while it is Rs 190 for botany and zoology students. In today's price structure, even consumables don't come in these amounts."

The lethal combination of the fund crunch and substandard faculty has caused substantial deterioration in research in the university.

Libraries: The university library system, which includes five major libraries and gets Rs 1.85 crore for purchase of books and periodicals every year, is also reeling under the fund crunch. Not a single bill for the purchase of periodicals for 1999-2000 has been cleared so far.

"Some of the book suppliers have stopped supplying because of pending bills," says an official. Even while the Rs 1.8 crore figure has remained more or less constant over the years, the prices of books and periodicals have gone up several times.

Consequently, there has been a drastic cut in books and periodicals. For instance, 2,117 periodicals were purchased in 1993-94. The figure for 1998-99 dropped to 1,137. The science library, which caters to research and postgraduate students, subscribed to around 900 journals/periodicals a decade ago. Today, the figure is around 100. "Vital periodicals needed for research are vanishing quite fast...this especially hurts science researchers," says a professor. The scene in college libraries is equally pathetic. If Hindu has stopped subscribing to the *Times Literary Supplement*, St Stephen's is thinking of doing so. "It is a very good periodical but is proving very expensive," says Anil Wilson.

The *TLS* is just one of the periodicals the colleges are doing without. "The UGC has been contributing just Rs 15 per student to college libraries for years. Books and periodicals have become very expensive but there has been no corresponding increase in funds," says an official.

NEW DELHI: Ram Dev Dubey has seen it all. A quintessential *pan-wallah* who set up shop in 1953, he has witnessed Delhi University weather the ravages of time from his vantage point in the main administrative area of the north campus. "Haalat university ki down ho gayee hai," says the wizened old Dubey, emphatically. His may be an outside view, but it's as good as any one can get from within.

Questions are being raised now if the university is drawing its last breath? No — to sound its death-knell would be an exaggeration. But yes, it is facing its worst-ever financial crisis at present. Or, so it seems, from the hand-to-mouth existence that has become the norm in the sprawling university and its 79 colleges. The financial situation has become so perilous that the university is finding it extremely difficult to even pay salaries. "At the moment, we have no funds to pay salaries for

DU needs rich friends

NEW DELHI: Open an account named "Friends of Delhi University" in United States and Europe. This was the advice Ashit K Ganguly, a professor based in New York, gave to Delhi University, after donating \$ 85,000 to it on Friday.

"Lots of people might want to contribute to it," said the professor. Delhi University has belatedly woken up to the need to garner funds from alumni settled abroad. It is now thinking of formally beginning an alumni association in the US.

Alumni donations form an important part of the efforts made by western universities like Harvard to generate funds. "I studied in a US university in the early 1970s...I still get letters from there for donations," says a professor.

Experts say while the responsibility for the maintenance of the university, including payment of salaries and pension, must rest with the State, mobilising resources for higher education from non-governmental sources is vital to sustain the system at its present level of operation.

"Delhi University has taken some steps to gather funds through technology-transfer and patents but they are meagre compared to what is needed," admits an official.

The external resource generation can be stepped up through more and more research and development, patent rights, consultancy, foreign tie-ups, professional and executive development programmes.

Internally, among other things, the fee structure can be rationalised and hostels can be made self-financing to ensure they cover running costs. "Wasteful expenditure must also be curbed. For instance, the university needlessly spends a lot of money on travel and legal expenses," says a college lecturer.

Adds former university registrar S K Wasan, "The university-industry interaction must be promoted aggressively. Generation of resources is a must for survival but it cannot be oriented towards payment of salaries and pension."

R P

Time to sit up and think

NEW DELHI: *This is what vice-chancellor V R Mehta had to say about the precarious financial situation of the university to Rajat Pandit:*

"There is an enormous gap between our budget estimates and the funds we have received from the University Grants Commission. We are finding it very difficult to even maintain the system on an even keel, much less to sustain academic and research activities. This applies not only to the university but also to most of our colleges. We do hope the UGC would very soon plan out an appropriate strategy to bail us out.

We appreciate the difficulties in finding funds for development of higher education. But when the situation deteriorates to the extent that even the maintenance of the system in terms of payment of salaries, acquisition of

basic books and periodicals, and basic material in labs becomes difficult, it is time to sit up and think seriously where things have gone wrong.

For the last four years, we have had a reasonably comfortable position as far as sustaining maintenance functions of the university was concerned. That is why we were confident we would be able to generate resources of our own to give greater impetus to academic and re-



search activities.

I dare say we have initiated this process to a certain extent with some success. But unfortunately, in the last few months, we appear to be swinging back to square one.

We have been forced by events to use the funds which ought to be spent on developmental activities for the basic requirement of paying salaries."

