Autonomy for Excellence in Higher Education in India

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Abstract

The need for autonomy in higher education arises on the grounds of academic expansion, excellence and innovation. The whole field of higher education in India is plagued by multiplicity of controls and interventions exercised by the government with the result that there is quantitative expansion without excellence and innovation. There are more than six authorities or bodies exercising controls on management education which has to play a crucial role in the growth and development of the country. The Draft New Education Policy of 2016 admits the need for autonomy in higher education. But it fails to identify suitable mechanisms for guaranteeing autonomy that is needed for transforming India by maintaining excellence in higher education. It is heartening to know that the Union Budget for 2017-18 recognizes the phenomenal significance of autonomy in the institutions imparting higher education. It goes without saying that the States should complement the efforts of the Central Government for what is absolutely needed for ensuring both excellence and innovation in higher education in the times to come.

Keywords: Higher education, autonomy, multiplicity of controls, the new education policy and the union budget

INTRODUCTION

One of the areas where the control Raj has badly affected the overall progress of India is the multiplicity of controls on higher education. Introduced by Thomas Macaulay in the mid 1800s, we are still saddled with an educational system that in spirit subscribes to creating subservient subjects (Aggarwal, 2012).

University Grants Commission in India came into existence in 1956 and was modeled after the University Grants Committee of the UK., a body that was disbanded in 1989 and replaced by a body that is now directly accountable to the British Parliament. The limitations of the current educational system in India has rightly been recognized by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, when he said recently "our education apparatus can't be

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one that produces robots. That can happen in the laboratory. There has to be overall personality development". (ToI. 2014).

By way of tracing the history of higher education briefly, Macauley's system for India was based on the University of London Model whereby teaching colleges were affiliated to the university (Choudhary, 2008). The charter of the university was to simply have the teaching colleges do exactly what the university prescribed in creating a class of subservient individuals to take care of the interests of the Raj. It is important to note that Macaulay did not introduce the University of Oxford model or the University of Cambridge Model where the universities' mandate was to generate new ideas, create new inventions and be the backbone of the intellectual vigor of the country.

Higher Education interventions have long gestation periods. It takes decades of patient work to generate a culture of knowledge-seeking, original thinking and research output. Take the case of a typical institution offering MBA degrees. They have more than six organizations that directly or indirectly control the program. These are

1. University Grants Commission
2. National Assessment and Accreditation Council
3. All India Council for Technical Education
4. National Board of Accreditation
5. Department of Higher Education of the State Government
6. Parent University

These organizations typically take a control-oriented, rule-based view. Unlike international accreditation agencies that operate in developed countries - who have a process view of things - where assisting the institutions to achieve excellence is the motto, unfortunately Indian institutions take a regulatory view. This goes against the spirit of experimentation, innovation and co-thinking of the teacher and the student. Too many institutions for generating controls are also a burden to the national exchequer.

It is important that the academics are made free from the fetters of such controls and given autonomy to do what they are supposed to do: teaching and researching. Knowledge work requires a climate of trust and the

spirit of trusteeship which can least be fostered by the compliance orientation we see today. The cultural ethos of our ancient nation of respecting knowledge and sacralizing the process of knowledge generation and transmission are completely at odds with the bureaucratization we see today. Questioning is more important for the students than having answers to what the teachers ask. It is interesting to note that most great works of ancient India start with the student asking a question and the Master giving answers.

In addition to teaching, most of the working hours of the faculty are involved in massive amounts of paper work. Where there is centralization, there are also rigidities in the manner in which the questions are posed in the examinations. Coupled with external examiners, the tendency is to ask bookish questions that have one right answer, making exams highly standardized. One "convergent answer" is a unwritten rule so that there is agreement across different examiners. All this takes a toll of creativity and context-specific application of the students' mind. Boldness of thinking, innovations and on-the-spot proficiency in dealing with real-life situations are given least importance in such an atmosphere. Such an atmosphere hardly provides any scope for critical reflection, writing and research. Any good system recognizes the diversity of students and the individualized approach that the teacher should ideally adopt towards the students. Even with mass education, there are innovative means of letting the students think for themselves which is a surrogate for individualization. What is required is a culture which does not assume that there is one right answer. Except in higher quantitative subjects, completely objective (and correct) answers do not exist all the time.

There is a wide spread feeling that educational reforms are the need of the hour (Nikunj, 2017). Since India is aspiring for higher rate of growth and development it is reasonable to argue that reforms are very much needed in the field of higher education. To increase productivity of the beneficiaries of higher education emphasis should be on reflective education and education that enlightens about the self and gives a peek into one'sown mind. This linkage between human productivity and higher education was the main theme for discussion in the 90th Annual Meeting of the Association of Indian Universities held on February 05-07, 2016

at Sardar Patel University, Gujarat. It is interesting to note that one of the important representatives of NAAC was ready to admit that most of the colleges and universities do not have enough autonomy to take their own decisions (Singh, 2016). The government rules and regulations rather slow down the speed of progress in higher education. Many institutions find it difficult to comply with the directives and conditions of multiple regulatory authorities so much so that it has become a herculean task. Any effort towards transforming India would call for well-developed structures and systems in higher education that would allow for reaping the benefits of autonomy.

The adverse impact of multiplicity of controls and uncertain policy process has hit higher education in a variety of ways. The Draft National Education Policy of 2016 is not adequately aware of this reality. Therefore, there is a strong view that both the "Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Economic Policy" and "Some Inputs for Draft National Education Policy" seem to have only a blurred sense of the big picture. On the question of autonomy in higher education, the Policy (Section 7.2) is abundantly clear about the need for financial autonomy. Yet the Draft Policy is not unequivocally arguing for minimizing governmental interventions and controls in several other matters of higher education. No concrete mechanisms are suggested for reducing such interventions and debilitating controls. "The standard of Government universities will improve only when governments see the need to detach themselves from management control, and empower universities to be financially responsible and academically respectable" (Deshpande, 2016).

Time is ripe for fresh thinking on the implications of autonomy to institutions providing higher education (Swaminathan, 2014). Here we should mention that the Honorable Supreme Court of India had delivered judgments invoking Article 19(1) (g) of the Indian Constitution which requires providing new guidelines for providing autonomy in the real sense. Though the government has to make greater budgetary allocations for higher educations, care should be taken to not let this translate to reduction of autonomy. The relevant model may be that of our Judiciary, funded by the state, but completely autonomous in its functioning. To prevent misuse of autonomy there are process-based models, such as

accreditation models, available world over for the higher education sector.

Where there is absence of micromanaging, with good governance systems in place, Indian education system has shown good results. State owned institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management have considerable autonomy that non-funded private institutions do not enjoy (G. V. Joshi, 2014). What is required is macro-level governance systems based on the principle of trusteeship rather than micromanagement that only stifles creativity and initiative.

Just to illustrate the point we cite the case of how one of the national-level regulatory institutions have tried to bring in controls over time. There have been occasional circulars coming to educational institutions on which internet-based database has to be subscribed; which entrance test has to be considered for admission; which software platform has to be used by the institution; which accreditation has to be obtained etc.! In all these cases the suggestions were not in the institutional, social or national interest. Many of these decisions have been challenged and overruled by the judiciary. More often than not, such judgments are challenged again in the higher courts. There is least application of the principle of "conflict of interest" in such decisions. Also, there are no adverse consequences that such regulatory institutions face on account of such high-handed and anti-educational rulings.

We believe there is need to completely relook at the institutional infrastructure that is meant to develop the overall intellectual capital of the country. Intellect can only co-exist with a quest for experimentation, creativity and innovation. This is the challenge that the controls we alluded to above ignores. Consequently there is also need to reconsider the National Policy on Education, 1986.

AUTONOMOUS COLLEGE

The concept of autonomous college in India was rooted in the labyrinth of problems that cropped up in bureaucratic and centralized structure of the universities with the system of affiliations as its supporting pillar. Of course, with all their handicaps,the Indian universities with systems of affiliations did function satisfactorily in the early years of

Independence. The system also served the purpose of encouraging the establishment of a number of private colleges by local communities and voluntary agencies. With massive increase in the number of colleges, the universities were not able to function even in a routine manner. Examinations and results were delayed even though teachers were given remunerations for examination works. Syllabi were revised with delays which were natural and teachers were still called upon to maintain quality which was unnatural. The UGC in one of its reports making a strong case for autonomy to colleges lamented that the centralized structure of universities was to be radically altered to avoid delays, to evade attempts at rigid uniformities and to promote innovation. To begin with the idea of autonomous colleges thus essentially stemmed from the immediate need for administrative convenience and not from a strategic orientation.

India is a member of the General Agreement on Trade and Services, the requirements of which can be met only through autonomy at various levels. Much before the formation of GATS, the Kothari Commission report first recommended in 1966 autonomy for an outstanding college or a small 0cluster of very good colleges within a large university. The National Policy on Education of 1986 suggested that autonomous colleges should increase in number.

The National Policy of Education contained some specific objectives for autonomous colleges. An autonomous college will have the freedom to design its own courses of study and syllabi. It is authorized to prescribe rules for admission consistent with the reservation policy of the concerned state government. An autonomous college, according to the National Policy, is free to evolve methods of assessment of students and examinations. For achieving higher standards and greater creativity, it is free to use modern tools of educational technology. The National Policy of 1986 has declared that an autonomous college can undertake projects and provide services for the benefit of the society at large. The policy spelt out the relationship of an autonomous college with the parent university, the state government and other educational institutions. Both the parent university and the state governments have to encourage the autonomous colleges without interference. If the National Policy of Education of 1986 is the basis, any organization which has its right of

governance to fulfill its objectives with least interference from others, though connected, is said to be autonomous. Likewise, a college will be fully autonomous only if it has its right to admit students, appoint teachers and employees, decide on course content, carry out teaching, conduct examinations to evaluate the performance of students and take all other steps to maintain high educational standards with only guidelines from the university and state government, but not remotely controlled by them. In the context of conceptualizing autonomy, we should keep ourselves on guard by saying that autonomy to any college does not mean sovereignty. It does not make the college free from the social objectives.

The experiments and experiences in connection with autonomous colleges have been different in different states. In Haryana all the objectives and the essential principles of the National Policy of Education of 1986 were incorporated in the Technical Education Department Notification dated 11th September 2006. The criteria for identification of institutions for grant of autonomy, procedures for approval of autonomy, mechanism for implementation of autonomy, governance of an autonomous college and all other related matters are specified through a general notification in Haryana. The copies of notification of 2006 were marked to all engineering colleges, all university departments, all government and self financing polytechnics. Thus the government of Haryana made a distinct beginning in the direction of spreading the message of autonomy.

In Karnataka the condition is different. The universities falling within the jurisdiction of KSU Act of 2000 have different statutes to give autonomy to colleges. There have been instances where autonomous colleges have realized that they are not really autonomous. There are instances where the Boards of Studies and Academic Councils of parent universities are tampered with the decisions of the Boards of Studies and Academic Councils of autonomous colleges. When the Maharashtra Universities Act was amended in 1994, the universities there suddenly came under the control of the state government. The interference of the state government became even more acute. It is not surprising that where the parent university is without autonomy, it is not ready to grant real and full autonomy to its constituent colleges.

Another significant fact deserving our attention is that the number of

autonomous colleges in India even now is awfully small. Tamilnadu was one of the first states to have autonomous colleges. While the NPE-1986 suggested that 500 colleges should be developed as autonomous by the end of the Seventh Plan period in 1990, that figure did not become a reality. According to the report of the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) submitted in June 2005, there were just 204 autonomous colleges, spanning 11 states and 43 universities. The list of benefits of autonomy is numerous. However, often what arises is a paradoxical situation that autonomy to colleges is so good that many colleges don't want it! Therefore the most formidable challenge to the autonomous colleges is to retain autonomy which they have got with great difficulty. Autonomy can be just a concept without becoming a practice. If autonomy becomes just a superficial legal position with no mission-driven leadership, in a short time there would be serious lapses of quality and accountability.

The studies conducted in the different parts of the country some of which have been published in the different issues of the Economic and Political Weekly have thrown light on the reasons for the poor progress of the scheme of autonomous colleges:

- The reluctance of state governments to give up their power over to the colleges.
- The managements of private colleges were apprehensive that they will have to find additional resources.
- The teachers were not fully willing to assume complete responsibilities.
- The teachers fear that the management would have more control and would be subjected to higher work load and also they may not rise to the expectations of the management.

The important types of autonomy are administrative autonomy, academic autonomy and monetary or financial autonomy for the programs and courses run through the institutions or colleges. Ultimately the consideration of monetary autonomy can emerge as a deciding factor. An autonomous college is, in principle, free to fix the fees for every program. It is free to fix the fees for every course. It is also free to decide the mode of collection of fees. Since money is what money does for

autonomous colleges also, the real strength of an autonomous college is measured by mobilizing internal resources by running socially useful and job oriented under graduate and post graduate courses. But it should be made clear by the state government as well as the UGC that an autonomous college shall not become the victim of its own success. At least in the initial years the state government and UGC must give matching grants for building infrastructure. The managements of autonomous colleges should be ready to provide supporting staff to the teachers who should not be made to fritter away their time in doing clerical work and instead concentrate on their academic responsibilities. In this connection we may remember what was categorically stated in an international seminar in Helsinki in Finland on August 30-31, 2001 in which higher education policy makers from both developed and developing countries were present. There were some excellent presentations including the one by Prof. Nicholas Barr of the London School of Economics on paying for higher education and the lessons to be learned from economic theory. Common to all these presentations, was the realisation that overall funding, especially public funding, for higher education is increasingly inadequate for the achievement of diverse objectives set by the universities themselves.

Joshi (2009) quoted Gudmund Hernes, the then Director of the International Institute of Educational Planning in Paris noted the tasks of the agencies funding higher education institutions:

- Achieving ever wider and more equitable/socially inclusive access;
- Maintaining institutional support for teaching and research in the face of a declining unit of resources;
- Responding to demands for transparency and greater accountability for institutional effectiveness and quality assurance;
- Responding appropriately to student-based funding;
- Managing institutional performance in relation to performance related funding models;
- Meeting the challenges presented by private and commercial providers and
- Developing funding formulae that facilitate life-long learning.

It is a little heartening to know that the Union Budget for 2017-18 has clearly recognized the need for autonomy in higher education. The Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has promised to undertake reforms in the UGC. Good quality institutions would be enabled to have greater administrative and academic autonomy. Colleges will be identified based on accreditation and ranking, and given autonomous status. A revised framework will be put in place for outcome based accreditation and credit based programmes.

Since, many matters of higher education are in the State list of the Indian Constitution, the State Governments should also take policy measures to complement what the Centre proposes to do through the budgetary announcements. They should also admit that without a well-structured higher education system guaranteeing autonomy in the real and full sense of the term their growth and development will be further stunted.

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