

## THE INDIAN UNIVERSITY IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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The purpose of looking at Indian Universities in a global perspective is obviously to locate it among higher education institutions across the world and to identify its strengths and weaknesses in the advancement of scholarship and development. In doing so, one can discern the directions for reform in order to put the university system in a competitive advantage for an emerging knowledge society. The fact that none of the Indian Universities figure in the top rankings of world class universities today need not necessarily be a factor in assessing the performance because of the diversities in policies and approaches, measurement criteria and anticipated outcomes of university education in India. Nonetheless, in a globalizing world, it is necessary to make comparisons, however irrelevant in the past, because of its implications to economy, trade and quality of life of the people.

### **Universities as Organizations in Distress :**

The Indian University today is not a uniform, monolithic organization as it is the product of a highly diversified and hierarchically organized multi-cultural society seeking to bring about unity in diversity. There was a time in Indian history when the famous Nalanda and Taxila Universities offered higher education to scholars across the world and created knowledge through inter-disciplinary research. Somewhere down the line, India lost that tradition and became a poor cousin to the higher education system evolved in Britain in the nineteenth century. Modern university education in India is fundamentally what the British introduced in its biggest colony for producing the cadres necessary to carry on the administration and defense of its territory. Universities performed that job well with the result when the country became independent, it inherited a civil service which could manage the transition from a colony to a democratic republic without jeopardizing the constitutional values of democracy, human rights, secularism and the unity of the Nation.

On adoption of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the challenge was different and the country demanded from its higher education institutions people qualified to take the socio-economic agenda forward and create an egalitarian social order through the instrumentalities of



rule of law and democratic governance. Under the federal scheme, "education" was initially in the State List and later shifted to the Concurrent List in the scheme of division of legislative powers. There was no way the universities could have developed independent of the constitutional scheme.

The policies of educational governance varied from State to State in the initial decades of the Republic. This is reflected in the huge body of judge-made education law governing universities and the disproportionate influence of political parties, big and small, in governance of academic bodies. In the process, learning and research took a back seat in many institutions and the dominant concern was maintaining campus peace, advancing influence of ruling cliques and expanding access indiscriminately disregarding merit at all levels. Nowhere in the world one can find repeated judicial interventions in setting norms of student union elections, ragging prevention, admissions and examination, fee fixation, attendance issues, appointments to faculty positions, capitation fee, scope of reservation of seats in technical institutions, government interference in management of unaided and minority colleges, choice of text books etc. as it happens in India. This has resulted, inter alia, in three independent developments which adversely affected higher education in significant ways. Firstly, university as an organization got highly politicized with unholy alliances between academics and groups which have very little to do with education, constantly keeping universities as their battle fields for power and influence. Secondly, the number of politician-teachers and non-teaching teachers grew steadily deflecting the attention of the academic community including students from learning and research thereby diluting standards. Corruption increased in admissions, appointments and promotions creating a vacuum in educational leadership and scholarship. Thirdly, the pattern of financing got unnecessarily cluttered in Centre-State conflicts leaving the State Universities to gather funds from expansive affiliation and examination routes making the system thoroughly bureaucratic and unmanageable. Many universities found no time or resources for revision of curricula or for promotion of research for long periods. Vice-Chancellors spent their time in negotiating with Government offices for funds and struggling to keep order and discipline in the campus. The cumulative result of these developments was the complete surrender of university administration (in States) to the powers-that-be in Government and erosion of autonomy even in academic decision-making.

In the midst of such drift and dilution of academic and governance standards in most State Universities, the Central Government went about setting up centrally sponsored universities and technical institutes and gave them liberal infrastructure support and research funding. Many of them showed promise in quality improvement. Their products, however,



mostly migrated to foreign countries leaving the State universities to mend for themselves. Research was diverted from universities by establishing a chain of research institutions with Central Government funding. The Central Government using its power to legislate for co-ordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education and research (Item 66 of List-I) enacted legislations like the UGC Act, AICTE Act, IGNOU Act etc. to set the standards and police the erring institutions in the States. While pursuing their mission, these regulatory agencies had to settle on common minimum standards and an inefficient inspection and approval mechanism which allowed mediocrity and corruption to grow everywhere. Good institutions found the environment suffocating, autonomy eroding, excellence not getting recognition and they being looked with suspicion for alleged nurturing of elitism and exclusiveness!

### **Economic Liberalization and Higher Education :**

Nothing would have happened to this depressing scenario in which universities were placed in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but for the economic liberalization and the market seeking educated people in large numbers to manage the expanding private corporate sector. Given the fat pay packages offered to the really meritorious and the increasing demand for technical and professional graduates, the private sector found it good business and set up its own universities and colleges with better infrastructure and governance systems. Some sections revolted against what they called, privatization and commercialization of education. The Supreme Court declared the principle of "education-not-for-profit" and said that profit, if made in educational enterprise, it should be invested back for improving or expanding education. Private sector soon became big players in higher education both in the States as well as at the Centre through what is called the deemed-to-be-universities route. The Central Government brought in a series of legislations (many of them lapsed) which were intended to facilitate expansion and promote pursuit of excellence in the higher education sector. The whole scenario is now in a process of change. Thanks to the market forces and the new economic policy, the Nation is talking today in terms of the emerging Knowledge Society and the "Demographic Dividend" that India is awaiting to exploit!

Change is inevitable and it is happening. What is crucial for the future of higher education is the direction change is taking and how it can be influenced by well-thought-out policy. It is in this regard Centre-State policies and the commitment of the academia are going to be decisive. The old mindset is still prevalent among some educators and educational administrators. Politicians play with the fear associated with change and debate endlessly on



policies and State responsibilities. In this milieu, market is distorting priorities and is trying to set the agenda of university education. This is the tragedy of higher education today, where educational space is increasingly occupied by non-educationists and middle-men.

#### **Leadership Matters for Transformative Change :**

It is said that Indians can outshine as individuals but they fail to perform as a team when it comes to managing change. The only exception possibly is defense services. Admittedly, Indian universities produce world-class scientists, engineers, doctors, managers, statisticians and artists; but our universities are not rated world class. Individuals graduate from Indian universities and acquit themselves creditably in organizations across the world where they are competing to perform, though not necessarily to lead. Is it a genetic problem or a cultural attribute? The argumentative Indian is a character who can explain everything without doing anything to change the course of events. And higher education is the field full of opportunities for the argumentative Indians.

Let me conclude my comments on Comparative Perspectives in Indian higher education with a success story in which I happened to be the team leader. Forgive me for being personal in describing the story of the National Law School Movement which revolutionized legal education in India in a short span of ten years against heavy odds and challenges.

I was a professor heading the law department in Delhi University in 1985 when the call came to establish an innovative law university in Bangalore which when established, can be compared with the best of its kind in the world and which will act as a pace setter in legal education reforms in India. Rarely does one get such an opportunity in higher education. All my colleagues, argumentative Indians as they are, impressed upon me the overwhelming risks involved and advised me to desist from tasks considered impossible by people more knowledgeable and experienced than me. My conscience persuaded me to give it a try as the returns can be far reaching if the experiment turned out to be successful. I dreamt for several days of a university attracting talented students from all over the country pursuing a curriculum that is path breaking in the company of a group of committed teachers dreaming with me. Once out of the dream, reality dawned on us that Law is a subject which bright students seldom pursued and that good faculty may not join our institution which has no credibility yet nor financial security. Funds were to be raised as we go along building the so-called world class law school ! Nonetheless, the moral support of the Bar Council of India and the patronage of Chief Justice of India as the Chancellor of the University emboldened us to take the challenge.



To cut the story short, a team of twelve teachers and few supporting staff worked with me tirelessly, determined to make a qualitative change in Indian legal education. We worked out a five year integrated LL.B. curriculum, conceived several innovative methods of teaching law combining theory with practice, and developed our own brand of study materials for interdisciplinary learning. We embarked on a journey with very little infrastructure facilities and with uncertain funding support. Nobody, particularly our peers in the teaching profession ever thought we would succeed and they dismissed us as crazy adventurers. We, however, after a long struggle, demonstrated that a well-conceived idea executed with commitment and competence can change the course of legal education not only in the institution concerned but even in every other law school in the whole country. Acknowledged as the best in the country for the last thirty years and more not only by the bench and the bar but also by governments, parliament and the private sector, the National Law School experiment is today being replicated in every other State in the country. The moral of the story is that determined leadership and some amount of autonomy can still make change transformative enough to overcome old mindsets and overbearing bureaucratic systems and build institutions for advancement of learning and scholarship.

### **Why India cannot follow foreign models in higher education?**

There is a demand, justifiable and desirable, to have few world-class universities in the country though there is no unanimity on the concept of what makes universities "world class". It assumes global competitiveness in teaching, research, governance and extension activities. It warrants state-of-the-art infrastructure and adequate financial support to attract the best available talents internationally to teach and research in the institution. The proposed Innovation Universities are supposed to fill the bill, if ever it takes place. Meanwhile, the university system in every country develops in the peculiar circumstances obtaining in that country and its transplantation to another country will not work unless there are comparable circumstances in that country as well.

The leading American universities are privately sponsored and funded with linkages with big corporate enterprises having research agendas of their own. These institutions are research-based and market driven and enjoy a lot of freedom to experiment with academic programmes without regulatory interference from anywhere. This cannot be a model for Indian universities which are not supposed to be profit-driven and market-oriented. Access, equity and inclusiveness are key elements in our system for sustaining which compromises are inevitable even if they undermine quality and competitiveness.



Closer home, the models adopted in Singapore, China and Hong Kong which claim to have world-class universities, also are inappropriate for the Indian situation. They concentrate on limited number of elite institutions with very heavy investments on infrastructure seeking to imitate the market model focusing on collaboration with foreign universities and hiring teachers globally on negotiated pay packages and service conditions.

While India can borrow some of the features of these foreign universities like research focus, industry-linkage and autonomy in internal governance, it is neither possible nor practical to abandon or subordinate the demands of access and equity for the sake of quality. That is perhaps the reason why neither the National Education Policies nor the Five Year Plan documents on higher education have given priority to world class focus in university development.

#### **Twelfth Plan on Higher Education Quality Development :**

According to the XII<sup>th</sup> Plan, developed economies will face a shortage of about 40 million highly skilled workers by 2020. India could easily capture a higher share of global knowledge-based work, for example by increasing its exports of knowledge-intensive goods and services, if there is focus on higher education and its quality is globally benchmarked (Plan Document on Education, p.89, 2013). The three strategic aims of the Twelfth Plan on higher education therefore are : (a) an over-riding emphasis on quality; (b) diversification of higher education opportunities to meet the needs of employers and to provide wider choices to youth; and (c) introducing governance reforms to enable institutions to have the autonomy to develop distinctive strengths, while being held accountable for ensuring quality.

For achieving the above three objects, the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan has proposed a set of strategies which are equally applicable to States intending to improve higher education through quality enhancement and governance reforms. The key recommendations for quality improvement as they are supposed to be spread out during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Plans (2014-2025) are :

- (a) **Reforming the Affiliating College System** through a five-pronged strategy, namely;
- (i) large and reputed colleges with necessary capabilities will be converted into full-fledged universities;
  - (ii) college-cluster universities, under a new name, with each college working as a campus of the university will be created;

- (iii) large and unwieldy affiliating universities will be bifurcated or trifurcated into manageable units;
- (iv) colleges desisting to scale up to leverage existing infrastructure would be allowed to consolidate through merger under an autonomous framework;
- (v) affiliating universities will be required to revamp their college development councils and give greater autonomy to their colleges in all academic, administrative and financial matters.

- (b) **Deepening Academic Reforms** including introduction of choice-based credit system, regular revision of curricula to make it relevant to contemporary and future needs, giving students opportunities for intellectual exploration, hands-on research, job skilling, experiential learning, creative thinking, leadership, ethics education, community service and more.

To achieve these multiple objectives, the under-graduate programme will be of four years duration.

- (c) **Focus on Teachers and Teaching** by doubling faculty from the current 8 lakh to 16 lakh. Qualitative change in the content and methodology of faculty development programmes through the Academic Staff Colleges will be undertaken. In addition, 50 Teaching and Learning Centres with a strong research focus will be set up during XII<sup>th</sup> Plan. Collaboration with foreign universities will be encouraged. An enabling policy framework would be put in place to attract faculty from abroad, particularly from amongst the overseas Indians teaching in universities abroad. Growing pool of retired faculty could be utilized as adjunct faculty. Consistent with international best practices, faculty selection, performance evaluation and promotion should be handled at the department level. New faculty may be kept under probation for a period of five years and confirmation could then be done on the basis of rigorous performance evaluation including peer review and student feed back.

The transformative potential of online learning is beginning to unfold now. There are massive online courseware by many of the best universities available now free through internet. Technology will be leveraged by using these massive online courses to meet the acute shortage of quality teachers. India should contribute to this global repository, contextualize and translate to local languages wherever necessary to enable the maximum number of students to access quality learning materials.



- (d) **Strengthening the Accreditation System** by establishing multiple accreditation bodies and by making accreditation mandatory with clear incentives and consequences.
- (e) **Research and Innovation** are now vital functions of higher education. There is need to promote a research culture across all higher education institutions while ensuring special support for those able to engage in state-of-the-art research. Low levels of funding and segregation of the country's R&D institutions from universities and colleges have been responsible for the weak research capacity of Indian universities. Twelfth Plan would focus on the development of faculty, institutions, departments and centres of excellence in research and to increase investments in research infrastructure in them. Upper-tier institutions are to be allowed to hire globally, including foreigners and provide compensatory benefits to those who re-locate. Bench marking doctoral programmes with global requirements on capacity is said to be the key for quality development in research.
- (f) **Multi-Disciplinary Research Universities or Universities for Research & Innovation**  
Twenty such universities are proposed during the Twelfth Plan. They could be Public or Private universities or universities under Public-Private Partnerships. It may be set up by conversion of existing institutions as well.
- (g) **Promoting Collaborative Research through Inter-University Centres.** More IUCs will be established in both basic and applied research during Twelfth Plan with a common governance structure at the Central level and separate governance structure at the institutional level.

### Conclusions :

The University System in India, no doubt is in a state of disrepair. It has expanded since Independence allowing access to higher education for almost 25 per cent of the eligible population. For some strange reason, the policy on research pursued by the Government has been to put the available research funds on specialized institutions outside the university system and to restrict the entry of private enterprise in higher education, at least till recent times. Multiplicity of regulatory institutions and interference at the political and bureaucratic levels have literally killed autonomy of universities and even undermined academic initiatives at the institutional level. The internal governance structure based on 19<sup>th</sup> century University Acts have further inhibited academic freedom even in curricular reform, pedagogic innovations and



examination. Affiliation of colleges have made universities, particularly at the State level, mere examining and degree awarding institutions far removed from research and innovation. No wonder that the Prime Minister himself characterized the situation (with reference to legal education, though it applies to others as well) as "a sea of institutionalized mediocrity with few islands of excellence"!

Realizing the dangers inherent in such a situation for the future of the country, the Central Government initiated a series of policy changes including half a dozen legislative measures which have been introduced in Parliament. Unfortunately, neither the Government nor the Parliament found the time to pursue the matter and the whole system is in limbo full of uncertainties and lack of clarity on future direction. In this situation, it is too much to expect a paradigm shift in university administration and academic accountability for improving quality of higher education in the near future. One can only hope for the better. There may be few more islands of excellence in the sea of mediocrity. Otherwise, the system will continue to be enmeshed in party politics and corruption submerging quality in the name of equity and social justice! In the process, India will have lost the "demographic dividend" about which our leaders have been talking and taking pride in its outcome.

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