Journey of Autonomy: Improving Quality of Higher Education in Kerala

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Abstract: Quality of Higher Education in India is measured in terms of Access, Equity and Quality. Generally, in most of my papers I emphasize upon Quality of Education. It is one of the aspect, if achieved at its best level can bring changes in every field. In order to improve Quality of Education in India educational institutions of Higher Studies should be given freedom in academic terms. Although administration should be kept under the control of a centralized system/University. This paper is a study of autonomous colleges in India, reasons for their autonomy, how to achieve autonomy, its benefits, hindrances in the path of autonomy and steps to overcome those obstacles. Some secondary data have also been collected to know the present status of autonomous colleges in Kerala.

1. Introduction:
Quality is as important as Access and Equity in higher education because it is intended to enable its recipients to live a life of dignity while contributing to the development of society. Nonetheless, because of heavy demand for access and consequent expansion of colleges and universities together with constraints on resources, standards of education could not cope up with expansion. There is steep decline in the academic standards, profiteering by the college management, low level of the quality of teaching, vulnerable examination systems etc were reported from a number of institutions from several states. The affiliating system trifles academic freedom and innovations in higher education. In order to improve quality in Higher Education it was thought to give academic freedom to select colleges. The main objective was to encourage innovative changes so as to achieve academic improvement.

Towards this step first specific recommendation in this regard was made by Dr. K. S. Kothari Commission (1966) and later by the National Education Policy (1986). The UGC meanwhile prepared concrete guidelines for setting up of autonomous colleges in 1973 which was revised in 1998. University Grants Commission evolved in 2007 a set of Guidelines for Autonomous Colleges to give autonomy to at least 10 per cent of its colleges, 420 colleges in 19 States spread over 79 Universities already enjoyed autonomous status by the end of XIth Plan. University Grants Commission approved 526 autonomous colleges upto 01.05.2015

(i) What is autonomy?
Autonomy has nothing to do with privatization or commercialization of education which are matters to be addressed by the policies of appropriate governments. Autonomy is in respect of academics only. It is an affair as where quality matters. The words of an eminent educationalist well sums up the essence of autonomy as the academic freedom given to teachers to decide “what to teach, how to teach, whom to teach and how to evaluate.” It should be understood very clearly that autonomous colleges does not come under the category of self-financing colleges. Autonomy means only academic autonomy not administrative or financial autonomy.

(ii) Importance and Relevance of Autonomy
Even while we consider the limited success or failure of the autonomous college experiment, still a strong case can be made for the concept of academic autonomy to teachers and institutions for the following reasons:
(a) The higher education scenario is fast changing with the world moving towards a knowledge society. Integration of academic disciplines, application of information technology in teaching learning process, newer concepts like multi-skilling, global skills, job shifting, lifelong learning & employability, anywhere any time learning etc. are emerging. These can be dealt easily with autonomous approach to education.
(b) New knowledge providers like the corporate houses are emerging who have started marketing knowledge products and educational softwares.
(c) Corporate companies are by passing Universities and educational institutions by establishing set ups for imparting domain skills, skill testing and assessment and also starting various modern diploma courses.
(d) Through the traditional academic approach and institutions these challenges cannot be overcome with the result that the benefits of these developments are taken away by the students who can pay. From a public good education becomes a private property and commodity.
2. Autonomy In Context Of Kerala:

Kerala Situation

In Kerala the first serious initiative in the matter of autonomous colleges was made in 1987 when the Government constituted an Expert Committee with Dr. K. Gopalan as Chairperson to study the various aspects of the proposal to have autonomous college in the state. The Committee in effect recommended the establishment of autonomous colleges.

It has gone largely unnoticed the academic autonomy given to the faculty and the departments in the University of Kerala from 1995 onwards as part of the introduction of the Choice Based Credit and Semester System (CSS) in the PG Courses conducted by the University Departments. As per the CSS system the faculty members of the various departments have the rights and responsibilities to design, review and revise the core and elective courses. The CSS programme is based on continuous internal assessment and of the four semester examinations the departments conduct the first three and the University will conduct only the end semester examination. The working of the CSS programme is coordinated and monitored by the Academic Committee regularly. All matters relating to the administration of the PG programme under CSS are coordinated by the CSS office setup in the Kariavattom Campus.

Question arises as what are the reasons that Kerala government is so much interested in implementing the autonomous concept in Kerala:

(i) The education standard is declining day by day in Kerala. Higher education and market mismatch is a significant constituent of the disequilibrium in the job market for the educated.

(ii) It has to be conceded that the University governance system is not conducive enough for achieving academic excellence.

(iii) There is a general neglect of the arts and science colleges where the majority of students are studying. There is an over emphasis on professional education.

(iv) Many undergraduate courses are still running on the old mode of terminal summative examinations. The Choice Based Credit and Semester System are introduced only in a few University departments. Semester system has been introduced at PG level only.

(v) Teachers also lack the knowledge about the modern teaching methodologies and technologies since there is no training programme to upgrade their pedagogical skill.

(vi) Courses especially conducted under the self-financing mode are run by guest academicians who are responsible for erosion of academic standards.

(vii) The recent spurt of self-financing professional colleges, the attitude of the management of some these colleges, the court verdicts in effect denying educational opportunities to the poor have all contributed to a chaotic situation within the educational sector in Kerala.

Considering above discrepancies which are somewhere responsible for decline in quality of Higher Education in the state, KSHEC constituted a committee, chaired by Prof. J.A.K. Tareen (Vice Chancellor Pondicherry University and Prof Dr. Sheen Shukkur, (National Judiciary Academy, the present PVC of MG University) as Convener. The committee submitted the report on 6thNovember, 2012. The recommendation of the Tareen Committee regarding abolition of Affiliating System and the alternative is to establish College Cluster Multiple Campus Universities (CCMCU) not autonomous colleges. The KSHEC ignored the recommendations of the Tareen Committee. Later in Dec 2012 the Kerala State Higher Education Council (KSHEC) has set up another committee under the Chairmanship of Prof. N.R. Madhava Menon to recommend criteria for selection and steps for operationalisation of
Autonomous Colleges. The Committee submitted the report on April 25th, 2013. Study by the committee gives enough evidence on how autonomy leads to enhancement of academic standards and promotes student centric learning in higher education. There are colleges in Kerala in the Government and private sectors which deserve autonomy and which can prove their full academic potential if greater freedom is given to Colleges.

Main features of Prof. Madhavan Menon Committee:

Minimum criteria for colleges seeking autonomy:

(i) All colleges, government, government-aided, unaided, self-financing including professional colleges, are to be considered eligible for seeking autonomy. They must have been functioning for a substantial period of time with good academic and administrative performance record.

(ii) The college must have been accredited by NAAC and must have received nothing less than ‘A’ Grade accreditation.

(iii) The adequacy of staff (teacher-student ratio), their educational qualifications and experience of teachers can be taken as criteria.

(iv) Colleges seeking autonomy should have teaching programmes both at under-graduate and post-graduate level.

(v) Adequacy of academic, physical and technical infrastructure of the college including library, hostel, equipment, staff quarters, ICT-enabled services etc.

(vi) Equity and affirmative action programmes for weaker sections, fair student admission procedure and fee structure, anti-ragging policies, sexual harassment norms and availability of grievance redressal mechanisms in college.

(vii) The Committee recommending autonomy should satisfy itself that the necessary preparations have been made, draft regulations are prepared, management committees are formed and the college is ready to exercise autonomy responsibly.

Hindrances in conferring autonomy to colleges:

(i) Resistance from interest groups partly because of fear of implications of anything new.

(ii) Integrity of preparing the faculty, staff and students to take up autonomy with responsibility and evolve an appropriate work culture which alone can make a difference in the existing situation.

(iii) The level of motivation and self-discipline of faculty, staff and students, their preparation to make sacrifices for the successful implementation of the scheme in their college indeed counts.

(iv) Non-receipt of payment of salaries by Government to teachers in aided colleges.

(v) Crowding out of students in lure of money.

(vi) Starting of self-financing courses without prior permission of the University.

Steps to overcome

(i) Autonomy should be initially limited to not more than a dozen most deserving colleges.

(ii) If autonomy does not percolate down to every member of the staff the intended result will not follow. In order to ensure that autonomy is shared by all stakeholders and accountability for academic enhancement is equally shared, one of the suggestions is to increase the representation of teachers in Governing Board and Academic Council.

(iii) The constitution of the Governing Body, Academic Councils, Boards of Studies, and Finance Committee of autonomous colleges shall be in accordance with UGC guidelines.

(iv) The Committee believes that the solution lies in transparency, participation, decentralization and increased activities.

(v) Renew at least one-third of the courses.

(vi) Go slow in implementing the scheme.

(vii) Details of the scheme to be widely circulated among the stakeholders to spread awareness.

Colleges under University Conferred Autonomous Status as on 01.05.2015 in Kerala

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl No.</th>
<th>Colleges</th>
<th>University</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01.</td>
<td>Maharaja’s College, Park Avenue, Ernakulam, Kochi-682 011</td>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam</td>
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<tr>
<td>02.</td>
<td>Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kalamassery, Kochi – 683 104</td>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03.</td>
<td>Sacred Heart College, Thevara, Kochi, Kerala</td>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04.</td>
<td>St. Berchmans College, Changanassery, Kottayam, Dist, Kerala – 686 101</td>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05.</td>
<td>St. Teresa’s College, Ernakulam – 682 011, Kerala</td>
<td>Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06.</td>
<td>Farook College, Farook College Post, Calicut Dist., Kerala-673 632</td>
<td>University Of Calicut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07.</td>
<td>M.E.S. Mampad College, Mampad College, P.O., Malappuram, (DT), Kerala-676 542</td>
<td>University Of Calicut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08.</td>
<td>St. Joseph’s College, Devagiri, Devagiri, Calicut-8, Kerala</td>
<td>University Of Calicut</td>
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<tr>
<td>09.</td>
<td>St. Thomas College, Thrissur-1, Kerala</td>
<td>University Of Calicut</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Fatima Mata National College, Kollam, Kerala – 691 001</td>
<td>University Of Calicut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Mar Ivanios College, Mar Ivanios Vidya Nagar, Thiruvananthapuram – 695 034</td>
<td>University Of Kerala</td>
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http://www.ugc.ac.in/oldpdf/colleges/autonomous_colleges-list.pdf

3. Conclusion:
Autonomy to the departments and academic faculties in Universities and affiliated colleges is a desirable educational reform. However, this should be implemented only with the concurrence and consensus of all concerned like teachers, students and management of affiliated colleges. Definite norms and protocols should be laid down for giving autonomous status to affiliated colleges. It should be understood that autonomy in the affiliated colleges works only in the presence of a well functioning University system and academic vibrancy in the affiliated colleges. In the absence of both these autonomy by itself will not bring in the desired changes as evidenced by the experiences of the autonomous colleges in other states. Autonomy should be a collective decision of the Universities and the affiliated colleges. Within the colleges the demand for autonomy should come from the teachers and students. Granting autonomy to the affiliated colleges should be a consensus, conscious and transparent decision and should be implemented as part of an overall attempt to reform higher education.

4. References:


[3] UGC guidelines for the scheme of autonomous colleges, X Plan, www.ugc.ac.in