

Universities in Western India

Problems and Prospects

Knowledge production and knowledge inculcation are both essential aspects of the university and serious thought needs to be given to how these features can be strengthened in the current context of rapid economic and social change. An essay on the dilemmas in higher education.

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I Introduction

There is a great deal of dissatisfaction in our society, as well as in our academic fraternity, about most of our universities. However, we have made great strides in the field of higher education, particularly after independence. At the time of independence in 1947, India had only 18 universities and less than 0.2 million students [Powar 1995]. But, after independence there has been considerable growth in the spread of educational institutions in the country. Today, we have 300 universities, 12,600 colleges, 3.31 lakh teachers, and 7.8 million students spread across the country [Patil 2002]. Our higher education system is the second largest in the world [Powar 1995].

Moreover, Indian universities have made a considerable contribution to our national development. Over the years, they have produced thousands of technically trained personnel including scientists, engineers, doctors, lawyers and researchers of high competence. Today, we have a large indigenous resource of well-trained and highly educated persons largely built up in the post-independence era. It is with the help of this trained manpower we have become self-reliant in many fields such as agriculture, industry, defence, atomic energy, space, etc. From a state of abject poverty, rampant illiteracy, total lack of modern technology, and abysmally poor infrastructural facilities, today we have reached a state where we can claim much satisfaction for the progress made in each of these areas. I am, therefore, of the

opinion that we need not be pessimistic on account of the performance of our educational system.

Nevertheless, in the light of these achievements, we must also not lose sight of the problems and challenges faced by us. Nor shall we develop an attitude of complacency. For, in the contemporary world, a nation, to be strong and powerful, needs a steady supply of the elites who can provide solutions to newly emerging problems in different fields, particularly when, the pace of change in every aspect of the society is so fast that we continuously face new problems. Obviously, we need new solutions for new problems. This requires a class of able elites in each field having the capability to think critically, originally, and creatively. And, the training to inculcate these qualities of critical, creative, and original thinking can be given only at the university level, through research. Therefore, today, the knowledge industry has emerged as the most important industry in the world. And, all over the world, in good universities, research is considered a very important activity. For instance, the best universities of the US, which are also best in the world today, are known as the research universities. If today, the US can be proud of anything produced in there, it is not automobiles, nor is it electronics; it is the knowledge produced in the American universities. For instance, the most seminal research work in all fields of knowledge is being done in the American universities. Most of the Nobel laureates are from the American universities. The American professors write most of the textbooks and reference books used in most of the universities of the world. The degrees conferred by the American universities

have become a licence for the most lucrative jobs in the world. Not surprisingly, therefore, these universities have become the Mecca for the knowledge-seekers of the world; any talented student from any part of the world would crave for a degree from an American university. The knowledge produced in these universities is the real source of the strength of the US. In fact, the US emerged as a major world power only recently, by the end of the first world war, by the time when it produced the world-class universities.

And, what is true for the US is also, in a way, true for most of the other nations of the world. As a matter of fact, the history of the human civilisation shows that the rise and fall of nations partly depend upon the rise and fall of their institutions of higher learning, and the quality of the intellectual class produced by these institutions. For instance, the academies of the ancient Greece played a major role in transforming it into a powerful empire. And, with fall of these academies, the Greek empire also fell. In ancient India universities like Taxila and Nalanda played the similar role in making India a world famous power. After the destruction of these universities, India lost its ancient glory. In modern times, Germany and Great Britain emerged as world powers to reckon with, when they developed their universities into the centres of excellence. The modern universities of Germany and Great Britain were so famous in the 19th and the early 20th centuries that scholars from all over the world, including the US, used to go there for higher learning. But, when the US acquired the decisive lead in the field of higher education, by producing the world's best universities by the beginning of the 20th century, it has become the most powerful nation in the world today. Thus, a nation can ignore its universities, and the quality of higher education imparted by them, only at its peril.

In this essay, I attempt to identify some of the most important problems faced by us today in western India which deserve some serious attention, with special reference to the knowledge-production and knowledge-inculcation

(i.e., teaching and research) functions of the university.

II Problems of Universities in Western India

Subsidised Education

One of the major problems faced by most of the states is that the education provided in the government-aided institutions is highly subsidised, beyond a point of economic rationality and beyond the call of a welfare state. The fees charged from the students for these institutions are too low to recover even the basic minimum recurring expenses. Only about 15 per cent of the total expenditure on higher education has been shared by the students in the form of fees, whereas about 80 per cent of the total expenditure on higher education has been met so far by the government [Tilak 1995]. It is true that in a welfare state, due to very high fees, the students coming from socially and economically weaker sections should not be deprived of higher education, and, thereby, of their chances of upward social mobility. But, at the same time, those who can afford to pay more fees should be made to pay at least reasonable fees. Today, in case of many students studying in these institutions their daily pocket expenses are much more than the fees they pay. This is an anomaly.

Another fact to be noted, with reference to Gujarat, is that the state government has adopted a wise policy of providing completely free education for the girls up to the highest level. This is a progressive and commendable step in view of our social structure, which is still discriminative against females. However, this benefit is also available to all those girls who come from affluent families, or from other states, or even from foreign countries. This makes it an unpragmatic policy.

As a result, these institutions are gradually becoming unsustainable, due to inadequate infrastructural facilities and insufficient staff. In some universities, ironically, a major problem bothering academic administrators of major faculties, is: "What will happen on a day when all students will decide to attend the classes?" In such a pathetic situation, the question of introducing additional facilities to improve the quality of education imparted by them does not arise. This has several undesirable consequences as, for instance, the glaring difference emerging between the quality

of education imparted in these institutions and in some of the self-financed institutions. Moreover, this kind of highly subsidised education is often not valued by the students or their parents. For all these reasons, it is not uncommon to find relatively more problems of indiscipline and unrest in these places. Therefore, without being retrograde, the government needs to evolve a rational and just policy, whereby it can charge reasonable fees from at least all those students, boys or girls, who can afford to pay more fees in such grant-in-aid institutions.

Higher education in India, compared to its size, structure, and basic requirements, has generally remained underfunded. The universities are barely managing to survive. Moreover, allocation of more funds for higher education has been one of the issues of contention among the policy-makers. But, the situation has worsened particularly after the early 1990s, when the country faced a major balance-of-payment crisis. Due to this crisis, as we know, the government of India had to accept the stabilisation measures suggested by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and to follow the adjustment policies, supported with the soft loans from the International Development Agency (IDA), World Bank, etc. The conditions attached to these loans were related to macroeconomic balances, such as reductions of deficit financing, cuts in subsidies, trade liberalisation, and opening up of the Indian economy to global competition. India is pursuing these policies for the last decade to improve its economic efficiency through cost recovery and cost sharing. Obviously, the social service sectors were the first to be affected by such policies. In the field of education this was done by (i) freezing, and even by reducing, the budgetary support for the education sector; and (ii) restructuring of the education system to respond to the changing requirements of manpower. The most important measure, affecting the higher education, was the gradual withdrawal of subsidies and the increase in the element of cost-recovery. As a result, budgetary support to recurrent expenses of the educational institutions fell.

Public funding of higher education has gradually come down of late. The contribution of the government to higher education in the total planned resources has decreased from a high 1.24 per cent in the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969-72) to 0.35 per cent in the Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992-97). The spending on higher

education, as percentage of Gross National Product (GNP) has declined from 0.98 per cent in 1980-81 to 0.35 per cent in 1994-95. Similarly, the share of higher education in total expenditure on education has fallen from 28.19 per cent in 1990-91 to 15.7 per cent in 1996-97 [Tilak 1995].

But, due to slow growth of resource mobilisation and worsening situation of financial stability of many state governments, cuts in such allocations are now quite severe. Of late, the universities are finding it increasingly difficult to meet even the recurrent expenditure necessary for the survival of the system. For instance, the Gujarat government has not permitted the universities of the state for past several years to fill vacant posts (both teaching and non-teaching) without its explicit permission. The same is the story in many neighbouring states, including Maharashtra. As a result, the burden on the existing staff has increased.

Not surprisingly, the universities are also suffering from the shortage of the resources much needed for their development. As a result, further development is becoming increasingly difficult. In some cases the state governments could not provide even the matching grant for the new positions and/or for some of the programmes sanctioned by the UGC in the Ninth Plan. As a result, many universities of the western region could not implement their development plans in the last five years.

In view of this, there is a vast shortage of both teaching and non-teaching staff in many universities, which has forced them either to work with limited staff, or to make ad hoc or temporary or part-time or contractual appointments. Even, in the state of Maharashtra, the practice of appointing university teachers on ad hoc or contract basis is quite common. But, the consequences of such a practice on the morale of the universities are not always desirable. For instance, the commitment of such ad hoc or contractual teachers to teaching or research cannot be always very high. In addition, the timely availability of the funds also some times becomes a matter of constant concern and anxiety for the universities, resulting often into ineffective use of funds.

Privatisation of Higher Education

Another important consequence of the above-mentioned policy of the structural adjustment and resource crunch is the increasing privatisation of higher education. The encouragement accorded by

policy-makers to private sector initiatives in higher education has resulted into a rapid growth of private educational institutions charging very high fees, which a poor student cannot easily afford to pay. Moreover, except a few genuine philanthropists, the motive of many private managements for entering into this venture still remains business-like; 'profit' appears to be at the centre of their operations.

While it is true that these days it is difficult for the government to carry out massive expansion in the field of higher education. At the same time, however, it is also the obligation of the government to see that the profit-mongers do not take the common man for a ride in the name of privatisation. For instance, some private managements charge capitation fees, in one form or the other. This practice has to be totally eradicated. Prohibition by law is not adequate. Serious efforts should be made to uproot this evil altogether. Because as per the Supreme Court of India's verdict given in 1992 "The capitation fee brings to the fore a clear class bias. It enables the rich to take admission whereas the poor has to withdraw due to financial inability. A poor student with better merit cannot get admission because he has no money whereas the rich can purchase the admission. Such a treatment is patently unreasonable, unfair, and unjust" [Powar 2002].

Nevertheless, private managements should also be allowed to charge reasonable tuition fees. In this connection, the Gujarat government has taken a wise step to fix such tuition fees, for different courses, with the help of different committees appointed for this purpose under the chairmanship of one or the other vice-chancellor of the state, as per the Supreme Court of India's 1993 verdict given in the case of Unnikrishnan J P and others vs State of Andhra and others. While fixing these fees the committees generally consider the recurring expenses likely to be incurred in imparting such education, and also funds required for future development. And these fees are generally reviewed and revised after a period of three years. However, the system is not yet foolproof, and therefore, at times, it gives rise to disputes. Recent litigation regarding the revision of the fees for the Physiotherapy course in Gujarat is an instance in point.

The state government, while fixing the uniform fee structure, cannot discriminate between the genuine philanthropic trusts,

devoted to the cause of education, and the unscrupulous ones, mainly interested in profit. Therefore, sometimes genuine philanthropists feel that they do not have enough freedom for the kind of development they desire in the field of higher education. Hence, it is the challenge before the state government to formulate, in the due course of time, a comprehensive and rational policy for all such courses with an ideal combination of the goal of social justice, needs of future development, and efficiency of the economy. Perhaps, one of the solutions can be to fix the upper limit and the lower limit for fees to be charged by self-financed institutions, depending upon the academic and infrastructural facilities provided by such institutions. However, in a most recent and a historical judgment given by the 11-judge constitution bench of the Supreme Court of India delivered on October 31, 2002 in the case of T M A Pai Foundation and Others vs State of Karnataka and Others has declared the existing practice followed by the state governments regarding the fixation of fee structure and the admission procedure as unconstitutional [Tilak 1995], and thereby created an entirely new situation to deal with both by the state governments and the private managements.

Centralised Admissions

In recent years, the practice of centralised admission to professional courses, such as engineering and technology, management, computer science, etc, has been in vogue in Gujarat. Originally, different universities of the state had autonomy to give these admissions. But, the government of Gujarat was forced to start a system of centralised admissions, under the supervision of state government, due to some complaints about the lack of fairness in the admission process of some medicine and engineering colleges/faculties and also due to some difficulties faced by the students while seeking admission in the reputed institutions. This practice has been extended to several other professional courses such as management, computer science, etc, over a period of time. Maharashtra and other states also follow the same policy. Undoubtedly this practice has its own advantages. But, this has increased the burden of the state machinery. Moreover, unfortunately for past several years these centralised admissions are not finalised very quickly, for one reason or the other.

As a result, the fate of lakhs of students wishing to pursue higher education in these disciplines lies hanging for nearly one full semester, which is lost in granting of admission through the centralised system. Apart from keeping the students in a prolonged state of anxiety, this delay also leads to adverse fallout in other disciplines as well, since the students apply simultaneously in different related disciplines to keep their options open. In many cases, they also pay fees to keep their admission alive in these disciplines. Hence, either they end up paying fees for both courses, or they have to apply for refund of the fees, adding to the administrative burden of the already understaffed administration. Besides, the less preferred disciplines tend to over admit students, anticipating an outflow of the students after the finalisation of all such admissions. In many cases, a number of vacancies result in colleges after teaching has taken place for a couple of months. This upsets academic planning and schedules.

This problem, therefore, needs to be addressed by the state government at an early date before it gets out of hand. A committee can be appointed by the state government to streamline the centralised admission process in all disciplines. However, this practice of centralised admissions is also questioned by the above-mentioned judgment of the Supreme Court of India delivered on October 31, 2002.

Unplanned Expansions

Another problem, which needs urgent attention, is the rate of expansion of the university system today. The kind of expansion we witness, of late, needs some definite direction. We, as a society, have not been able to generate the employment opportunities at the rate required to meet our population growth, partly because of the prolonged stagflation. And, the recent economic recession has further deepened the crisis. Unemployment among the educated youth is increasing alarmingly.

Moreover, we do not have realistic projections about the growth of different sectors of economy and the probable requirement of trained manpower. Yet, we have expanded the university system to a great extent, without much planning. The recent expansion of the management courses or the information technology courses or the computer courses is an instance in point. The supply of students

in these fields is more than the job opportunities. As a result, not only do the students and their parents suffer from anxiety, due to uncertain future, but also the future of many private and government-aided institutes, offering such courses, is uncertain.

In order to overcome this situation urgent steps are required for realistic manpower planning. For instance, a research cell can be set up at the state level for monitoring the job market and making accurate projections of manpower requirements not only at the state level, but also at the national and international levels. This kind of information will help the society to utilise its scarce resources more efficiently and effectively.

Over a period, the demand for the professional courses among the students has been increasing. The effect of this trend is visible even at the school level. For instance, many high school students opt for science stream, without regard to their aptitude or intellectual ability, mainly with a desire to obtain admissions into medical and technical streams. But, when they fail to do so, or when they realise their mistake in choosing the stream, it is often too late for them. Similarly, even in the common stream the preference is for commerce subjects. As a result, the subjects of arts stream, such as social sciences, are not offered in most of the schools, even if some students want to study them.

At the university level also the first choice of the brightest students is the professional courses. Therefore, not only arts colleges, but even the science colleges also are not able to attract them. This is almost a general trend. However, if this trend is not arrested in time, I am afraid, it will have an adverse effect on the research and development activity of the nation in due course of time. Similarly, the increasing preference for management courses and commerce subjects has resulted in a relative neglect of the social sciences, literature, and humanities. These subjects are generally chosen by less talented students who fail to secure admission in the disciplines of their choice. This tendency is also likely to have negative consequences on the future growth of the cultural and intellectual elites required in our society. Therefore, effective planning is required to arrest this disturbing trend. It is important to see that while any expansion takes place in higher education, the distribution of talented students in different disciplines should not be extremely uneven.

Teaching at the Cost of Research

Another problem, confronted by our universities, is with regard to the very purpose for their existence. As we all know, universities are basically 'knowledge institutions', institutions engaged not merely in imparting knowledge, but also in acquiring, creating, and applying knowledge to address some of the pressing needs of the society. However, in practice, most of our universities have become teaching institutions, mainly imparting knowledge; giving relatively less importance to creation and application of knowledge. Whatever research is being done is mostly in a ritualised form; it is not always innovative, nor is it of a very high standard. For instance, nearly 400 students are awarded PhD degree every year in science disciplines. But, hardly any patent is registered out of those researches [Joshi 2002]

Moreover, in recent years, the government has been emphasising the strict implementation of the formula of teachers' workload. The method of calculating the workload mainly focuses on teaching, and discounts research hours. This guideline of workload, based on the calculation of number of hours devoted to teaching, unfortunately, does not give adequate recognition to the research work carried out by a teacher. This has adversely affected research work. In addition, meagre funds allocated for research work, for organising seminars and conferences, for the laboratories, for libraries, for equipments, and for maintenance of these facilities have also played a major role in discouraging research. Teaching has also become a lifeless and unexciting ritual. Teaching-learning process is no more an exciting process. In some courses, due to ever-growing number of the students, the teachers are mostly busy with the routine teaching and examination work, forcing them to merely churn out information, without personal and meaningful interactions with the students.

In such a lifeless situation, at many places, the student ('vidhyarthi') becomes the examinee ('parikhsarthi'), interested only in examinations, instead of the pursuit of knowledge. And, the examinee, in turn, mostly becomes 'marksist' (interested only in scoring more and more marks, with less and less efforts). Gradually, the marksist loses interest in attending the classes, and thus becomes, to use the

Marxian (?) terminology, 'declassed', interested only in 'class-less university', i.e., more involved in the activities outside the class room, rather than in the class room learning. Even if a student attends the classes, s/he does so half-heartedly. Not surprisingly, in such a boring condition, some teachers complain, out of frustration, of having been to 'baby sit' (in the name of teaching) for the 'adult babies' (i.e., the so-called students).

In view of such a pathetic situation, there is an urgent need to reorient all our universities, by formulating a rational policy of workload, which can encourage teaching and research equally, and make our classrooms throbbing and exciting places, for the teaching-learning process. Moreover, the universities need to encourage teachers to be bolder, and more innovative, in their research enterprise, so that they can contribute more significantly to the existing fund of knowledge, and also to its practical utilisation. With the pace of change taking place around us, both within and outside the country, in recent years, it is imperative that we take urgent steps in this direction. This requires an appropriate planning and monitoring at the university level. In addition, an effective reward system has to be evolved and implemented with a view to promote creative research and the spirit of inquiry in our universities.

Besides, each university must formulate a clear statement of its vision, mission, and a set of measurable objectives to be achieved in a specific time limit of 15 to 25 years, so that their performance can be periodically compared and measured on specific and objective parameters. This will provide the universities a clear direction; promote inter-university evaluation and competition; and invigorate them. In addition, considering the geographical and cultural uniqueness of its region, to which a university is expected to serve, each university may also specify its thrust areas. This can provide a university its own distinctive identity, apart from being better able to serve its hinterland. This will also avoid mere duplication of the work done in other universities, and, thereby, encourage efficient use of our limited resources.

III Conclusion

It is high time that we undertake a serious exercise to ponder over the issues emerging from this situation. The compulsions

of the structural adjustment policies have refocused the attention of development planners on the role of higher education in the development process. However, the unemployment of educated youth continues unabated. Issues related to fees have yet not been resolved fully, in the light of the considerations of equity, economic rationality, and excellence. The reduced budgetary support for higher education in recent years is indicative of the current thinking of the government for this sector. But, a coherent policy-response to meet the future challenges needs yet to be evolved. For, if the present situation is not handled properly, the crisis may further deepen in the form of greater unemployment and increased costs of higher education at all levels, and there are real dangers that it may even cause social unrest.

In view of the increasing financial crisis, it is imperative that state governments of the region immediately undertake some serious exercise to formulate a comprehensive, rational, and long-term policy, regarding the university finances, with a view to avoid adverse consequences on higher education. If need be, a commission at the state or national level also can be appointed for this purpose. But, in any case, it is absolutely necessary to stop the prevalent short-term and ad hoc approach to higher education, as it has undesirable effects on the destiny of our future generations, and, thereby, on the destiny of the whole nation.

Therefore, in view of the problems of our region, discussed above, which in a way are the problems of the entire university system of our nation, the following questions need to be addressed by us, immediately:

- (1) In view of the emerging global society, what kind of goals and objectives should we have, as a nation, in the field of higher education, in order to safeguard our democracy and sovereignty?
- (2) How do we bring about a culture of strategic thinking, as opposed to ad hocism, in our approach to solving our problems related to higher education?
- (3) What creative solutions can we find in tackling the resource crunch, with a view to make our universities the centres of excellence; intellectually throbbing and exciting places of higher learning, pursuing our national goals mentioned above? In other words: how can we make our universities more creative, research-oriented, and knowledge producing? What kind of reward and support system do we

institute to bring about the enhancement in the quality of higher education?

It is heartening to note that many universities have started mobilising resources from the community through business houses, philanthropists, and alumni, with a definite objective to improve the quality of higher education. The recent movement towards assessment and accreditation of the universities, encouraged by the University Grants Commission (UGC), is also gradually promoting the culture of accountability along with autonomy. However, this process is to be accelerated, and given specific direction with the joint efforts of the government and private initiatives, so that our institutions of higher learning become the world-class centres of excellence in teaching and research. But, the colonial mindsets, in which our universities have been established, and the archaic practices, sometimes followed by the governments, make it extremely difficult for most institutions to change into the mould of becoming vibrant, vital, and self-sufficient to face the challenges of globalisation, liberalisation, and privatisation. **□□□**

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