

Managing Education

An Encounter with Higher Education: My Years at LSE

by I G Patel;

Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003;

pp xiv + 200, Rs 495.

K S KRISHNASWAMY

After laying down the office of governor, Reserve Bank of India in 1982, I G Patel spent two years as director of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A) before going on to become the director of London School of Economics (LSE), for six years. His 'encounter' with higher education thus lasted altogether for eight years. As head of these reputed institutions, Patel had to deal with matters of educational content as well as of educational administration. In both these, the global contacts he had developed during the high offices he held in India as well as in international organisations turned out to be very handy. Patel found his tenure in these institutions exciting, pleasurable and rewarding in various ways; and in this record of his experience, he communicates these sentiments in ample measure.

As head of institutions of higher learning, Patel had the unenviable task of having to satisfy multiple needs and serve multiple interests at the same time. The latter included students, academic staff, governing bodies, government, university agencies and the general community. The needs of all these had to be harmonised and the totality of benefits optimised in some recognisable fashion. Obviously, the experience he gained at IIM-A helped him to some extent at LSE. But their traditions, environments and objectives differed significantly. The latter was very much older, catering to international needs of academic advancement and burdened in some respects by the hoary traditions of British academia. The relations with the British government were also different from those of IIM-A and the government of India. Hence the resolution of even those issues which were apparently common to both required methods specific to each of them.

The fact that despite all these factors, Patel found his six years at LSE both rewarding and pleasurable is a tribute to his academic ability as well as management skill.

During his tenure, Patel had to deal with several questions regarding higher education and its purposes, some of which had wide implications. What exactly constitutes higher education is not easy to define; accepting Patel's pragmatic position (that it refers to all learning modes above the undergraduate level) is also not entirely satisfactory, since a majority of students at LSE are at under-graduate level. Nevertheless, LSE's claims to be an institution of higher education are unquestioned the world over, for the reason that what is learnt even at the undergraduate level is of an advanced nature. As director, Patel had to find answers to questions of relative allocation of real and financial resources to teaching, research, consultancy and so forth; whether the purpose of higher education is to 'empower' society or to 'enrich' the students; of cost-benefit evaluations and so on. There are no universally applicable solutions to such problems and much depends on the conditions under which resolutions are sought. What makes Patel's encounter with higher education absorbing is the manner in which he sought to tailor his answers to the specific conditions his London engagement.

Britain of the 1980s belonged to Margaret Thatcher, who relentlessly pursued her objective of reducing the government's role in both economic affairs and education. Though LSE mobilised funds from various sources, it had come to depend significantly on financing by government over the years. The Thatcher government sought to identify "the national or social obligation of higher education almost exclusively in terms of the contribution to the economic advancement of the country" (p 122), and on that basis created both budgetary and academic problems for LSE. On the budgetary side, the principal question that had to be faced was twofold: first, since students are the direct beneficiaries, how much of the cost of higher education should be borne by them? Secondly, since society or the community also gains from this advancement of knowledge, what is the responsibility of private

and civil society organisations to finance higher education? These issues are common to all countries, but each country has to resolve them in its own way, on such considerations as ability to pay, long-term benefits, equity, budgetary constraints and the prevailing sentiments on state responsibility for human development. But in England of the Thatcher years, when the ruling ideology was that of the free market with minimalist government, universities were pushed to seek more funds from private sources, besides enhancing student fees. LSE was no exception, and a good part of Patel's book deals with his divers attempts to ensure that LSE's needs were adequately met. Besides convincing the University Grants Commission and the Court of the London University of its special responsibilities as an institution of global services, private corporations and charities as well as alumni and student bodies had to be persuaded to contribute in a significant measure. It is to Patel's credit that by the end of his term he had succeeded in substantially improving LSE's financial conditions.

An important element in financing higher education is that of 'externatities'. The quality of such education depends as much on the research element that goes into teaching as on its pedagogy; hence in the allocation of human and financial resources, providing adequately for research becomes an important issue. At LSE, the problem was further compounded by its having to cater to undergraduates as well as postgraduates; students from Britain, EEC, the US and Canada and other developed countries; students from the developing countries of Asia and Africa; visiting scholars of repute; the British Library of the Political and Economic Sciences (BLPES) and research publications; and a range of disciplines to be covered under both training and research. Apart from the details of how their different needs were met by Patel and his colleagues, several basic questions are raised in this book which merit considerations by educators and administrators in all countries.

First, what precisely ought to be the role of government in this context? On the question of financing, there is little dispute that the benefits of higher education and research accrue to society at large in significant ways and hence some of the costs should be a charge on the collective resources of the community placed at the

disposal of the government. However, this ought not to create a situation in which universities and institutions of higher learning are subjected to bureaucratic (or ministerial) intervention and control. Academic freedom is a value which has to be cherished and enhanced by both government and civil society organisations. The fact that they finance educational institutions should not be construed as giving them the right to decide what is taught or researched upon by the universities and specialised institutions of higher learning. At the same time governing bodies of such institutions have the obligation to enhance the social benefits from this investment in knowledge. Evaluating such benefits is not just a question of assessing the economic or political gains to government and private agencies providing support; nor is it a matter of parochial concern. In the final analysis, their contribution to the promotion of harmonious relations in society, to ethics and aesthetics – indeed all human values which constitute culture and excellence – are matters of universal concern. They are at least as important as the increase in the economic efficiency of their alumni and other specific benefits. If academic freedom is curtailed in any manner, these purposes will not be served adequately; public or private organisations should not presume that since they pay the piper in some measure they have the authority to call the tune. Equally, those entrusted with the task of directing institutions of learning have the obligation to ensure their efficient governance.

How Patel dealt with these issues at LSE makes absorbing reading. One element in his account is particularly noteworthy. As is well known, when LSE was founded more than a century ago, it had strong socialist and trade union associations; and though things have changed with the times, its position is still somewhat left of centre. But despite its strong anti-socialist philosophy, the Thatcher government exerted little bureaucratic pressure on the content of LSE's operations. Apart from requiring periodic reports on how public money was being utilised, the principal issues brought up by HMG were those of admission to British (and EEC) students and the fees to be charged to students. So far as academic freedom was concerned, nothing was done to curtail it in any manner. If LSE's present philosophy is considerably different from that of the Webbs, Harold Laski, W A Robson, James Meade, Nicholas Kaldor and others, it is more a matter of choice than the result of undue pressure from government.

However, in regard to student admission and fees LSE had to fall in line with

government's wishes. The Thatcher government decided to withdraw support to foreign students from non-EEC countries and on grounds of budgetary economy sharply reduced its grants to universities, including the London University of which LSE was an affiliate. In addition it required such institutions to provide more room for British and EEC students, the majority of whom were low-fee paying undergraduates. Inevitably, fees paid by students from other overseas countries had to be stepped up and additional resources mobilised from private sources. Increasing the fees for overseas students also raised the issue of equity in the case of those coming from the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, who had to be provided additional scholarships, etc. There was also a change in the profile of disciplines offered; several 'useful' subjects such as accountancy, operations research, development economics, financial markets, and banking had been added. This probably helped in attracting high-fee paying students from some countries – especially those who hoped to secure superior positions in business and financial institutions. It may also have benefited LSE in terms of securing more financial support from private charities and corporations. But as more subjects were added, the teaching and administrative loads on the teaching staff went up significantly; as Patel suspects, this could affect the research capabilities of the institutions in the long term, if not proximately. Apportioning staff resources

between teaching and research for maximum benefit to both teaching efficiency and research output is not easy in any case. If this has to be achieved in many subjects in institutions catering to both under- and post-graduates it must be truly daunting! More so when institutions of higher education are subjected to financial stringency.

This is a book which education ministers and their minions in the governments of India and of the states should read carefully before they set out to meddle in academic affairs. The purpose of education is not just to transfer some settled body of knowledge to the students but more importantly to raise their awareness of values which sustain the world around them and make the individual's life fulfilling. As Swami Vivekananda said almost a century ago "education is the manifestation of the divinity already man". This objective cannot be served by associating 'divinity' with specific dogmas or ideologies and restricting the freedom of universities and institutions of higher education to pursue knowledge in whatever direction or manner they choose, as long as the end result is beneficial to students and serves the social interest. At this juncture in India, when Murli Manohar Joshi, bureaucrats of the HRD ministry the UGC and state government officials are prone to intervene thoughtlessly in academic institutions to peddle their pet prejudices, Patel's encounter with higher education at the IIM-A and LSE has much to teach; softly but clearly, he is asking them to lay off. **EPW**