

Governance Issues in State Universities in Maharashtra

B VENKATESH KUMAR

Governance reforms have been effected recently in universities in Maharashtra, where sugar barons have built vast education empires. A discussion of these reforms.

The last four years have seen a number of new initiatives undertaken by the central government towards reforming university education. Two committees, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and the Yashpal Committee have both made a number of critical recommendations towards improving university education. While some of them are in the implementation stage, others are being debated and, it is hoped, will be implemented in the next few years, one would see some of them being implemented. This will, undoubtedly, help in some major changes taking place.

This period has also seen a huge investment in higher education. The xith Plan allocation towards higher education is a whopping Rs 84,942.79 crore, a ninefold increase as compared to the previous Plan. How much of this has been spent (with a little more than two years for the plan period to be over) will only be known once the midterm appraisal of the xith Plan is completed early next year.

The issue this article focuses on is that of the existing crisis in our state

universities. Are they still important? And how to resolve the mess that has set in?

The Ministry of Human Resource Development has as a part of its ongoing dialogue with the states on broader issues of higher education reform emphasised that the latter have to play a key role in reforming state universities and take part in shaping the broader national agenda of creating a vibrant knowledge economy. Given that education is a state subject, the central government at best can only urge the implementation of reforms. The key to getting the state universities out of the dysfunctional mode lies in governance reforms at the state level.

When the Indian born us citizen Venkaraman Ramakrishnan recently won a Nobel it was the subject of much discussion in India.

This Nobel laureate was an undergraduate student in one of India's leading state universities – the Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU), Baroda. Unfortunately, MSU is infiltrated by extreme right wing politics today. So much so, that there is more than one faction of right wing politics operating through the governance structures. This is true of most of our state universities.

The setting up of newer central universities and with many more universities (private and foreign) in the pipeline is going to pose a serious challenge to the existing state universities. Not only will

B Venkatesh Kumar (venk71@gmail.com) is a political scientist and is with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

the new universities attract good students they will also attract good faculty from state universities.

This is not to say that all central universities attract good students and faculty. For a variety of reasons, barring some really well known and well-established ones, a number of them are still struggling to attract the very best. In some cases, they (especially in the north-eastern region) have not been able to attract a mix of pan-Indian students and faculty due to problems of bad/remote locations and the lack of adequate facilities in terms of schooling/medical facilities. This trend will be replicated if the newly established central universities are not location-friendly. In fact, many of them are still struggling to find land.

On the other hand, despite all the ills that affect state universities, a number of students from rural, and mofussil areas and even from the north-eastern states join the ones located in urban areas. This is not only due to their past glory, but also because they are located in well-connected areas. It has to be recognised that universities play a very important role not only

in providing quality education and employment but they are also laboratories of advanced research and play an important role in influencing and affecting the local economy. This is why the states need to pay them adequate attention.

It is in this context that this article examines some of the recent changes initiated in Maharashtra. These changes in some ways could be trendsetters in encouraging a federal learning process, wherein many states could be encouraged to undertake such reforms.

Reforms in Maharashtra

The recent governance reforms in universities in Maharashtra make an interesting case study. This is a state which has encouraged ambitious education barons. To use Rob Jenkin's phrase "in fact sugar barons have taken over as educational barons". They have set up huge private educational empires with the sole motive of profiteering. In some ways many of these barons have had a stake in state politics and occupy key political positions. In addition to this control by the political elites, there has also been strong control/

interference by the bureaucracy (most often in nexus with political elites), which over the years has only increased.

Over the years, the government has through a number of amendments sought to strengthen political interference in the governance structures of the university, increase the stranglehold of the bureaucracy in higher and technical education and in some ways give extraordinary powers to the chancellor's office.

Therefore, in this context, the recent changes in governance of universities made possible due to the intervention (pro-activeness) of the Chancellor S C Jamir (with the support of the state cabinet) are trendsetters. The first change is in the manner of the selection of the vice chancellor. The appointment of the vice chancellor is always done by the chancellor from amongst the names (not less than three) suggested by a five-member committee consisting of the chancellor's nominee (who is the chair of the committee), the principal secretary of higher and technical education or any other principal secretary, nominated by the state government, a nominee of the University Grants

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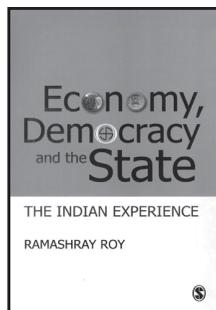
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Commission, one member nominated by the Management Council (also called as Executive Council) and one member nominated by the Academic Council. The presence of the last two categories has often resulted in political interference and lobbying.

The recent changes are in some ways in keeping with both the recommendations of the NKC and the Yashpal Committee. Both had suggested a search-cum-selection process to be initiated so as to insulate the entire process from political interference. In fact, the Yashpal Committee has pointed out that

appointments of vice chancellors, directors, etc. are made by Search Committees with candidates of impeccable credentials, keeping the best interest of the institution in view. It is deplorable that in recent years, choosing persons for such high-level appointments is becoming scandalous in several states involving political and financial considerations at the cost of qualifications and competence.

The changed process consists of a committee with a member nominated by the chancellor, who shall be a retired judge of the Supreme Court or retired chief justice of a high court or an eminent scientist of national repute or a recipient of the Padma award in the field of education, the principal secretary of higher and technical education or any other officer not below the rank of principal secretary to government nominated by the state government, the director or head of an institute or organisation of national repute, such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), Indian Institute of Science, Indian Space Research Organisation or the National Research Laboratory, nominated by the Management Council and the Academic Council, jointly, in the manner specified by the state government by an order in the Official Gazette.

The new process is a huge improvement over the previous one. It clearly identifies categories of individuals/persons of eminence to be associated with the process. It also does away with involvement of any member from the university bodies (which unfortunately are politicised). Further, a conscious effort is being made by the search committee to maximise the pool of available candidates

by notifying the position, inviting nomination from distinguished academicians and the search committee members themselves inviting suitable candidates. It also institutionalises a system wherein there are definite timelines for completing the process.

A cursory look at the names of the chairpersons of the search committee in the case of Mumbai (Andre Beteille), Pune (Justice B N Sri Krishna), Kolhapur (Yoginder K Alagh) and Nashik (Madhav Menon) clearly indicates that the level of the search process. Current directors of IITs/IIMs are also part of the search committee which will be assisted by a nodal officer identified by the chairperson/external member and who will provide all administrative and logistic support. The nodal officer will be from the institute with which the chairperson/external member is associated. This is an extraordinary step as it will insulate the process of selection from the interference of interested parties.

Landmark Role

It will play a landmark role in institutionalising a process of governance through which the standards of selecting a vice chancellor are set high. It is bound to minimise external interference and bring in a great deal of transparency in the selection process. Such a process can only function very effectively when enlightened constitutional functionaries like the governor (who takes an independent decision) uphold the tradition of scholarship and academic merit.

The second related change that has very recently been notified by the higher and technical education department on 14 September 2009 relates to the eligibility conditions for being an elected or nominated member of any authority of the university. While this in some ways is an improvement on the composition of various governance structures (namely, the Senate, the Academic Council, the Management Council, Boards of Studies and other such bodies) there is scope for further improving and relooking at some of the newly incorporated changes. In all these bodies the members who will occupy these positions will have to have a set of academic qualifications such as a PhD and should

have both teaching and research experience. In addition, in some cases they should also have published articles or books. This is a marked improvement from the present where all these positions have been sought by lobbying, and politicking and thereby vitiating the environment of the university. There are even a large number of non-academics infiltrating the system at present.

However, while these changes are well-intentioned and timely one bizarre suggestion calls for the presence of two MLAs, who shall be graduates, nominated by the speaker of the Maharashtra assembly and two MLCS, who shall also be graduates and nominated by the chairman of the legislative council. This is certain to bring in considerable political interference in the functioning of the university since the Standing Committee is an important body that nominates candidates to the various governing bodies of the university. This needs to be urgently rectified, if the changes that have been undertaken are to bring about desired results in improving governance.

Despite the negative features pointed out, the two major changes mentioned above are an improvement. However, more refinement is called for through revisiting the Maharashtra Universities Act, 1994. This is very essential since it has become outdated and needs urgent changes to provide the enabling conditions to facilitate these two significant changes. These changes will no doubt set benchmark standards in the overall governance structures in the university. Hopefully, Maharashtra will soon set an example for the other states to emulate.

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