



CONCERNS ABOUT AUTONOMY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Introduction

Autonomy is crucial for the growth and development of higher education. Considering how different commissions and committees set up by the Government of India from time to time have looked at autonomy and accountability, this essay makes the point that there is an interesting interplay between the two and that without them it is virtually impossible to achieve excellence. It argues that the governance structure in all institutions of higher learning should be conducive for consensus making, resulting in both autonomy and accountability. Besides focusing on factors which can significantly contribute to enhancing autonomy, the article argues that effective autonomy cannot descend as a "gift" from above, it has to be earned.

Each institution of higher learning is believed to be a Centre of excellence. It is supposed to be achieving excellence in three things, namely; in teaching and learning, discovery and engagement. But the fact remains that there are only a few institutions of higher learning which are known to have achieved excellence in the genuine sense. And, these are those institutions that have embraced and institutionalized autonomy in the truest sense. It is amply evident from the history of global higher education that the issue of autonomy is crucial to the growth and development of higher education and that there is an umbilical relationship between autonomy and excellence. Autonomy has been a subject of discourse in the reports of the commissions and committees set up from time to time, since independence, to review the system of education and to initiate the needed reforms and innovations.

This essay recapitulates the concerns of autonomy and academic freedom of institutions of higher learning, as reflected in the reports of various commissions and committees, as substantive critical issues related to autonomy have received adequate attention in those documents. It also raises several other critical issues which have relevance for any discussion on autonomy. It reflects on the scope and areas of institutional autonomy as well as reasons for the loss of autonomy. In addition, the essay also makes certain suggestions as to how governance structures could be made more conducive for the enhancement of autonomy in institutions of higher learning. The commission's documents that have been critically examined for the purpose of preparing this article include the University Education Commission 1948-49, the Education Commission 1964-66, the report of the National Commission on Teacher in Higher Education 1985, the National Policy on Education 1986 with modifications undertaken in 1992, and its programme of action 1992, the report of the University Grants Commission (UGC) Committee towards New Educational Management 1990, the report of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) Committee on Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions 2005, the report of the National Knowledge Commission 2007, the report of the Ministry of Human Resource Development Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education 2009.

A study of the documents listed above not only shows expression of sensitivity towards the erosion of the principle of autonomy in academic institutions but also the overall environment of lack of accountability in the higher education system in the country. It is acknowledged that there is an interesting interplay between the issues relating to autonomy and accountability and it is not easy to separate the two. Higher education system in India covers a wide spectrum of institutions. On the one end, we have premier educational institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITS), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMS), old and established central and state universities, on the other, we have some universities established in the private sector which are in their formative years. The issues of autonomy and accountability relating to all these institutions ought to conform to the same set of norms, which are essentially required for achieving intellectual excellence in the growth and development of knowledge. The specific issues outlined in this essay may be seen in this context.

Concept of a University

The university as an important instrument for higher education has been a subject of discussion on autonomy in the report of the Education Commission (1964-66) which had rightly stated that universities have a major responsibility towards promotion and development of an intellectual climate in the country which is conducive to the pursuit of scholarship and excellence, and which encourages criticism, ruthless and unsparring, but informal and constructive. The commission further emphasised that the universities should be governed by one overriding consideration - their commitment in all fields of knowledge. This passion for truth must be inculcated in some measure in all the members of their faculty and, of course, there shall always be some members who are wholly dominated by this passion and find in it their real fulfillment. This concept of a university led the commission to emphasise the need for university autonomy without which it is nearly impossible to translate the vision of a university into reality.



The vision of a university articulated by the commission in the 1960s has been endorsed in the 1990s by the report of the UGC Committee towards New Educational Management and also by the report of the Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education in the first decade of the 21st century. According to the latter, a university is a place where new ideas germinate, strike roots and grow tall. It is a unique space, which covers the entire universe of knowledge. It is a place where creative minds converge, interact with each other, challenge the established notions of truth, and construct visions of new realities. In order to implement the idea of a university, as described above, it has to be an autonomous space in the discharge of its academic commitment.

Concept of Autonomy

According to the UGC Committee towards New Educational Management, autonomy broadly emphasises the freedom to function to achieve academic excellence and to administer the institution through its own rules and regulations. Autonomy should percolate down to the various organs of the university system. University autonomy in the present context is not absolute as it has to function within the regulatory framework enforced by the State, since the university is established by an act of Parliament or state legislature, which sets the limits of its autonomy. The objectives, functions, governance structures and powers of different functionaries and bodies are enunciated in the legislative act itself which limits the scope of autonomy to function in the absolute sense. This may call for revisiting the acts and memorandum of associations (MOAS) of institutions of higher learning to provide for autonomy in the various facets of their functioning.

The establishment of a coordination mechanism among institutions of similar nature in the field of higher education need not be considered as interference in the autonomy of an individual university or institution. For instance, an overarching council of IITS, IIMS or coordination committee of central universities may represent a higher level of collective decision-making and also may aim at avoiding duplication of efforts and wasteful expenditure. Implementation of the decisions of the "coordination council" of all such institutions should not be construed as infringement of its autonomy but an input to enhancing its academic excellence.

The autonomy of an institution of higher learning cannot be and should not be delinked from its accountability. An institution is accountable to society, future of the students, and future of the country. At another level, the institution also has to be accountable to the generation of new knowledge and establishment of truth. Society has to put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure enforcement of the norms of accountability. Each institution is under obligation to ensure that it does what it is expected to do in the discharge of its commitments towards the responsibilities entrusted to it and uses the resources provided in a responsible manner to ensure the delivery of outcomes of the tasks undertaken. In turn, the leader has to ensure that the element of accountability percolates down to all the constituents of the institution.

Autonomy vs. Academic Freedom

The Education Commission (1964-66) prefaced its deliberations by making a distinction between institutional autonomy and academic freedom of the institution. It stated that teachers need to exercise their academic freedom in good measure, enthusiastically and wisely. Academic freedom, according to the commission, implies that a teacher cannot be ordered to teach something that goes against his/her conscience or conflicts with his/her conception of truth. The freedom of the teachers to hold and express their views, however radical, within the classroom (and outside) should be subject to their being careful that they present different aspects of a problem without confusing teaching with "propaganda" in favour of their own particular ideological views. A teacher should have the academic freedom to pursue and publish his studies and research and also have the freedom to speak and write about and participate in debates on significant national and international issues. The commission further stated that the teacher should receive all facilities and encouragement in his/her work, teaching and research even when his/her views and approach may be in opposition to those of his seniors and the head of the department or faculty.

Scope of Institutional Autonomy

Institutional autonomy lies principally in the following fields: selection of students, appointment and promotion of teachers, determination of courses of study, pedagogy, assessment, areas of research and use of resources.

Any uniform prescription for admissions applied to all higher education institutions in such a vast country as ours may put several institutions with very special character in complexity unless we think of forming several syndicates. Though the Centre may evolve a national system of entrance examination for various common programmes, the institutions may be given a free hand to join it or to conduct its own entrance examinations. The Government of India may consider establishing a "National Testing Service" on the lines of Educational Testing Service of the us as envisaged in the National Policy on Education 1986. Appointment and promotion of teachers should be based on a nationally determined transparent set of



criteria, associating persons of eminence with the process of selection. The determination of courses of study, methods of teaching, and the implementation of evaluation procedures are best left to the academic expertise of institutions of higher learning. Identification of areas and problems of research which can elevate the status of basic and fundamental research should be undertaken as a priority while not ignoring areas of research which lead to solution of critical problems of concern to both the society and the nation. Resources of the institutions should be suitably apportioned to the prioritised areas of study identified by the institution itself.

Levels of Autonomy

(i) *Administration*: The levels of autonomy in the higher education system span institutional administration, including the vice chancellor, registrar, finance officer, controller of examination, governing bodies of the university, departments of the university, teachers and students. The University Education Commission (1948-49) stated in categorical terms that it is really a part of institution's duty to learn how to choose its own head/vice chancellor wisely and it further emphasised that to deprive the institution of this duty would be a counsel of despair; which is yet to become a reality. It suggested mechanisms for the appointments of vice chancellors, their term of office and their powers. The commission also pointed out to the need of a Model Act for degree awarding institutions.

Institutions of higher learning should not become administration or administrator oriented. The principal function of the administration is to serve the academic interests of the institution. Such institutions should be visualised as an integrated community in which the teachers are, as it were, "senior scholars", the students are "junior scholars" and the administration is a service agency to both. There is too much centralisation in the process of decision-making in the institutions of higher learning. The governance structures should be such as are conducive for the preservation of autonomy. They should have enough space for consensus making on the basis of discussions and debates. The focus should be to develop such conventions as would largely shift the Centre of gravity of authority to the academic wings of the institution's governance. The academic council should be the final authority in all academic matters. The tendency to attach importance to ideas and proposals merely because they emanate from persons who happen to hold important positions is unhealthy and particularly out of place in all institution of higher learning where they must be judged objectively and on their intrinsic merit.

(ii) *Departments*: The departments of an institution of higher learning are its main operational units on the academic side. They should be delegated with wider administrative and financial powers. Improved excellence must be the goal of every department. Each department should have its own perspective plan at least for five years, which of course must be revisited on annual basis. The departments may have their own advisory boards comprising professionals from sister institutions. They can help the departments develop perspective plans as also in peer assessment. Good teaching departments could be considered for grant of status of autonomous departments within the institutional set up. Such departments should enjoy academic autonomy within the institutions.

(iii) *Teachers*: The kingpin of institutional autonomy is the teacher; he/she is the pivot on which the excellence of the institution will depend. His/her academic freedom coupled with accountability to the concerns of truth and generation of new knowledge has to remain paramount in the system of higher education. His/her role is not just to execute the dictates of the hierarchical authority but to make his/her personal intellectual contributions to the advancement of the goals and concerns for which the institutions of higher learning stands. Institutions should evolve appropriate mechanism of academic audit. Each faculty member may set up goals in terms of the students' success rate as also research contribution which can be periodically reviewed at the level of the department. It is evident that there is low involvement of faculty and also students in most policy decisions. Recruitment of teachers should be done by institutions of higher learning and not by state public service commissions, as is in vogue in some states.

(iv) *Students*: The Education Commission 1964-66 stated that the students should be encouraged to take part in institutional governance and to make them realise their responsibilities in the day to day functioning of the institution. Representatives of the student community should be associated with academic councils and all other statutory bodies of the institution. The issue is not without its elements of concern and may need to be deliberated afresh. But support to such involvement is found in some foreign institutions where alumni are associated with the governing bodies in the process of decision-making. There are some premier foreign institutions wherein one-third of the members of the governing board are from amongst their alumni.

Areas of Autonomy

For the purpose of this paper, the issues of autonomy have been grouped in terms of their implications for academic, administrative and financial autonomy governing the higher education system. This grouping focuses on integrated understanding avoiding water-tight compartmentalization of issues. It may be appreciated that many issues related to university autonomy



are as relevant today as they were before, but for non-implementation, their importance has remained relevant even today. Some of the relevant issues which warrant serious discussion amongst the academia are mentioned below:

(i) *Issues Related to Academic Autonomy:*

- Designing of curriculum with a focus on innovation and experimentation to transform teaching and learning into a fascinating and rewarding experience for teachers as well as students; introduction of new courses to meet local, state, national and global needs.
- Undertaking innovations for periodic revision of curriculum making the process of revision simplified, less cumbersome and less time consuming.
- Autonomy to design own procedure for selection of research fellows with potential for research to enable them to utilise their talents and contribute to quality research.
- Research endeavours not to suffer for want of funds; faculty to be accountable to research of acceptable standards evidenced by publication in reputed journals.
- Adoption of choice based credit courses along with semester system.
- Switching over to internal evaluation of students over a period of time.
- Setting up an internal quality assurance cell to continuously assess the performance of the institution on objective and predefined parameters and making the output performance public to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Autonomy of departments within the institutional set-up.
- Transparency and objectivity in the selection of faculty, to be open on all-India basis.
- Performance appraisal of teachers with adequate weightage for research work based on quantifiable parameters.
- Internal resource generation to fund and encourage participation in national and international consultations, seminars, workshops, conferences, etc.
- Programmes for developing manpower for new and emerging realities in the field of education.
- Quality of research with the focus on use of international benchmarks such as citation indices, patents, etc.
- Synchronisation of academic calendars, at least to begin with for institutions within a state, to ensure mobility of students from one institution to another, if the need so arises.
- Institutional mechanism, infrastructure and facilities for attracting international students and to enter into collaborative arrangements with their counterparts.
- Autonomy to establish linkages for academic and research collaboration with their counterpart academic and research institutions, industry and professional organisations both in India and abroad.
- Development and observance of a code of professional ethics.

(ii) *Issues Related to Administrative Autonomy:*

- Management system in the university to encourage best practices of governance, speedy decision-making, networking, team effort and collective responsibility to meet the emerging challenges.
- Head of the institution to have autonomy to determine both the rank and the number of positions of professors, associate professors and assistant professors in accordance with the tasks envisaged in the development plan of the institution.
- Outsourcing of non-academic activities to achieve better efficiency and greater effectiveness by reducing the overall burden of normal responsibility of running the administration.
- Expeditious disposal of litigations on service matters - a case for a central/state higher education tribunal; grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Norms of accountability for individuals and institutions to be evolved which must be open, participative and data-based.
- Charter of responsibility and devolution and delegation of authority defined for different levels within the system of higher education.

(iii) *Issues Related to Financial Autonomy:*

- Provision of funds to individual institutions in an untied manner to ensure greater degree of freedom in setting up priorities.
- Mechanisms for deciding the fee structure.
- Free-ships and scholarships to meritorious and deserving students coming from lower economic strata of the society.
- Undertaking consultancy assignments and sponsored research projects.
- Inducing user agencies of the central and state governments to contribute to development and growth of higher education system by earmarking certain percentage in their respective budgets for such purposes.



The Education Commission had made a bold recommendation that the "universities should not only be immune from direct governmental intervention but also from direct public accountability. Their financial affairs should not be made either a subject of public controversy or an issue in party politics." The issue needs to be revisited for its implications.

Loss of Autonomy

It is often lamented in academic circles that during the past few decades, the institutions of higher learning have suffered a loss in their autonomy. This widespread perception is true to a large extent. The erosion in autonomy prima facie is attributable to a number of factors; some of them are briefly here.

(i) *Political Interference*: There are several shades of political interference in the functioning of institutions of higher learning as it takes place at different levels by different members. Many a time they exercise their authority to influence decision-making in the institutions in different spheres such as admissions, recruitment, examinations, civil works, etc. It would be wrong if institutions of higher learning were expected to owe allegiance to any political party, or individual, or attempted to further the interests of such parties or individuals. The institutions have suffered loss of autonomy due to interference from various political and commercial vested interests.

The report of the National Knowledge Commission also recognises this phenomenon. It states that, "the autonomy of universities is eroded by interventions from government and intrusions from political processes". It further adds that, "experience suggests that implicit politicisation has made governance of universities exceedingly difficult and much more susceptible to entirely non-academic interventions from outside". The institutions have to insulate themselves from political interferences. This could be made possible only when the senior functionaries are the persons of highest academic and administrative credentials coupled with impeccable integrity.

(ii) *Over Assertive Bureaucracy*: Generally the bureaucrats hold the academia in high esteem. But sometimes some of them are found to be a little insensitive towards the heads of institutions. This class of bureaucrats starts treating them like the CEOs of the public undertakings. The bureaucrats generally tend to impose their line of thinking on the leadership of institutions of higher education. Consequently, they start interfering in the day-to-day functioning of the institutions of higher learning which not only has a demoralising effect on the head of the institution but also make him or her vulnerable to the faculty and staff.

(iii) *Money Power*: Because of their economic clout, many industrialists and business magnates manage to get nominated or elected on the governance bodies of institutions of higher learning. Their contribution in decision-making is most of the times guided by their personal interests or those of the business community. In the case of private institutions, the question of its autonomy and that of its senior functionaries or its governance structures simply does not arise as the entire functioning of the institution is geared to promote the interests of its promoters.

(iv) *Inability of the Universities to Protect Their Autonomy*: The responsibility for the protection of autonomy in institutions of higher learning is that of its faculty, particularly of its senior functionaries like the vice chancellor, registrar, dean, heads of the department, etc. The fact remains that many a time appointments to these positions are manipulated and made on considerations other than merit. The vice chancellors and other functionaries many a time allow themselves to be manipulated by their past and future benefactors. The administrators in higher education institutions may have low management skills because of which the institutions suffer loss of autonomy. Any change in governance structures should aim at more autonomy. The private initiative, political interference and some other factors are no doubt responsible for the loss of autonomy of institutions of higher learning. But the academic community is equally responsible for it as it does not resist the sociopolitical and market forces and allows them to manipulate and subvert the normative structures of the institutions. The subversion ranges from matters of policy implementation to appointments and the day-to-day functioning of the institutions.

(v) *Financial Autonomy*: Financial aid is no doubt the most powerful instrument in the hands of the State to curtail the autonomy of an institution. The vice chancellor, dependent on the government for funds to run the affairs of the institution, becomes vulnerable to the pressures of the government and at times may be forced to surrender his or her autonomy to a large extent. It is evident that the public funding is not keeping pace with the growing enrolment and institutions are increasingly asked to fend for themselves. This situation is creating lots of problems for the institutions. While the government should continue to provide increased grant-in-aid, the institutions should be allowed to augment their own resources without being adjusted it in their budgetary allocation.



Enhancing University Autonomy

(i) *Revisiting the Acts and Mo As*: There is a need to revisit the acts and memorandum of associations of all degree awarding institutions of higher learning to find out if there are some clauses detrimental to their autonomy. Such clauses should be replaced by clauses more conducive for the enhancement of autonomy.

(ii) *Streamlining the Recruitment Process*: The institutions must have the autonomy to recruit the most competent faculty as per the laid down procedures and purely on the basis of merit. Only persons of impeccable integrity, strong credentials and high achievements in their fields should be nominated on the selection/search committees. The faculty should be recruited purely on the basis of merit and not on any other consideration.

(iii) *Membership of Governing Bodies*: An institution is administered by the senior functionaries under the guidance of its statutory bodies like executive committee, syndicate, senate, etc. The persons to be nominated on these bodies must have specialised knowledge in the relevant disciplines and should not have conflict of interests so far as decision-making in the institution is concerned. These bodies should not be packed with ex officio members and government nominees and instead have adequate representation from amongst its alumni.

(iv) *Institutional Leadership*: It is the duty of the head of the institution to safeguard the institution's autonomy. This is possible only when the head is a "Leader" in the true sense of the term in both academic and administrative matters. There is qualitative difference in the management of an educational institution and that of an administrative department. The increasing trend of appointing civil servants as heads of educational institutions needs to be reviewed. Special orientation programmes or conferences on the issues of governance of higher education should be organised to enable the vice chancellors, directors, pro-vice chancellors, deans, and heads of departments to hone their management skills.

(v) *Changing Role Perceptions of Public Representatives and Civil Servants*: The political class and civil servants in education ministries must appreciate that their role vis-a-vis institutions of higher education is restricted to policymaking, enactment of legislation and also to monitoring and enforcement of norms of accountability. They need not indulge in micromanagement. They must realise that they do not have any legitimate role in the administration of the institutions.

Conclusion

An in-depth reflection on an issue such as autonomy of higher education system has complex overtones. If to be autonomous, among other things, is to be capable of making a rational decision then the development of rationality should in some sense be a key aim of education, inseparable from the development of autonomy. This is obviously a problem both of philosophical and academic nature. Rationality like autonomy has a life in the everyday world as well as in philosophical and educational thinking. One also cannot understand the claim that the exercise of rationality is central to the acquisition of autonomy unless one is reasonably clear about what is meant by "rationality". Of particular concern in this context is critical "rationality" or the ability to employ one's rationality in a critical way. This leads to a more serious intellectual discourse on the nature of rationality itself and its implications for a philosophical discourse on the nature of autonomy.

Coming to the operational aspects, the price of autonomy is eternal vigilance by all parties concerned. The institutions of higher learning are established by law and they can have only as much autonomy as the law permits. It would be unwise to expect that effective autonomy could descend as a "gift" from above; it has to be continually earned as deserved. The capacity of the higher education system to resist any illegitimate claims on its autonomy will be proportional to the performance of its duty.

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