

COLLEGE AUTONOMY SOME MEASURES TO ENSURE ITS SUCCESS

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It has been universally acknowledged that Indian higher education is extremely rigid, incapable of accommodating the fluctuating demands of a vibrant society. There are some anachronistic practices which have become a drag affecting the quality of higher education. Certain practices like the affiliating system which was borrowed from Britain vanished from the country of its origin. The colonial masters authored the scheme as it suited to their interests. Even after independence, the government continues to conform to the same policies as a result of which universities tend to show less concern for academic programmes and concentrate more on administrative functions. Many suggestions have been offered to effect positive changes in the collegiate education. Of these, the conferment of autonomy to colleges has been a significant step to improve the quality of higher education. According to the University Grants Commission, college autonomy has the potential to pave way for academic excellence. An autonomous scheme as documented in the UGC Guidelines (1998) will give the institution “the freedom to devise its curriculum, evolve more effective methods of teaching and learning, and revise rules of admission to suit its aims, conduct its own programmes of assessment and examination and to undertake other specific programmes in order to achieve academic excellence.”

Autonomous colleges are meant to send out batches of bright students who have the required skills to get absorbed in the job-market. These colleges are supposed to give a fillip to the enterprising teachers to pursue academic goals and take them off from the stronghold of conservatism, and the resultant inertia of the affiliating system. Congenial academic atmosphere can be created and benchmark practices for generating new ideas and activities can be developed easily in an autonomous institution. The scheme of college autonomy can be a success when autonomous colleges are able to translate the goals.

The main objectives of an autonomous college are many and varied. In its pursuit of knowledge, it helps the development of its community in its neighbourhood and the society at large. It is supposed to ensure the employability of the students. This involves the introduction of employment-oriented and vocational-based educational courses and programmes. Thus it is incumbent upon it to make education functional, productive, meaningful and relevant. The main functions of an autonomous institution are as follows: development of courses and curricula to satisfy the needs and aspirations of local people; maintenance of academic standards; adopting modern and challenging methods of instructions. Accordingly, the college shall have freedom to determine its own courses of study and syllabi, prescribe rules of admission subject to the reservation policy and to evolve methods of evaluation to conduct examinations.

It is interesting to note that there are three separate agencies involved in the matter of conferment of autonomy on the colleges which have to function under the rules and regulations of these three agencies. They are the parent university which gave autonomy; the state government which concurred with the UGC's proposal for granting autonomy, and the UGC which gave the concurrence as well as the necessary instruction to the parent university to grant autonomy. When a college has switched over to autonomy it has to bind to the above three. In a sense, its autonomy is confined and qualified owing to the interference of the above three.

Autonomous scheme was devised to empower an institution to optimize all its resources and scale the rungs of excellence. True to the spirit of the scheme, they have blazed a trail of academic achievements in the realm of higher education. However, they are functioning under a number of constraints. To name a few, at the time of granting autonomy, the UGC promised special financial assistance to the colleges to develop proper infrastructure etc., but the assistance is not time-bound. The UGC delays the sanctioning of these grants in time. Apart from this, the autonomous colleges cannot bring in the necessary reforms in courses, curricula, etc., unless permission from the parent university and the state government concerned are accorded. Besides these, autonomous colleges have confronted a plethora of other problems. To aggravate the problems further, the inadequacies on the part of the individuals involved are glaring. To put it in a nutshell, practice of autonomy is at variance with the scheme of autonomy. Unless these problems are addressed and causes unravelled, college autonomy is not going to be successful.

It is, however, baffling to understand the reasons for the aversion for autonomous system as evinced from some quarters of academic circles. Even though many universities directed colleges to go for autonomous system, most of the affiliated colleges have not ventured to embrace autonomy perhaps fearing that it would pose problems of governance. However, NACC has injected a new flow of ideas and enthusiasm into academic fraternity. In a way, it has empowered an accredited college to march ahead and pursue its mission with unflagging zeal. As a result, many colleges have shed their inveterate fear and are willing to opt for autonomy.

Teacher unions are staunch opponents of the scheme. We attended seminar on college autonomy at a college in Guntur, at the end of which all the lecturers with one accord vehemently opposed college autonomy when a proposal was mooted seeking their views. My experience was no different in another college where the discussion on college autonomy met with a similar fate. All this lends credence that though College Autonomy has many feathers in its cap in principle, it suffers from some shortcomings in practice.

When it comes to the jurisdiction of Acharya Nagarjuna University, only two colleges, P.B.Siddhardha College, Vijayawada, and Andhra Loyola College, Vijayawada came forward to go for autonomy when the university proposed a scheme to this effect in the late 80's. These colleges had been performing well under affiliating system. For these colleges, however, autonomy seems to hold out a promise of excellence. It is remarkable that these colleges were wedded to autonomy when some other colleges of equally good repute were complacent in the cocoon of affiliating system. Now the question is how far they are able to translate the ideals of college autonomy as enshrined in the UGC Guidelines. About two decades went by but most of the affiliated colleges are still in the rut of affiliating system and are not euphoric over college autonomy. Of late, a few more colleges – Sri Durga Malleswara Siddhartha Mahila College, Vijayawada, Maris Stella College, Vijayawada, V.S.R & N.V.R.College, Tenali, Montessori Mahila College, Vijayawada, J.M.J.College of Women, Tenali, Noble College, Machilipatnam

and St. Joseph's College of Education for Women, Guntur have switched over to college autonomy after accreditation by NACC. It is remarkable to note that there are quite a good number of other colleges which have shed fear and are ready to embrace the new system. But the colleges mentioned are in the initial phases with the usual teething troubles. Most of these colleges went for autonomy under some compulsions. It is too early to deliberate upon their implementing the scheme.

There are scores of other colleges in the jurisdiction of Acharya Nagarjuna University which are complacent about affiliating mode. Many colleges are going to switch over to autonomous system and some have many nagging doubts about it. They have misgivings that the UGC scheme of college autonomy is aimed at commercializing higher education, reducing government funding and encouraging only marketable education at the expense of liberal arts and basic sciences. The informed view is that if the government is going to waive aid to autonomous institutions, the possibility of stopping the aid will also hang over the affiliated colleges like a sword of Damocles. In this context, it may be borne in mind the Human Resource Minister, Arjun Singh's statement in Lok Sabha who, while dispelling suspicions, clarified that autonomy would enable a college to obtain increased allocation of funds from the UGC for its faculty improvement, functional orientation and overall development. The academicians continue to be sceptical about such a lasting benevolent stand towards funding higher educational institutions. In fact, this is one of the reasons for looking at the college autonomy with an air of suspicion.

It goes without saying that college autonomy, as a corrective to the affiliating system, should not degenerate into old wine in an old bottle with a new label. Autonomy for a college implies that the college and its teachers assume responsibility for the academic programmes they provide, for the content and quality of their teaching and for admission and assessment of their students. In order to generate enthusiasm and enlightened awareness and set the scene for college autonomy, workshops and seminars have to be organized to prevail upon the staff and students whose whole-hearted participation is a must for the success of college autonomy. In the same breath, workshops and training programmes need to be organized for the non-teaching staff. Such multi-pronged preparation is indispensable because the institution has to gear up its machinery to perform many of the functions, which the university has hitherto performed.

When autonomy is granted, the stakeholders cannot afford to be self-complacent. In order to make it a resounding success, the teaching staff in the main should be keen on updating their pedagogic skills and be collaborative in their academic endeavours. Furthermore, academic audit, constant orientation and periodic overhaul of the system will ensure the successful functioning of college autonomy. When there are glaring loopholes in an affiliating university in terms of syllabi design, conducting examinations and valuation, the public and media are quick to find fault with the system. In a way, they are helpful in either correcting the erring individuals or suggesting ways to ameliorate the system. However, such news about an autonomous institution may escape the public or media's attention because it is relatively small. It may peter out without being noticed!

Of the many determinants which pave way for success of autonomous system, collaboratively-structured efforts are of prime importance. The obvious fact is that the inter-personal relationships of the individuals working in an autonomous college are crucial. It is clear that an autonomous system entails collective endeavours, and hence, its success necessitates

harmonious inter-personal relationships. Lone individual brilliance, isolated efforts and lack of rapport among the individuals and unhealthy professional rivalry prove to be detrimental and they are bound to tell upon the tenor of the autonomous institution. Herein lays the importance of the principal whose breadth of vision, infallible judgment, unprejudiced assessment of individuals and above all, his qualities of head and heart go a long way in making autonomy a resounding success. It can be rounded off with a touch of certainty that united the system stands, divided it falls.

College autonomy as a system is viable and has many advantages. Nevertheless, individuals are an inseparable part of it and therefore, are the heart of a system. It is upon their shoulders that the success of the system rests. To put it squarely, individuals can either make or mar the system. Like many other good systems, College Autonomy will fail to realize the enshrined objectives if individuals go bankrupt of ideas and are lacking in sincerity of purpose, intellectual dynamism and above all, discipline. If the stakeholders go wrong, then it is not the failure of the system but the collective inadequacy of the individuals. A system prospers or becomes puerile because of the individuals who are the crux of it.

Knowledge has assumed the form of intellectual property and countries imparting high quality education can on their own emerge triumphant and reap the fruits of the new GATT agreement. Indeed, the agreement paved way for the globalization of economy and this likely to lead globalization of higher education. Foreign institutions can thrive when the autonomous institutions lack the vigour and vision.

College autonomy will be a roaring success when the institutions march ahead with sincerity of purpose to serve the economically backward sections of society. An autonomous institution can make its mark when it offers various scholarships and concessions to bright students to the tune of 50% to 75% depending on their financial viability of its resources. Top rankers may be accommodated under the scholarship scheme and more such schemes can be initiated with the support of new endowments, parent teacher associations, and alumni associations. Such supporting services, and the special schemes like “earn while you learn” are the need of the hour. In the face of inexorable forces of liberalization and globalization, these autonomous colleges of repute at least, to some extent, may shoulder some social responsibility.

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