

NEP 2020: Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom in Higher Education in India

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Abstract

The concept of autonomy in higher education evolved out of democratic movements during the European Renaissance that emphasized on the spirit of curiosity and critical inquiry. The conventional notion was that the state would provide necessary funds for smooth functioning of the universities but will not interfere in designing its curriculum, pedagogical methods, research and governance. But in the neo-liberal age, the onslaught of global capital has put this concept in jeopardy. Its repercussions are perceived in NEP 2020 where an attempt at centralization of education problematizes the concept of institutional autonomy in higher education.

Keywords: democracy, funding, global capital

Introduction

Universities are spaces that foster creativity and encourage open debate. It provides the necessary human capital to enhance a country's progress and prosperity. Universities also have a fundamental role in promotion of healthy democracies; they interrogate governmental policies and decisions. Institutional autonomy is therefore vital for the freedom of institutional decision making processes. It becomes the responsibility of the government to recognize and advocate institutional autonomy as a necessary condition for proper functioning of higher education institutions.

Institutional autonomy ensures that universities and all higher education institutions are free to pursue enquiry, disseminate knowledge based on evidence and truth. They should be free to operate that satisfies both the university community and local needs. The main purpose of education is to question the existing age-old beliefs, superstitions that prevail in society. People had thought independently and questioned authority throughout ages. It is perceived as a threat to power. Academic autonomy had been restricted. The writings of great social and political thinkers like Bruno, Aristotle, Confucius, Kant, Locke, Mill, Rousseau, Voltaire, Darwin, Marx, Russell, Paine, Bernard Shaw were banned, books confiscated and burnt.

The medieval universities were religious institutions in themselves. The transformation of feudal society to the democratic produced conflict between the religious authority and educators. Due to the influence of the industrial revolution and the French revolution, the concept of institutional autonomy gained ground in the 19th century, particularly in Europe. Modern universities were created to meet the social and economic demands of the times. Humboldt was the founder of Berlin University who strove to free research and teaching learning processes from the interference of the state. He believed that 'education will be good to the extent that it suffers no outside intervention. It will be all the more effective, the greater the latitude left to the diligence of the teachers and the emulation of their pupils' (Humboldt,

W.V. trans. *Schriften*, Book I, p.146). The ideals of the Renaissance movement in Europe, birth of parliamentary democracy and the need for secular and scientific education reinstated the idea of institutional autonomy. It therefore, is a consequence of the development of human society that is tied to the economic, political, social and cultural changes. Education became secularized in this particular developmental stage and the responsibility of teaching shifted from the monks to the educators who framed curriculum and came up with pedagogical methods that best suited the times. The fundamental principle of democratic education was laid down – the financial responsibility of education will rest upon the state power but its curriculum, methods of teaching learning, governance, research ideas will be decided by the universities.

Autonomy in Governance and NEP 2020

State power had always tried to manoeuvre educational institutions in its own interest. But such phenomenon has stalled societal progression. NEP 2020 proposes that the entire higher education will be controlled by a regulatory body HECI (Higher Education Council of India). ‘HECI itself will be a small, independent body of eminent public spirited experts in higher education, which will oversee and monitor the integrity and effective functioning. Suitable mechanisms will be created within HECI to carry out its functions, including adjudication’ (NEP 2020, Clause 18.10). The members of this council are nominated and at the head of this body is the education minister. Number of government officials has been increased. But whereas the UGC is a funding agency, HECI is not one. Apart from HECI, another regulatory body CABE (Central Advisory Board of Education) will exercise control over education from the primary to the higher education, and even research, the chairman of the body is again the education minister of the country. It is not only a consultative body, but the highest controlling authority. Therefore the declaration of autonomy that was floated as the guiding principle of NEP 2020 stands questionable. NEP 2020 proposes that organizations like AICTE, MCI, BCI, that regulated the vocational sector will be abolished and instead HECI will operate through four independent verticals – National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC), Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC), National Accreditation Council (NAC) and General Education Council (GEC) – all members in these bodies will be nominated by the government, there is no provision for democratic election in these bodies. This will ensure the control and surveillance of the state power.

As of now, students can easily enter the arena of higher education through the marks secured by them or entrance tests conducted by that particular college or university. NEP 2020 implemented a nationwide uniform entrance examination under the aegis of National Testing Agency (NTA). In a country like India, considering the economic, social status of students belonging to remote areas, this will only further restrict students from securing higher education. Students will be forced to take admission in distant colleges adding to their economic burden. Though for now this has not been made mandatory, this system will become the rule, in the same way that NAAC assessment has now come to be looked upon as a mandate. Clause 4.42 of the policy document of NEP 2020 clearly states that ‘the National Testing Agency will work to offer a high quality common aptitude test, as well as specialized common subject exams in the science, humanities, languages, arts and vocational subjects at least twice every year’ (NEP 2020).

The idea of a unitary nation, one syllabus, one examination is problematic to the democratic concept of education. It is a blow to the diverse language, religion, locale and culture that our country takes pride in. The attempt to centralize the administrative and academic processes therefore cannot be a principle

of autonomy. The struggle that established the freedom of academics from the clutch of the church and the dictates of the monarch in the feudal economy was a natural process of democratic revolution. The monarch was no more the patron of education, but the universities began to run on the taxes of the people. To impart a secular scientific democratic education became the necessity of the age which in turn required that the institutional autonomy be guaranteed. The ideal of institutional autonomy was first upheld in Berlin University, later the universities of Harvard, Yale, and Chicago followed suit. In our country, the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948) as well as the Kothari commission (1966) recommended the grant of autonomy to universities and affiliated colleges not only to ensure 'quality' in higher education but also described autonomy as a yardstick to determine inclusiveness in education. To rip off autonomy and academic freedom, to politicize, centralize and bureaucratize higher education can only mean a destruction of the spirit of free enquiry, values, cultural ethos and a gradual annihilation of the man-making, character building aspect of education. Each university has its own history of origin, growth and development. Its mission and vision determined the selection of curriculum and it had its own discretion in the admission process. The variegated knowledge base that grew up as a result of this diversity had a positive impact on the societal development of the country.

Autonomy in Curriculum and Course Structure and NEP 2020

'By 2040, all higher education institutions (HEIs) shall aim to become multidisciplinary institutions and shall aim to have larger student enrolments preferably in thousands, for optimal use of infrastructure and resources, and for the creation of vibrant multidisciplinary communities' (Clause 10.7, NEP 2020). These clusters would gradually become autonomous. Not only the public funded institutions, the private institutions will also be granted autonomy through 'graded autonomy' (Clause 10.7, NEP). The present day affiliated degree colleges by gradual transformation will be uplifted to graded autonomy. These autonomous colleges will be controlled by BoG (Board of Governors). The BoG will be empowered to govern the institution free of any external interference, make all appointments including the head of institutions and take all decisions regarding governance.' (NEP Clause 19.2). The BoG formed would then select its new members who are committed and skilled. The BoG will in its turn abide by the guidelines of NHER, a regulatory body under HECI. The autonomous college in this manner will come under the direct surveillance of this central controlling council. The policy document clearly mentions that the autonomous colleges will be degree awarding institutions. The transformation of single stream HEIs into vibrant multidisciplinary institutions will in no way safeguard the interest of education as it will erase the variety of small and large institutions with their special needs that cater to students from diverse backgrounds. The long cherished ideal of academic freedom and autonomy will hit hard.

NEP 2020 proposes that a student of the 21st century should be skilled in more than one subjects or stream of study. The purpose of such an approach is to meet the challenges for the creation of a versatile workforce required in the industry for the fourth industrial revolution. Under such approach, the students will have the option to choose subjects that cut across disciplines, merge traditional classical subjects with the vocational. The concept of multiple entry/ exit and Academic Bank of Credit promises to give more autonomy to students. Social scientist Satish Deshpande noted that 'this system of multiple entry/exit will certainly help in renaming drop-outs as certificate or diploma holders. But they cannot ensure that these credentials will bring significant benefits for holder... the indivisibility of the degree that runs in the current system provided an incentive for students and families to try hard to complete their degrees' (Deshpande, 2022). If we look at the history of evolution of and development

of knowledge, the subjects of the same sort were integrated to form specific disciplines and streams of study. With the development of civilization, connectedness between subjects became a major area of study giving rise to interdisciplinarity. Modern researches even show an inclination towards multidisciplinary where experts from all fields come together to resolve a particular problem. Unlike this, the focus of such an approach in the policy is to create a band of semi-educated and half-skilled workforce that would only satisfy the needs of the industry.

This workforce, the product of these multidisciplinary institutions will serve as cheap labor. They will neither have the proficiency nor the confidence that is achieved through specialization in a particular subject. Thus the fruits of education will be in lieu of industry benefits. The entire NEP 2020 document is loaded with words like mobility and choice. They are seen as markers of autonomy. The credit based framework suggests a fluidity of general and vocational stream that students can opt for. As Prof. Pramod K. Nayar rightly points out, 'Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in their *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2018) note that left to students' own choice and to fulfill their aspirations, the supportive structures of the welfare state relegates to the background. The responsibility lies solely on the students and the decisions they make. Thus in stressing more on versatility, choices, responsibility, and emphasizing the goal of education to produce more skilled, more flexible, more inventive and more autonomous' (Nayar, 2022) what is gained is skill at the cost of knowledge. Jakob Claus, Thomas Meckel and Farina Patz sees the flexibility of creation and management of their own curriculum by the students as a disguised social control. They will be vulnerable to slowed-down job markets and thrown to anxieties to fend on their own and exploited by corporate demands. On the other hand, with the lack of supportive structure characteristic of the welfare state, the inclination towards 'academic capitalism' (Claus et al, 2018) will gallop its way to educational institutions.

Conclusion

It is therefore evident that in the guise of flexibility, choice and autonomy what is intended is a more stringent control over academics, curriculum, examination, institutional prerogatives and discretions. Albert Einstein had once remarked in an interview in 1950 that 'It is evident that any restriction of academic freedom acts in such a way as to hamper the dissemination of knowledge among people and thereby impedes rational judgment and action' (Einstein, 1950). In our country Vidyasagar resigned from the post of assistant secretary of Sanskrit College when denied the freedom to act according to the best interest of the institution. The then Vice Chancellor of the University of Calcutta Sir Aushutosh Mukherjee defiantly voiced out his tirade and refused grants from the British government when the officials tried to infringe upon the institutional autonomy of the university. When the NEP 2020 has moved out of theory and entered the implementation phase, it becomes a social responsibility on the part of all stakeholders to interrogate the designs of centralization. Noam Chomsky opines 'if that outside funding seeks to [influence] teaching, research and other activities, then there's a strong argument that it should simply be resisted or rejected outright no matter what the costs. Such influences are not inevitable, and that's worth bearing in mind' (Chomsky, 2011). Such doubts at the realization of institutional institution and academic freedom are raised in the much awaited education policy.

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