Empowering Higher Education: Analyzing the Transformative Potential of the NEP 2020 Autonomy Model

Sheena Thomas[1] and Lila Simon[2]

[1]Department of Education, BSSS College, Bhopal. Madhya Pradesh, India
[2]BSSS College, Bhopal. Madhya Pradesh, India

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Abstract: The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 has introduced a groundbreaking Autonomy Model for higher education institutions, aiming to revolutionize the landscape of education in our nation. This research paper critically examines the transformative potential of the NEP 2020 Autonomy Model in empowering higher education institutions. Through an extensive literature review and comprehensive analysis of policy documents, we explore the key features and objectives of the Autonomy Model and its anticipated impact on fostering academic excellence, research innovation, and administrative flexibility in universities and colleges. Additionally, this study investigates the challenges and opportunities that institutions may encounter during the implementation of the Autonomy Model and identifies potential strategies to maximize its benefits. By scrutinizing the experiences of institutions that have already adopted the Autonomy Model, we derive valuable insights into its efficacy and potential as a catalyst for educational reform. Our findings shed light on the implications of this policy shift, offering valuable recommendations to policymakers and stakeholders in higher education for unleashing the true transformative potential of the NEP 2020 Autonomy Model. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational policy and provides a basis for informed decision-making in reshaping the future of higher education in our nation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The *National Education Policy 2020*, approved by the Central Cabinet and released on the 29th July 2020 presents a novel model of autonomy for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Even though autonomy has been the backbone of higher education since its birth, with the establishment of the University of Bologna, the concept and practice of autonomy has constantly been curtailed in India. The NEP 2020 has delineated on the concept and the method of granting autonomy through the Policy and also given a roadmap through the establishment of Board of Governors (BoG). Each institution will have its own BoG which will be independent and managed by the experts and the stakeholders.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) had come up with the concept of *Autonomous Colleges* and it had granted autonomy to a number of institutions in the country. The Bhopal School of Social Science (BSSS) is one such institution which was granted autonomy. The BSSS has emerged as one of the most

prestigious and sought-after institution in the region because of the autonomy it was granted. The *NEP 2020* in Chapter 19 has given a roadmap for establishment of Board of Governors (BoG) in all institutions in a phased manner so that the decision making is more relevant and institutions are able to perform better.

This paper examines the concept of autonomy as delineated by the sub-Committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) under the Chairmanship of Kanti Biswas and as proposed by the NEP 2020. The paper is based on the experiences of the BSSS and presents ideas for the establishment of the BoGs.

2 THE CONTEXT

The National Policy on Education 2020 (NEP 2020) in Sec. 9.1.3. mentions the objectives of education in the 21st C. Indian context which reads– "The purpose of quality higher education is, more than just the

creation of greater opportunities for individual employment. It represents the key to more vibrant, socially engaged, cooperative communities and a happier, cohesive, cultured, productive, innovative, progressive, and prosperous nation." And then goes on to say in Section 9.4 "Some of the major problems currently faced by the higher education system in India include:(a)With over 50,000 higher education institutes, the higher educational ecosystem is significantly fragmented. (b) poor learning outcomes and development of cognitive skills of students(c) rigid separation of disciplines(d) Access to higher education is limited, particularly in economically deprived communities. (e) limited teacher and institutional autonomy;" and then goes on to suggest in Section 9.3. "This policy envisions a complete overhaul and re-energising of the higher education system to overcome these challenges and thereby deliver high-quality higher education, with equity and inclusion. The policy's vision includes the following key changes to the current system (a)moving toward a higher education system with large, multidisciplinary universities and colleges in every district. (b)moving towards a more multidisciplinary undergraduate education(c) moving towards faculty and institutional autonomy;" We try to present some ideas for the creation of BoGs in the light of previous debates.

It is apparent the policy makers and the government are aware that autonomy of the faculty and the institution is of utmost importance for *innovative, progressive, and prosperous nation* and in our HEIs we have *limited teacher and institutional autonomy*. It is encouraging to see the government through its policy itself recognises the importance of 'academic autonomy' and also promises to restore autonomy of the faculty and the institutions. The University Grants Commission had come up with the scheme of extending 'Autonomous' status to some good performing institutions and now it can be seen that in most cases they have performed better than before. The Bhopal School of Social Sciences (BSSS) is one such institution which has been able to use the 'autonomous' status to extend good quality education to learners. It is one of the most sought-after institution in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The practices followed by the BSSS can throw some light on the creation of the Board of Governors (BoGs) as suggested in Chapter 19 of *NEP 2020*.

3 UNDERSTANDING AUTONOMY

Sometimes it appears universities are granted autonomy as charity by the governments or the funding agencies. Traditionally institutions have been funded by the State through the public exchequer without being treated as a subordinate office. The Radhakrishnan Commission (1950) highlighted the point and said "*Professional integrity required that teachers should be free to speak on controversial issues as any other citizen of a free country. An atmosphere of freedom is essential for developing the morality of the mind*" (p. 42). Even in the Classical Indian times the King used to provide funds or the Gurukulas were maintained on liberal public support without dictating terms. The rebellion of Chanakya against the Nanda dynasty was in the larger state interest. State must extend the autonomy that academia deserves, failing which the state suffers. This has been noticed and also highlighted many times but still the funding agency/state uses funding as a method to subvert autonomy. Noticing this the Radhakrishnan Commisison (1950) had mentioned "*Higher education is, undoubtedly, an obligation of the State but State aid is not to be confused with State control over academic policies and practices. Intellectual progress demands the maintenance of the spirit of free inquiry. The pursuit and practice of truth regardless of consequences has been the ambition of universities*" (p. 42). It has been reported by many university administrators that the governments exercise undue pressure through fund cut or delayed release of fund, when the university does not dance to the tune of the government. Often universities are not released funds in time and also funds for faculty development (travel grant and research) which is one of the most important components of institutional development. The Government is aware and conscious of this malice so it has committed in the NEP 2020 – "*The new suggested regulatory regime, with clear separation of roles and transparent self-disclosures, empowerment and autonomy to institutions, and the appointment of outstanding and qualified experts to leadership positions will help to enable a far smoother, quicker, and more transparent flow of funds*" (Section 26.5). It needs to be emphasised that autonomy to BoGs with deserving institutional leaders and mandatory self-disclosures should be ensured auto-flow of funds. And, most importantly, what the Prime Minister said on the floor of the Parliament that public money should be shared by Private institutions as well, as they are also serving the learners of the nation. Funds especially for faculty

development and research on merit should be ensured.

practice has led to constant improvement in performance.

4 CABE ASSURANCE

Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) is the apex policy making body on education of India and has been in existence for more than a hundred years. It had constituted a sub-committee to study and report on the autonomous status of our institutions under the chairmanship of Kanti Biswas. The Kanti Biswas committee (2009), very precisely defined autonomy and the pre-requisites for extending autonomy and said "*Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions is a pre-requisite for enabling them to achieve their goals and objectives. An honest exercise of autonomy - academic, administrative and financial – will lead to making these Institutions as centres of innovation, excellence and development. With this in view the Universities need to be insulated from internal and external pressures of all kinds, may be bureaucratic, political and other groups*". It needs to be highlighted that the Kanti Biswas Committee report was accepted by the CABE where all the Ministers of Education of all the states were present and the CABE accepted the report. The Report needs to be followed in letter and spirit. It is apparent the Committee was aware that HEIs suffer from bureaucratic, political and other pressures. A cursory review of the best performing institutions will reveal that good performing institutions enjoy utmost autonomy in deciding on curriculum, transaction of curriculum, assessment and certification and also research. Radhakrishnan Commission had also emphasized on these areas and pleaded that HEIs be given full autonomy in deciding on curriculum, transaction of curriculum, assessment and certification besides research. Unfortunately, autonomy in some Indian universities was misunderstood and autonomy became anarchy. This led to government withdrawing autonomy which has resulted in poor performance of a number of institutions.

Universities often have a large number of colleges affiliated to them but a number of universities do not revise their curriculum for years. As a result good and vibrant colleges also have to teach the outdated curriculum. It has been found that colleges which were granted autonomy, frequently revise their curriculum so is the case of BSSS. BSSS has revisits its curriculum before the start of every session, as a result learners are imparted up-to-date curriculum. They also perform well at the job interviews. This

5 THE BSSS EXPERIENCE

Effective leadership and relevant and up-to-date curriculum are two most important pillars of a vibrant educational institution. Chapter 19 of the *NEP 2020* says "*The common feature of all world-class institutions globally including India has indeed been the existence of strong self-governance and outstanding merit-based appointments of institutional leaders*"(Sec. 19.1). BSSS has a long tradition of appointment of merit based leadership, which is performed byBoG, The Principal of the college is selected by the Chairman who has only one consideration in mind while selecting the institutional leader and that is the "Academic and administrative acumen and the Commitment for serving the society". The principal is appointed on merit which is in line with National Education Policy 2020.

6 ROADMAP FOR BOG

The UGC document on Autonomous Colleges in its Preamble says "*The only safe and better way to improve the quality of undergraduate education is to the (sic) delink most of the colleges from the affiliating structure. Colleges with academic and operative freedom are doing better and have more credibility. The financial support to such colleges boosts the concept of autonomy.*" The process of *affiliation* had crumbled long back, as the colleges did not get support from the affiliating university except supply of question papers and award of degrees. Selected colleges were given autonomy which has been largely very successful. The Chapter 19 of the NEP 2020 recommends "*New members of the Board shall be identified by an expert committee appointed by the Board; and the selection of the new members shall be carried out by the BoG itself.*". The BSSS has been following a process where the members of the Board are selected through Chairman and Principal nomination based on expertise and merit of the individuals based on their experience. While drafting the guidelines for the BoG the UGC can replicate the process followed by BSSS and similar other institutions. Government interference must be minimised as it has constantly been recommended by all commissions and committees. Government departments and officials have little idea of running academic institutions which thrive on 'autonomy'

criterion which is not a criterion in government offices.

7 CONCLUSION

Indian HEIs have not performed well is the overarching message of the *NEP 2020*. The reason for this poor performance is lack of autonomy to faculty and institutions. This has resulted in selection of not the most suitable leaders who can take the institution to greater heights. Institutions which had been awarded *autonomous* status have performed better. As the *NEP 2020* has recommended that HEIs would be given autonomy to select their leaders, we can learn from the example of institution like BSSS and replicate it. This will be a crucial decision and a challenging job to make "*all HEIs in India to become independent self-governing institutions pursuing innovation and excellence*" (NEP Sec. 19.2). A major criticism of similar schemes has been subjectivity of the committees that visit for verification and accreditation. The *NEP 2020* has recommended that most information will be made available through website of the institution and the scheme for autonomous colleges has now made onsite visit optional. This must be adhered to strictly as visits by experts have often come under criticism. If we fail to design a fool proof system now India will again miss the train for next fifty years or more.

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