

Decentralisation and Democratisation of Higher Education in India: Prospects and Concerns

Dr. Vinodan Navath*

Abstract

Higher education is a promise for future development. Higher education should enable the active participation of students in the process of future social development. For that children should be inculcated along with knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. Decentralized and democratic distribution of knowledge is essential to include the diverse sections of society in the nation-building process. We need an education policy that nurtures local contexts and diversity. Any reform in this sector is important for the country. India is a land of diversity. The country demands a comprehensive education programme that includes all castes and religions. Studies suggest that higher education is still far away from a large section of India, especially the economically and socially disadvantaged. In the context of the National Education Policy 2020, this paper proposes a democratic and decentralized distribution of knowledge that includes the diversity of the country.

Key words: decentralisation, democratisation, mentoring, social engineering, mobility, inclusiveness

Introduction

Decentralization and democratization of knowledge are considered as essential prerequisites in the higher education reform process. Higher education, being one of the most important fronts in state development and social services, has been identified as one of the sectors revealing critical changes. The new Education Policy 2020 states that education is fundamental to achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society and promoting national development. NEP strives for universal access to quality education essential for India's continued rise and global leadership in economic growth, social justice, equity, scientific advancement, national integration and cultural preservation (NEP, 2020). India is able to achieve universal enrollment in Primary Education (90.9%) through various programmes like Operation Blackboard, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Right to Education Act 2009. Although India ranks first among South Asian countries in higher education, it faces a dire situation. In relation to quality issue, only a small proportion of the higher education sector can meet international standards. Providing access to India's burgeoning youth population and fast-growing middle class is a challenge. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 27.3, accounting for the 18-23 age group (AISHE, 2020-21). A recent survey shows that India's higher education system enrolls the second largest student body (after China) in the world, with about 22 million enrollees (Lindsay Daugherty et.al 2013). At present, 1113 Universities, 43796 Colleges and 11296 Stand Alone

Institutions are registered on AISHE web portal (AISHE, 2020-21). This is not the case when we consider the total enrollment ratio of SCs, ST's and minorities in higher education.

There are some aspects of exclusion that are specific to or significantly more intensive in higher education. According to U-DISE 2016-17 data, about 19.6% of students belong to Scheduled Castes at the primary level, but this fraction drops to 17.3% at the higher secondary level. These enrollment drop-offs are steeper for Scheduled Caste students (from 10.6% to 6.8%) and differently-abled students (from 1.1% to 0.25%), with female students in each of these categories having an even greater drop-off (NEP, 2020). Minorities are relatively underrepresented in schools and higher education. This can be attributed to different aspects such as financial constraints, complicated admission process, lack of knowledge about higher education opportunities, geographical and linguistic barriers, poor career prospects of many higher education programmes, lack of appropriate student support systems and social etiquette and customs (NEP, 2020). With globalization at its peak, there is an attempt to link educational outcomes to the interest of a market economy. Neo-liberal philosophy exemplifies the role of markets in all sectors and encourages the growth of private higher education institutions, most of which can be described as for-profit institutions. This testifies to the declining role of the state in the dissemination of knowledge and the increasing presence of the private sector in this sector. 446 universities are privately managed in India and 13.6% of colleges are Private (Aided) and 65% are Private-unaided (AISHE, 2020-21). Growing privatisation causes a lot of issues like exorbitant costs and a decrease in the number of seats available for underprivileged social and economic groups in society.

With the advent of machine learning and AI, there are attempts to ignore liberal arts, humanities, science and social sciences. The urban-rural divide is very evident in the distribution of universities and colleges in the country. Most of the leading institutions are located in metropolitan cities that are inaccessible to the poorest sections of society. According to the results of a survey, on the number of colleges across India for the academic year 2021, the urban district of the southern city of Bengaluru has 1,058 colleges. Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, ranked 671 and Hyderabad, the shared capital of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, ranked third during the survey period (AISHE, 2020-21).

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), decentralization is one of the concepts used to describe the division of authority, responsibility and decision-making responsibilities. It is a matter of boosting governance and managerial effectiveness. How to preserve academic freedom and maintain the proper role of government are the main concerns of today. Specific issues raised by decentralization include the transfer of power and decision-making processes required for policy planning, governance, and resource allocation from central authorities to municipal and school-based management structures (ZajdaJoseph, 2005). Like decentralization, democratization is also an important element for higher growth in education. It insisting on the flexibility and transparency of the educational

system. The present paper is an attempt to discuss the issue of decentralization of higher education sector in India and the need for academic freedom to the student community and teachers, in the back-drop of the implementation of New Education Policy of 2020. Some successful developmental models of decentralization in Higher Education sector also may be familiarized.

India's higher education needs are very important. The country needs more enrollment capacity at the base of the system as well as more places in the upper small elite sector. Systematic reform is needed. Instead of providing academic freedom and promoting decentralization, there are misguided attempts to encourage private and foreign agencies in the education sector. It is impossible for foreigners to solve the critical problems the higher education sector is facing. Modern society demands planned social development. It should be an experience for everyone in society and people should have maximum participation in its formation. Access to better education and communication should be ensured for the entire population. Political and academic efforts to implement this concept emerged in the post-independence era, and its growth was fueled by political will when education was made a fundamental right in 2002 (Article 21A) and the Right to Education Act was passed by Parliament in 2009. Past education policies have adopted a flexible stance that allows states to adopt regionally specific educational approaches to nurture states formed on the basis of language and culture.

A close reading of the 2020 policy reveals that this freedom will be largely eliminated. Diversity is important in a country like India. The assessment is that concepts like one textbook, one exam and one language bring about monolithic centralization and erode the majesty of the Constitution. One of the main arguments in favour of decentralisation is that it concentrates on the specific requirements of individuals and communities at the local level. Today's school students will begin to make visible contributions to the development of the state/nation in fifteen to twenty years. Therefore, there is a need to develop a common understanding of what and how India's vision for future development should be. Howard Gardner, the inventor of Multi-Dimensional Intelligence, says that people who want to live by the age of 21 must have five types of minds. They are disciplined mind, integrated mind, creative mind, respectful mind and ethical mind. The country's diversity can only be maintained through a decentralized and democratic approach to education. In the context of democratization, as all universities were part of the centralized organization of the government, the means and goals of political and higher education reform were decentralization. Efforts to improve the effectiveness of higher education institutions have been activated by contextual factors common to most higher education systems worldwide, such as the expansion of student numbers and systems, declining or stagnant resources, and the increasing complexity of tasks and services (OECD, 2016). Looking at the structure of higher education worldwide, two main types of government steering policies can be noted: (a) direct centralized planning and control as seen in many developing countries and (b)

self-regulation with a broad framework and accountability function as in developed countries. The latter model stimulated a gradual rethinking of traditional higher education management, which was largely self-determination in academic affairs, on the one hand, and administrative bureaucracy concerned with routine management tasks on the other.

Into decentralisation

In the twentieth century, the world witnessed the rise of decentralization in the development system. In many countries, decentralization has been constitutionally mandated as a means of achieving socio-economic goals. In India, post-independence, there have been strong voices in favour of decentralization, especially in the field of education. The Covid pandemic offers a compelling case for decentralisation, since empowered stakeholders are better able to address more significant issues locally. The 1950 Constitution gave control of education to the state governments rather than the federal government. However, a constitutional amendment in 1976 included education in the concurrent list, making it the responsibility of the state and federal governments. In case of conflict, this provision gave the federal government supremacy in all matters related to education. The Indian national vision of decentralization was manifested in the concept of Grama Swaraj conceived by Mahatma Gandhi. Education commissions and agencies appointed by the Government of India recommended a decentralized education system in India. The Kothari Commission of 1964 recognized the importance of universities' autonomy and freedom from ideological regimentation, party, power politics and pressure. It indicated the need to inculcate in teachers and students habits of independent thinking and an inquiring spirit. In June 1969, the University Grants Commission of India appointed two committees to look into the administration of universities and colleges respectively. The Commission observed that the administrative aim of the university should function as humanly imaginable and the statutory bodies of the university should be organized to give complete independence to the academicians and meet the changing requirements of the modern society (UGC Report, 1969). The organizational set-up should be free from inflexibility or rigidity. The National Education Policy (1986) was a landmark as it not only encouraged decentralization but also formulated a concrete implementation plan (Bjork Christopher, 2006). In the 1990s, India made significant moves towards decentralization. In line with the efforts to reform public administration, much stronger attention was paid to the problem of management and control of education.

Decentralized planning implemented by Kerala in several sectors including education through the People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning in 1996 is relevant in this context. First democratic government in Kerala which came into being in 1957 took steps such as drafting the Kerala Education Act and other regulations to ensure access to education for all. Kerala has made great achievements in terms of school availability, access, and enrollment. Mukundan in his study on higher education in Kerala argued that, People's Campaign for Decentralized Plan (PCDP) initiated by government of Kerala has contributed much to the spectacular progress of the state in school /higher education and literacy (MV Mukundan & Mark Bray, 2004). The

PCDP covered multiple aspects of development including education, and stressed the importance of community participation within the system of multilevel planning to lower-level bodies, along with powers to raise incomes through taxation. The PCDP was grounded in the principles of autonomy, participation and transparency. The Ramamurthy Committee (1990), appointed by the National Front government, recommended that decentralization was the only solution to link the country's cultural and regional diversity with education. In the Committee's view, decentralization is not simply a question of creating structures at different levels. It is the allocation of authority, functions and resources all the way through the structural hierarchy from the Center to the States, from the States to the Districts and even to the Villages/Habitats (Review Report on NEP 1990). Accordingly, there is a need for decentralization of educational planning and management at all levels, from the Center to the States, from the States to the Districts, from the Districts to the Blocks, and from the Blocks to the Panchayats. The committee envisaged that the concept of participatory education system is relevant at all stages of education and only through participation through partnership can an environment for true innovation be brought about. Within the education system, departments, faculties, heads of institutions and teachers should be given autonomy in their respective areas of competence. In the 10th Five Year Plan, the target was to give autonomous status to 10% eligible colleges in the country. The National Knowledge Commission and the Eleventh Five Year Plan acknowledge the same phenomenon.

In India, decentralization of education took a formal form in the form of 73 Constitutional Amendment in 1992. It provided for the establishment of uniform local bodies (panchayats) across the country at the village, block and district levels (the village being the most basic unit) through a democratic process of election and determination of their functions and responsibilities. In relation to education, Panchayat Raj institutions were given responsibility for primary and secondary education, technical training, vocational education, adult and non-formal education and libraries. To implement Panchayat Raj, the Kerala government had appointed a Committee for Decentralization (SB Sen Committee). It argued that the cornerstone of decentralized democratic governance anywhere in the world and especially in Kerala is popular participation. True participation involves dialogue and participation, leading to full participation in decision-making in the allocation and utilization of resources intended for the collective good. Power should flow to the people through elected bodies and their members and should not be blocked at any level because power ultimately belongs to the people and it is legitimate to transfer it to them (Sen Committee Report, 1997).

Complexities and contradictions

This is quite ironic when we look at the implementation of the recommendations of education commissions and agencies. Different studies on education raise the question of whether decentralization policies have the inherent potential to empower institutions and stakeholders in more transparent and accountable ways to cope with the changing demands of

systems and agencies from within and outside (Mukundan, Tilak, Bjork). The administrative structure of the university today is inadequate to cope with the flood of schemes and programmes on decentralization, affiliation of colleges, inspection, admission of students and conduct of examinations. Along with Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, India is one of the few countries where affiliated universities still exist (Sharma Shaloo, 2002). The affiliation system was introduced in India by the British in 1857 when the first three universities, namely Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, were established. The British model was the University of London, which was an affiliated university. While the British themselves abandoned affiliation systems many years ago, in India, this system not only continues, but more and more affiliating universities are created every year (Agrawal SP, 1999). An affiliating university, as originally conceived, had two main functions: determining syllabus or course content of various subjects offered for instruction and examination. With fewer number of colleges and hundreds of students, it was initially easier for the university to conduct the examinations effectively. The situation has undergone a revolutionary change since independence with mushrooming of colleges in government, aided and unaided sectors and a huge increase in the number of students. The management of colleges and the conduct of examinations has consequently become a mammoth task and very difficult to perform.

In the current university system there is no coordination between syllabus preparation, question paper preparation and evaluation. Each of these processes deals with specific groups. The university laws of most states stipulate that the governor of the states should be the chancellor of the universities. So, it depends on the chancellor's interest in higher education and his equation with the state government. As it happens, university education is one of the few areas of government activity in which a state governor can take an active interest. In most states, the Chancellor officially appoints the Vice Chancellor and the Pro Vice Chancellor. It turned out that the Governor himself did not have much interest in education or the necessary background to take an informed interest in it. Recent times we see the conflict of interest between Governors and elected governments at various states with regards to the appointment of vice chancellors, faculties and other office bearers. Our current university structure is time-consuming, centralized decision-making and increasingly slow, making it difficult to usher in an era of flexibility and diversification. In the current examination system, mere information under knowledge is tested and the higher order of critical evaluation is rarely followed. There is cognitive acquisition of information without a knowledge on different levels of knowledge attainment such as understanding, applying, analyzing, and synthesizing. Marks obtained, grades obtained and actual knowledge obtained have not yet been coordinated.

NEP 2020 proposed some workable fixes for the current university system, test design, and student assessment. It acknowledges the crucial role teachers play in the higher education sector since they have a real impact on the citizens of tomorrow. It also presented beneficial suggestions for granting access and accommodations to students from all sections of society.

NEP suggests a high-quality educational system with an emphasis on historically marginalised, underprivileged, and underrepresented communities. It offers flexibility, so that learners have the ability to choose their learning trajectories and programmes, and thereby choose their own paths in life according to their talents and interests. The goal is to turn institutions of higher learning into sizable, multidisciplinary universities, colleges, and HEI clusters/Knowledge Hubs, all of which will strive to enroll three thousand or more students (NEP, 2020). The foundations of high-quality learning, according to NEP, are curriculum, pedagogy, ongoing assessment, and student assistance. Notwithstanding the fact that NEP emphasises extensive access, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, high-quality, comprehensive, and multidisciplinary education, institutional autonomy, and integration of colleges with universities, it presents various practical challenges in its implementation. The first is the matter of certification and autonomy. Even while NEP talks of autonomy, the policy actually envisions a highly organised, centralised system that will be directly under the authority of the government. As education is in the concurrent list, state and central government should make proper enactments while integrating the colleges with universities in the form constituent colleges or autonomous colleges. Some of the colleges are very small and poor in resources. How it develop as constituent colleges and how to protect the teacher's service rules and students interests remains a question. According to NEP, the HEI should make decisions about all assessment systems, including those that result in final certification. There should be transparency in the way that college exams are administered, both online and off.

NEP recommends, as part of decentralized planning, the establishment of an institutional Board of Governance, made up of a group of highly skilled, capable, and committed people who have demonstrated their abilities and have a strong sense of institutional commitment. An institution's Board of Governors (BoG) will have the authority to run the institution without outside intervention (NEP, 2020). It is important to make sure that the BoG is not indirectly ruled by the then-governing party's political figures. If the BoG is subtly influenced by outside forces, it will undermine the spirit of higher education as a whole. Online or hybrid learning, as suggested by NEP, is another area of concern. There are many studies which suggests that offline class room learning offers much emotional bondage with learning system. For more effective in-class instruction, online platforms are preferable than a shift to a blended learning model. Most areas of the country, particularly the isolated villages, struggle with internet access. The digital divide between urban and rural areas is now very wide. Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2022 reports many big changes in rural areas. According to it almost every household (95.8%) has a cell phone in 2022, as against 90.2% in 2018. Over the same period, the proportion of households with smartphones has doubled from 36% to 74.8%, with many states going above 90 % (ASER, 2022). The Report also stated that majority of these cellphones had data issues and were improperly linked. Parents use these phones in their workspaces; their children cannot access them.

Developmental Models.

The democratisation of education and education for democracy are significant in the context of the society's broader socio-political transition towards parliamentary democracy. It may be useful to familiarize some developmental models on decentralization on administrative system and evaluation process, for ensuring sustainable changes in these areas. A National seminar on Decentralization of higher Education System was organized on October 8, 1991 at Kerala University, Thiruvananthapuram. It was attended by as many as 100 Vice Chancellors and Directors of other University level institutions of Higher learning (Report, 1991). Hoping that a decentralized system of higher learning will be able to better address the specific requirements of different geographic regions for promoting balanced regional development, the Seminar recommended the decentralization of the university system at the national level. It includes administrative decentralization, decentralization within the university system and academic decentralization. It suggested the formation of the regional centres of the UGC, vested with well-defined powers to take decisions, issue sanctions and pass orders at their levels (Report, 1991). In order to relieve the Vice Chancellors from the work of routine, it is necessary to make arrangements for proper devolution of powers within the University system. The vice Chancellor should be able to devote more time for reviewing and monitoring of ongoing, as well as for planning of developmental programmes of their respective institutions. For the academic decentralization it suggested the formation of a Faculty Council for each faculty with the representation of all concerned department, as well as other functionaries, so as to ensure the participation of faculty members. The faculty council also acts as a channel of communication between the departments and the highest authority of the university system. Another developmental model on decentralization was offered by National Institute of Planning and Administration in 1995. For ensuring flexibility in learning process it suggested that, curriculum must be internally generated by those who teach. College education must be liberated from the control of University and must be given academic and administrative freedom in matters such as curriculum restructuring, evaluation procedures, disciplining proceedings etc. University's role must be confined to standard settings and accreditation of colleges. Birla Institute of Technology introduced an 'Earn While You Learn' scheme, in which 100 students may work as assistance to faculty. Students may work for two degree courses at any time and are allowed to transfer in to less demanding courses rather than drop out. Examinations are internal and continuous, answers are returned to students and marking discussed. The Education Development Division plans, and monitors curricula, text books etc. The semester pattern, with continuous internal assessment and credit system, offered by the Higher Education Council of Kerala, also offer better scope.

Covid 19 marks a turning point in the nation's education and health policy-making for both the federal and state governments. The majority of educational institutions were closed for an extended period of time when lockdown was announced, and several states developed creative solutions to handle the situation and guarantee successful learning at home. Technology became

the new standard, and in order to guarantee that there were enough devices, computing facilities, and internet access in both urban and rural locations, local governments planned ahead and encouraged public involvement. By raising money for necessary infrastructure, providing counselling, and offering appropriate guidance, teachers, educational institutions and the local community tried their hardest to come together and support the students. The viability of these endeavors amid the disease presents a solid contention for decentralization, where engaged partners can fathom bigger issues at the local level. Several states have developed successful models that are being used in schools, colleges, universities and at home. The "Swadhyay" programme of the Maharashtra government, the "Shiksha Samvad" initiative of the Rajasthan administration, and the "First Bell" virtual classrooms of the Kerala government are all noteworthy initiatives. Through the Swadyay project, 18 lakh students of Class I to X in Maharashtra participated in a variety of academic activities in three languages. In order to deliver high-quality digital learning with low cost, the plan primarily targets low-income families and students enrolled in government and aided schools (Times of India, 2021). The Rajasthan government's Shiksha Samvad programme encourages community discussion in education, promoting awareness and accountability.

The General Education Department of Kerala launched "First Bell" on June 1, 2020, as an interim arrangement in light of COVID-19. The programme was introduced by the government and civic society for students in classes I to XII in state schools via the KITE Victors educational channel. Decentralised methods were used to launch the idea. According to the data, 2.61 lakh students did not have access to a TV or a smartphone when the programme was introduced (<https://kite.kerala.gov.in/>). Following a notable campaign for digital tools spearheaded by civil society, local self-governments, philanthropic groups, Student Police Corps, NCC and NSS volunteers, and others, the number rose to 1.20 lakh. The first phase of the KITE Victors channel has completed one thousand classes.

"Earn While You Learn" is an inventive programme created by the Kerala Higher Education Department Government to instill a value-conscious educational community in the contemporary academic setting and provide college students with the opportunity to gain vocational skills and, as a result, develop saving habits and financial self-reliance in the higher education sector. The concept of the project is centred on the notion of utilising learning to reduce costs, together with the idea of economic self-sufficiency and the financial boost that this creates for society. The ultimate objective of the project was to effectively move the community of students from a knowledge society to a knowledge economy, fostering social cohesiveness and setting them up for long-term, comprehensive development. The project was successfully conducted with the help of expert teachers and the arrangement of post-study hours and college holidays. The Department of College Education asked students at different colleges for their input in order to achieve this goal. A total of 29,247 students took part in the survey. 92% of the students were prepared to work in addition to their studies, according to the survey results

(<https://collegiateedu.kerala.gov.in>). Students could also practice their career and select their chosen fields. By providing training in internet-assisted works, such as data entry, website updating, web designing, online marketing, and hardware and software maintenance, the programme aimed to create professional opportunities in the contemporary technological era. There are many different professional paths to choose from, including teaching, farming, tax consulting, photography, videography, plumbing, housekeeping, etc. 'Freedom Wall' was a project planned by the Department of College Education as part of the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav launched by the Central Government. For this, the students themselves were assigned the responsibility and the amount was allocated. 'Waste to Wealth programme' was one of the inventive measures of the Earn While You Learn Programme that make large sculptures and souvenirs from recycled waste. The scheme provides an opportunity to participate in the development plans of a college and to make a personal mark in devising long-term plans aimed at infrastructure development. The entire student body created the programme, which was built from the bottom up

Democracy: A way for flexibility

The democratization of education and education for democracy plays a crucial role in the scope of overall socio-political transformation of society towards parliamentary democracy. The term emphasizes acceptance and respect for values such as freedom and responsibility, equality and solidarity, individuality and dignity. Democratization presupposes decentralization of education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 emphasizes in its Article 26.1, 'Everyone has the right to education'. Technical and general education shall be made universally available and higher education equally accessible to all on merit. In the 1970s, the demand for democratization of higher education grew strongly in many countries. Prabhat Patnaik points out that the main objective of the higher education system during the imperial period was to create biological intellectuals of the people (Prabhath Patnaik, 2009). Institutional and academic democracy is the high need of the hour. As Bernard Shaw pointed out, 'power corrupts a man and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. The man who heads a department or position for a long time often tries to monopolize everything. For flexibility and transparency in education, greater vertical and horizontal mobility of students and teachers should be ensured. As a workable model, we can suggest that greater emphasis should be placed on transparency and flexibility in the functioning of educational institutions at all levels in the education sector. The increasing element of choice for the student, establishment of linkages between various streams and subjects, possibility of greater variation in grouping of subjects, reduction of common examinations and continuous evaluation of teachers are some of them. Several dimensions of change may be suggested.

Conclusion

It concludes that decentralization and democratization are two important aspects necessary for the healthy growth of the academic system. Universities and educational institutions need to reinvent themselves along these lines to achieve qualitative and quantitative changes in the teaching and learning process. Universities should be given autonomy and universities themselves should give autonomy to departments and colleges. As education is for the holistic development of society and individual, students and teachers should be given more academic freedom. Existing complexities in curriculum formulation and evaluation can be avoided. Opening the doors of higher education to foreign universities and institutions for investment is not a solution to the serious quality problem facing the higher education sector. Global experience shows that the vast majority of higher education institutions entering foreign markets are not prestigious. So a foreign university needs a thorough evaluation before granting permission to set up their branch in India. It is the duty of a democratic government to strengthen the internal institutions by ensuring transparency and flexibility.

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