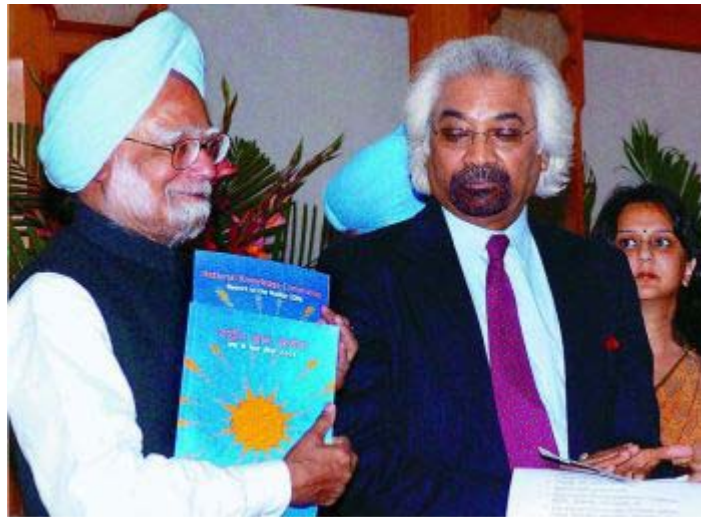


EDUCATION

Lessons not learnt

S. VISWANATHAN

The National Knowledge Commission recommends the overhaul of higher education and the establishment of a regulatory authority.



Prime Minister Manmohan Singh releasing the National Knowledge Commission report, as Commission Chairman Sam Pitroda looks on.

THE system of higher education has come under the scanner once again. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), constituted by the Union government in 2005 to study the various aspects of education at different levels, has presented its first annual report in the middle of its three-year tenure. The report gains significance in the context of the recent developments in education, particularly higher education, owing to the boom in the Information Technology and telecommunication sectors as also pressures on the economy with successive governments' persistence with neoliberal policies. Notwithstanding the huge employment market generated by IT and the splendid response to it from young graduates, the system of higher education, especially professional education, is beset with problems.

Academic and education experts have often pinpointed the dark spots in the system - gaps in infrastructure, fall in the quality of education, collection of exorbitant fees by private colleges and the state's poor control over them, and the mismatch between the curricula and the requirements of prospective employers. Although the NKC report covers sectors

ranging from education to e-governance, the accent is on higher education, particularly special higher education.

In his Foreword to the "National Knowledge Commission Report to the Nation, 2006", Sam Pitroda, the Chairman of the Commission, observes that the "NKC's recommendations constitute an important beginning" and he is confident that "the changes suggested would make a real difference". In his perception, the report is the first major step in the direction of helping India to "transform itself into one of the world's leading knowledge societies". The report was presented to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on January 12.

Projecting "expansion, excellence and inclusion" as the three principal objectives of the present phase of "reforms", the NKC has recommended an increase in the number of universities to 1,500 in the next eight years. "This," the NKC says, "is needed to attain a gross enrolment ratio of at least 15 per cent [of the relevant age group of 18-24] of the population from the present 7 per cent, which is only half the average of Asia." The Commission has also recommended the creation of 50 national universities as "exemplars of excellence".

It finds it "essential" to ensure that no student is denied access to higher education owing to financial constraints. For this, it wants the institutions to follow a "needs-blind" admission policy. In respect of reservation, the Commission advocates a system of admission based on "deprivation index", taking into account a number of factors in addition to social backwardness, to determine the nature and extent of deprivation. This recommendation, apparently aimed at diluting the reservation system, may kick off a fresh controversy.

The Pitroda Commission is one of the several high-level national bodies that have been constituted since Independence to guide the Union government on its education policy. The right to education recognised by the Constitution became the guiding principle to evolve independent India's education policy in the late 1940s and the state played a pivotal role in providing education. Political, social and economic compulsions, developments in science and technology, and judicial pronouncements now and then made governments look up to commissions for guidance to evolve policies in tune with the changing needs.

Social goals of education

The Dr. S. Radhakrishnan Commission on University Education, which was appointed by the Ministry of Education in 1948, defined the vital tasks of higher education thus: "Democracy depends for its very life on a high standard of general, vocational and professional education. Dissemination of learning, incessant search for new knowledge, unceasing effort to plumb the meaning of life, provision of professional education to satisfy occupational needs of our society are the vital tasks of higher education." Thus a system of education that could hopefully serve development needs and ensure social justice was put in place. The Commission emphasised that imparting higher education

was the responsibility of the government and recommended the creation of the University Grants Commission (UGC). However, it disapproved of government control in the matter of determining subjects and prescribing syllabi.

The Commission observed that academic autonomy for universities was vital because intellectual progress demands the maintenance of the spirit of free enquiry and the pursuit and practice of the truth regardless of consequences. The number of universities nearly doubled (from 20 in 1947) in the first two decades of Independence, although the concentration in this period was more on elementary and secondary education. The growing level of unemployment that defied solution and the mismatch between the education system and the development needs of the country, however, necessitated a redefinition of the system. New challenges emerged in the socio-economic sphere, such as the increasing presence of child labour and bonded labour.

The D.S. Kothari Commission on Education came out with a progressive and valuable report in 1966. It suggested the restructuring of education into a uniform pattern of 10+2+3. It adopted a "manpower approach" to the enrolment issue and declared that the principal purpose of higher education was to cater to the needs of industrial and other sectors, even as it acknowledged its role in promoting social transformation.

K. MURALI KUMAR



At a venue of the Common Admission Test examination for admission to premier business schools in India. The system of higher education, especially professional education, is beset with problems.

The 1970s and 1980s saw swift developments in the political and economic spheres, which had their impact on the education system too. The state started to abandon its responsibilities in the areas of education and health care citing financial crunch. The New

Education Policy (NEP) introduced by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1986 paved the way for large-scale participation of the private sector in education. Although the NEP accepted the concept of education for all, it favoured greater participation by the private sector. To cover up the state's failure on the various aspects of education, numerous projects were unfolded, one of which was the creation of "schools of excellence", which could not make any headway.

The neoliberal economic policy being pursued by the state since 1991 saw education in a different light. Higher education was termed a "non-merit good". In the perception of the policymakers, the 'social rates of return' on higher education were not high enough and subsidising it only resulted in "private benefits" to already better-off students and did not actually promote egalitarianism. State participation and budgetary support started dwindling.

The committees and experts had no difficulty in endorsing the political agenda of the policyframers. Following the gradual withdrawal of the state, private educational institutions rushed into the field. Vested interests have nearly hijacked the professional education system, which now stands highly commercialised and promises huge profits.

Significantly, many education-providers of today are either politicians or their henchmen. Encouraged by these developments, several substandard foreign institutions have started making forays into the Indian higher education market.

India has 367 universities, of which about 100 are private institutions. Of the 17,700 colleges, only 4,300 are government-run. Of the rest, 7,650 are under unaided private managements and 5,750 under aided private managements. Significantly, private professional colleges account for the majority of the students who have entered the portals of higher learning in the last 10 years. A substantial number of these private institutions bother very little about the quality of education they offer at exorbitant prices. This crass commercialisation makes higher education the preserve of the rich, creates an imbalance in the courses offered and leads to a fall in standards.

It is under these circumstances that the NKC has been required to take a look at the current educational situation and suggest remedies.

The Commission, with P.M. Bhargava as vice-chairman and Ashok Ganguly, Jayati Ghosh, Deepak Nayyar and Nandan Nilekani as members, addresses the major issues of concern agitating civil society such as commercialisation of education, fall in standards, financial constraints and the absence of equity in access to higher education.

At the very beginning of its note on higher education, the report states: "There is a clear, almost unanimous, view that higher education needs a systematic overhaul so that India can educate much larger numbers without diluting academic standards."

Apart from suggesting enrolment, expansion of higher education, promotion of excellence and ensuring easy access to the underprivileged, the Commission calls for an

effective regulatory authority. Stating that the present system is "over-regulated, but under-governed", the NKC perceives "a clear need to establish an Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE)".

"The IRAHE," the report says, "must be at an arm's length from the government and independent of all stakeholders, including the concerned Ministries of the government. Besides according degree-granting power to higher education institutions, the authority will be responsible for monitoring standards and settling disputes. More important, it would apply exactly the same norms to public and private institutions, just as it would apply the same norms to domestic and international institutions." The Commission says that the role of the UGC will be "redefined to focus on the disbursement of grants to, and maintenance of, public institutions in higher education". It has also proposed to curtail the functions of the two regulatory agencies, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and the Medical Council of India (MCI).

A significant recommendation echoes the demand often made by progressive sections in favour of increased public spending on education. The report says, "Since government financing will remain the cornerstone, government support for higher education should increase to at least 1.5 per cent of GDP [gross domestic product], out of a total of at least 6 per cent of GDP for education for overall." Stating that even this will not be enough, the Commission says that the universities should "essentially explore other possibilities".

It suggests that the universities see that the revenue from fees account for at least 20 per cent of their total expenditure and levy user-fee on the users of various facilities offered by them. The report wants the universities to revise their fees once in two years through "price indexation". The Commission has also recommended that universities "use their land as a source of finance".

Another major recommendation concerns the entry of foreign academic institutions. Stating that competition from foreign institutions with Indian universities "will be more qualitative than quantitative", the Commission has recommended that a level playing field be ensured by providing that all rules applicable to domestic institutions shall apply to foreign institutions. The Commission's suggestion to alter the size and composition of university courts, academic councils and executive councils or appoint small standing councils in the name of facilitating expeditious decisions is seen as a move to dilute the democratic character of such bodies and to make Vice-Chancellors all-powerful in the decision-making process.

The reaction to the report from experts ranges from critical appreciation to outright condemnation. A former university teachers' union activist, Vijender Sharma, takes exception to the recommendation to make the proposed regulatory authority the "only agency" to "accord degree-granting power to higher education institutions". The suggestion that the income from fees should constitute 20 per cent of the university expenditure will shut the door on the underprivileged, according to him. He cautions against the entry of foreign universities and the recommendation that they be treated on a

par with Indian universities. He has also objected to the NKC's projection of "deprivation index" as an alternative to reservation.

M. Anandakrishnan, noted educationist and Chairman of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, told *Frontline* that the report was "disappointing". He said that some of its recommendations, which are apparently new, had been made in a perfunctory manner without deeper analysis of their implications. "This is not the time for providing India with another compendium of prescriptions without deeper reflections on their relevance and effectiveness in the country," he said.

He said that the future demand for higher education would require a large number of higher education institutions but "the report has failed to analyse the characteristics and configuration" of the new universities that would come up. It contains no suggestion to guard against the creation of any "regional imbalance and disciplinary distortion", particularly because many of the new institutions would be under private control.

Another key area that deserves greater attention, in his view, is the government policy on private investment in higher education. He said the Commission should have been bold enough to recommend that all individual and family investors in higher education be categorised as commercial investors and subjected to commercial laws. The institutions should not be treated as "charitable institutions" to qualify for tax benefits.

As for the entry of foreign institutions, he said the Commission could have provided "unambiguous" guidelines... so that bogus degrees are prevented, and the gullibility of Indian students towards foreign degrees is not exploited". Anandakrishnan also regretted that no serious attention had been paid to the issue of political interference in higher education, which came in the form of packing the governing bodies of universities with political appointees.

He dubbed as "wishful thinking" the Commission's confidence that a single super regulatory authority could guide higher educational institutions in their varied functions.

How far the Commission's piecemeal approach to issues connected with education and its contentious recommendations will help the ruling coalition at the Centre fulfil its commitment to build an *inclusive* knowledge society is a moot question. Higher education cannot be seen in isolation from school education. Unless quality universal school education becomes a reality, inclusive higher education will remain a distant dream. The NKC believes that "expansion and reform of our school system is necessary to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to enter the world of higher education", but what prompted it to push the study of this "crucial area" of school education to the backburner is difficult to understand.