

Public universities: Trapped in multiple crises

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The public universities in India are now trapped in multiple crises which are primarily the outcome of two important factors: growing penetration of neoliberal utilitarianism accompanied by the reduction of public funding, and political interventions by incumbent governments. The university systems are also becoming more bureaucratic than academic and the varsity leaders are evaluated more through their managerial skills than intellectual capacities and democratic orientations which otherwise are considered to be the architectural foundation of a university system. The growth obsession of successive governments has also impacted the university system directly and indirectly. Accordingly, the streams of humanities, social sciences and also fundamental sciences like chemistry or physics have gradually been projected as not much capable and credible towards nation building. Such projections have been accompanied by pushing management and technology and also new branches of the corporate world's pursuit of wealth and profit as the most relevant disciplines to make the universities true engines of knowledge that contribute towards a nation's growth. The universities are now evaluated more through utilitarian criteria that endeavour to meet the present needs than that of exploring ideas for

a better humane, tolerant, democratic and inclusive future. The cumulative outcome is, even attempts are being made to reduce the universities to the status of govt departments.

Critics apart, these developments have also provoked some people within the parties in power to speak in public about these crises faced by the universities. For example, the ruling BJP's MP Firoze Varun Gandhi in an article 'The multiple crises in Indian Universities' published in *The Hindu* on May 9, 2022, exposes the hollowness of all high claims by the government in regard to its contributions towards making the higher educational institutions (HEIs) innovative, productive and oriented towards democratic rejuvenation. With extensive data drawn from various research studies, he shows that the spending in higher education has either stagnated or declined over the years, mostly under the present government.

Gandhi points out that the budgetary allocation for the Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) that provides funding for infrastructure loans, has been reduced from Rs 2,000 crore in the financial year 2021-2022 to Rs 1 crore for 2022-23. The universities have also been forced to take loans. Pointing out that the Indian universities have historically been bastions of free expression and nationalism, and

also substantiating his statement with a number of examples, Gandhi laments that this freedom has been repressed both by bureaucratic interventions and police actions.

Paucity of government fund and growing police actions and bureaucratic interventions in universities are only two but very critical challenges to the university system in India. There are more and deep-rooted crises. Two very critical challenges are accreditation and ranking of Indian universities and colleges.

Accreditation apparently is a good idea as it aims to bring in a competitive spirit among the universities and other HEIs and thereby contributes towards quality enhancement. With the process of assessment and accreditation under the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) for more than two decades now, there have been visible changes in the HEIs including the universities. It has generated a spirit of enthusiasm and collective involvement both among the faculty members and the administering officials. Generating and preserving a relevant data base have been one of the important achievements. Unfortunately, there are instances of the start of a vicious cycle of manufacturing data that promotes unethical practices. The process has not succeeded in bringing in transparency in the system and timely holding and declaration of results, etc. Data obsession has also created undue pressure on the functioning of

the system itself.

More fundamentally, the assessment and accreditation process fails to take into account the multidimensional diversity in HEIs and also the growing reduction of public funding vis-s-vis increasing political interventions. The Indian Constitution originally inserted education in the State List, and it was only during the Emergency and through the 42nd amendment to the Constitution that it was transferred to the Concurrent List. In actual practice though, it has almost become a subject of the Union List with the Union government deciding and imposing its decisions on the architecture, funding and the actual operational guidelines on education from the primary to the higher levels. With the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, this centralisation will move to newer heights.

Now, the national agencies like NAAC and National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF) have developed uniform parameters for all universities and other HEIs across the country including the private ones. This has created tremendous challenges, particularly for those public institutions that suffer from the deficit of both human and physical infrastructure primarily due to the deficit in funding. In a state like Assam the fee waiver schemes have posed more challenges to these institutions.

The affiliating public universities have mitigated the fund deficit to an extent by conducting examinations

and according affiliation and registration to the affiliated colleges. As the NEP 2020 pledges to bring to an end the affiliating system, it will create enormous challenges for the existing public universities and also the universities to be established in the near future in conformity with the NEP 2020. The private universities will be benefited through the NEP 2020 due to their capacity to enhance fees, etc., to meet the requirements of the policy as well as for their commitment to drive as per the requirements of the market. Lowly paid teachers and officials in those universities will of course face the heat.

The NEP 2020 also provides a complete architectural shift in leadership and management of the universities. Under it the universities are all set to work in a corporate style with the VC's position becoming like that of a CEO of a company. The public universities will gradually be forced to go in for the public-private-partnership model, and in the long run, may result in the private partners taking over. There is already a crunch of avenues for critical thinking in the university system. Freedom of expression will be a rare thing in the universities. The idea of autonomy will gradually be replaced by the idea of being innovative. Ironically, the idea of being innovative will be directed towards fulfilling the goals as determined by the governments. Being innovative will mean autonomy without critical intervening faculties.