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*Chairman, University Grants Commission,*

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Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, members of the university authorities, staff of the university, students, ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to thank the university authorities for inviting me to address the convocation this year, an invitation which I accepted with great pleasure. It is always inspiring to be in the midst of the university community. Visits of this type give me an opportunity to familiarise myself with the developments on various campuses. Sitting in Delhi, one can hardly appreciate the problems of colleges and universities located in different parts of the country.

It is in this spirit that I accepted the invitation of your university which is named after one of the greatest heroes of Indian history, Shivaji Maharaj. Since its establishment the university has grown to be an important seat of higher learning in the country. It has a large number of departments, disciplines and students. Let me, at the outset, wish the out-going graduates all the best in their careers. I have no doubt that the training they have received in this university will be a great asset to them.

Taking advantage of this convocation, I wish to invite the attention of the academics and policy makers to an important aspect of higher education i. e. the position of the colleges in it. Indian higher education has expanded enormously since Independence but it is also facing a number of problems. The system has been examined by several committees and commissions since the dawn of the century, more so after Independence. Most of the recent committees have identified the major problems concerning the system as quality, access, relevance, management, finances, accountability and performance. Important recommendations have been made to improve the system, but several of them have either not been implemented or implemented in a half-hearted manner. Problems are identified, solutions are suggested, but something goes wrong when it comes to implementation. We have a tendency to re-open the issues already settled and to be critical all the time without applying oneself to the task of doing something positive on what has been agreed upon. One such issue facing Indian higher education is the concept of affiliated colleges and the suggestion to give autonomy to selected colleges. Quality of education has been one of the major concerns. In our vast educational system where we have about 210

universities, 7,600 colleges and about 2,70,000 teachers, the quality is bound to be uneven. In it there are centres of excellence; there are average institutions; and there are those which are weak. According to UGC about 3000 colleges in the country are non-viable and as a result they do not receive any assistance from the Commission. By implication it does not mean that those which are receiving assistance are all maintaining high standards. There are colleges and colleges; universities and universities. Our centres of excellence are known for maintaining high educational standards. In all the states we have such high quality institutions. But many other institutions either do not maintain or are unable to maintain high quality. Reformers in higher education have suggested various ways of improving the quality in higher education. In this lecture I shall not go into all those aspects; instead, I would like to concentrate on one aspect i.e. the aspect of autonomous colleges. The college is the basic unit of higher education. It is this unit which caters to the educational needs of more than eighty percent of students in the country. 'There are colleges much older than the modern Indian universities. St. Annes<sup>1</sup> College at Bandra in Bombay was established as early as 1575. Then other colleges came to be set up.

The predominant system in Indian higher education is a system of affiliated colleges. It implies that any college which comes into existence should be affiliated to a university, otherwise it will not be recognised. Whenever a Government or a private institution or individuals want to set up such institutions they need to get the permission of the university in the area. In other words, every college in the country is affiliated to one university or the other. When a college is affiliated it is required to follow the academic and administrative guidelines/instructions issued by the university. The College can run only those courses which are approved by the university. Its examination is conducted by the university and the degree is given by the university. Even with regard to staffing and financing, the university prescribes the guidelines which are to be followed by all the government and private colleges. Examinations are conducted on the same day at the same time in all colleges. For example examination for a paper in Indian history at the undergraduate level will be given to all the students in the jurisdiction of the university at the same time on the same day. If a paper leaks out in one college the entire examination is cancelled; or if a few colleges in the jurisdiction of a university have not completed their courses and want the postponement of examination date it has to be postponed for all colleges including

those which are ready to conduct examinations. The type of examination i.e. whether it should be essay type, quiz type, objective type or whether there should be internal evaluation or not, has to be the same in all colleges. In other words, all these are prescribed centrally by the university. There is a high degree of centralisation in the present system.

Centralisation works very well in a small system. If there are 5 or 10 colleges in the jurisdiction of a university it is workable, even though the colleges are subjected to uniformity and have no freedom in running their own affairs. But on the other hand, if the system is very large it creates problems. There are now, as I mentioned earlier, about 7,600 colleges which are affiliated to some university or other. Take the case of older universities like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Osmania and Lucknow. Bombay has 205 constituent and affiliated colleges; Calcutta, after shedding several colleges, has 206 affiliated colleges and 4 university colleges; Madras has 4 affiliated colleges and 7 institutions of oriental learning; Osmania has 13 constituent colleges, 143 affiliated colleges, 7 postgraduate centres; and Poona has 141 affiliated colleges and 45 recognised institutions. Your own university has 211 affiliated colleges and 4 recognised institutions. When we look at it from the point of view of the university it is very difficult to supervise and manage such a large number of colleges. In fact if we ask a Vice-Chancellor to name all the colleges it would be impossible for him to mention them and to get to know all the institutions, much less visit them. Same is true of other important functionaries in the university like the Registrar, the Deans and the Heads of Departments. In other words, the colleges hardly get adequate attention from their parent universities. Only those colleges which are in the city where the university is located tend to get some attention of the university authorities; others are virtually neglected except at the time of examination. In fact in a city like Bombay, even the colleges located in the city may not get the attention they need.

But the fact remains that students studying in all these colleges study the same courses and get the same A degree. In the affiliated college system the university has total control over them. The colleges hardly have any freedom to innovate or bring about academic changes without the approval of the university authorities, which in some cases takes years. The colleges, therefore, have to run courses which are prescribed by the university and in such prescription the colleges themselves may not have a say. They are mere deliverers of courses

decided by the univer-sity. In this vast system where we have good, average and substandard colleges all of them are treated alike. No wonder good colleges are the worst sufferers in such a system. Let me give you the case of a state where examinations in most universities are behind schedule by 1-2 years. In this state there are a few colleges in the jurisdiction of a certain university which are extremely well managed, are prepared to conduct their examinations on time, but they are unable to do so because the university itself is not — conducting the examinations on time. As a result, students in these good institutions tend to suffer along with others. The question that arises in this connection is why should the good colleges suffer for the inefficiency of other colleges. Is it not unjust to treat good and bad alike? What kind of equality is this where good and bad, efficient and inefficient, performers and non-performers are treated alike? By any yardstick it is being unfair and unjust to the colleges which take their tasks seriously. We also cannot blame the universities because in a centralised system there is no alternative but to treat them alike.

In order to protect the good institutions, it has been suggested that they should be taken out of the affiliat-ing system and made autonomous. The concept of autonomous college has been there for quite some time; it was supported by the Kothari Commission and more recently by the National Policy on Educa-tion - 1986. The main features of autonomy are that while a college remains a part of its parent university it is given autonomy to manage its own affairs, formu-late its own academic programmes and devise its own examination system. It will have a governing and academic bodies on which there are representatives of the concerned university and the State Govern-ment. The autonomous college system is being im-plemented in seven States -Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. Of the 114 autonomous col-leges a majority of them are in five States - Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat have one autonomous college each<sup>1</sup>. In the Programme of Action of 1986 Policy it was stated that by the end of the VII Five Year Plan 500 colleges would be made autonomous. We are now in the midst of the VIII Five Year Plan and we are nowhere near the target fixed for the VII Five Year Plan.

The progress regarding autonomous colleges has been very slow. There are academics in the country who feel that it is a dangerous concept and will spell disaster for higher education in the country. To such academics my answer

would be that they are not fully familiar with the modern educational trends in the world. The dominant system all over the world is the autonomous college and not the affiliated college. If it can work well in other countries there is no reason why it cannot work in this country. Secondly, I understand the teachers are opposed to the system. It appears their apprehensions are:(a) it (autonomy) will lead to arbitrary behaviour on the part of the management; and (b) it will increase the workload of the teachers. These are apprehensions that need to be looked into. We can devise a system of management where the managements cannot behave arbitrarily. In the case of workload of teachers, it is not difficult to design a system whereby the workload does not increase. There is yet another criticism and /i that is about the students of autonomous colleges.

They are at a disadvantage with regard to admissions and getting gold medals in the universities. Since their results are not declared centrally by the university they are not eligible for gold medals. In some cases managements also have a grievance against the university because they cannot introduce a course in their colleges which does not exist in the parent university even though they are autonomous. No doubt there are some problems in the working of an autonomous college.

There are four partners in conferring autonomous status on a college - the college itself, the parent university, the State Government and the University Grants Commission. Unless the four partners agree, it is not possible to give autonomy to any institution. Of the four partners, UGC is the most willing partner and would encourage State Govts. and universities concerned to identify educational institutions which have a track record in consistently maintaining good standards and give them autonomy.

A recent study reveals that autonomy has been successful in: a) laying emphasis on teaching/learning in the college campus; b) improving standards of teaching and learning; c) providing academic freedom to teachers; and d) in introducing employment oriented courses<sup>2</sup>. Autonomous Colleges have been able to achieve many academic and administrative targets just because they are autonomous in comparison to those which are still under the stranglehold of university affiliation and waiting for decisions to be made at the university<sup>3</sup>. Autonomous colleges also instil competitiveness in academies which further

improves the overall quality of higher education. I am pained to see that some of the big States like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Assam, Bihar, West Bengal have not implemented the scheme. Some other States like Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat have made only feeble attempts. If the policy makers in the States are 2. op. cit .p.187. 3. op. cit. p 188. interested in the scheme, we (from the University Grants Commission) would be very happy to discuss with them the utility of such a scheme. The National Policy on Education, 1986 and the Programme of Action of 1986 which were slightly amended in 1992 are both approved by the Parliament of India. It is indeed a sad commentary on the way public policies are implemented in India. A scientifically sound scheme intended to improve the quality of education has been put on the shelf. It is clear that they are afraid of any change. I understand, they are afraid that the scheme of autonomous colleges would disintegrate or lower the quality in higher education. This is not based on facts. If anything, the conditions in the affiliating system are far from satisfactory. In our meetings with the state Education Secretaries and Vice- Chancellors we have been pleading with them, to make a beginning in this respect. But I find there is total apathy and indifference towards innovation. The only inference one can draw is that they are reluctant to lose control over these institutions.

In India's educational system the autonomous college is an innovation and any innovation is bound to have a few problems and some resistance. The crux of the problem about the autonomous colleges seems to be lack of awareness about the scheme. The situation is comparable to that of the eight blind persons trying to describe the elephant. As we all know in this case, each blind person touches one part of the elephant and describes the elephant. The plight of autonomous colleges is similar to that. "People who know the scheme and have implemented and have opinion on how it should have been are very few and their voice is hardly heard. It is the others who have neither experience nor proper understanding who have been spreading stories about the autonomous scheme."<sup>4</sup> We notice that ignorance of autonomy is all- pervasive.

One should not look at the issue of autonomy for colleges from the angle of problems, there are problems even in the existing universities and colleges; very few of them can claim to be free from problems. We should look at the concept of autonomy as an opportunity to give freedom to educational institutions to further improve their quality and also bring about changes in curricula. It is a freedom to do something on their own. I am amazed to see that people are afraid

of such freedom. I cannot think of any other walk of life where people prefer dependence to freedom. I say this with a sense of responsibility and some awareness of higher education in the developed and developing world. If we want to transform higher education in this country, there is no alternative to giving autonomy to the colleges whose performance is satisfactory.

A question may arise regarding the evaluation of standards in such autonomous institutions for each one conducts its own examinations. In the existing system such a question does not arise because it is the university which conducts examinations for all of them, and the assumption is that the University is doing such evaluation. Today, in higher education we do not have proper evaluation system. A huge system like ours needs to have some assessment of its performance. This is being done in other countries. It is against this background that the Programme of Action of New Education Policy has suggested that an Accreditation Council should be set up in the country. I am happy to mention that the Govt. of India has just cleared the establishment of Accreditation Councils. Indian higher education is facing several challenges and the situation is desperate. Desperate situation calls for desperate remedy but what is being suggested is not desperate at all. It is a well tested system and could be implemented without any difficulty. Indian higher education is similar to the Indian joint family where the grown up children and their children are in the joint family and the head of the family would like to keep them together so that he has control over it. But the experience proves that in most cases grown up children set up their own homes and, as we all know, they have not collapsed. The same situation applies to Indian higher education. I appeal to policy makers and academics in this country to start implementing the scheme and if there are any problems we could attend to them. We could go on improving the system. But to think of problems, even before implementing it, is not wisdom. Unless you get into the water, you will not be able to learn swimming. From the side of the University Grants Commission, I assure all those interested in higher education that this is a reform which is long over due and it is time that it is implemented. The more you delay, the more you are postponing the improvements in the educational system.

There is a need to create awareness about the concept and working of autonomous colleges among the policy makers, planners, academics, administrators and students. This can be done by organising a series of workshops, seminars and symposia. It is necessary to clear the misunderstandings and

apprehensions about the need, relevance and character of autonomous colleges. In order to understand the problems of autonomous colleges, UGC did organise a few seminars. In these seminars the working of the autonomous colleges was thoroughly discussed and a number of valuable suggestions have been made. In the light of these suggestions UGC has appointed an expert committee to revise its guidelines. Hopefully, very soon such guidelines would be evolved which take care of the grievances about ACs.

Before I conclude, I wish to thank the authorities of the university once again for inviting me to this university which has carved out an important place for itself in the academic world of this country. Those of you who are fortunate to be products of this university should indeed feel proud of your Alma Mater. Here you are exposed to the world of scholarship and I hope that you will continue to retain interest in your respective disciplines.

Thank you.

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