

*Report of the Two-Day National Seminar on New Directions in  
Higher Education, organized by the Kerala State Higher Education  
Council on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> July 2010*

**Prepared by C.Praveen**

**14<sup>th</sup> July 2010**

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- Prepared by C.Praveen, a delegate of the seminar & Faculty, Government College of Teacher Education, Thiruvananthapuram

The seminar commenced in the afternoon after the Foundation Day Lecture scheduled for the forenoon. The theme of the first sessions was Recent Trends in Higher Education. The first to address the audience was Mr. Prabhat Patnaik, an economist .

**Mr. Patnaik** began by referring to the fundamental paradigm shift all over the world- a shift which characterizes commoditization of Higher Education and cautioned that it is going to have a disastrous effect. The following are a few thoughts worth pondering on presented by the speaker:

Development of knowledge implies an openness of knowledge. The purpose of Higher educations is opening up of minds. Institutions of Higher Education are not just teaching shops and if so it would defeat the very purpose of its existence.

Now what exactly should this development of knowledge be given prominence? Well, for improvement of the human condition... and it could vary in societies. In some it would mean the removal of untouchability and some others the removal of unemployment. An in this context it is worth remembering that a good university in the Indian context is not necessarily a good university in the American context. Universities do have a social objective and the judging criteria do no necessarily consider the effect Universities produce locally.

We should not commit the mistake of producing clones of foreign universities in India ... and if the development of Knowledge is the main objective, cloning is to rejected. Cloning also is harmful because of the ideological bias most universities have. For instance in most universities, Economics is taught as how the World Bank perceives economy. It will rarely teach their students what kind of path the Indian economy should tread as evident in the writings of a great son of India Dadabhai Naroji .

Secondly publications in journals should not to be a criteria to assess the quality of the faculty. For the prevailing implicit academic pressure may prompt individuals to publish and judging through the eyes of someone, somewhere may not do any good. Further, for academic rating, one has to publish in refereed journals only. But in some such journals, the determinants of knowledge may not be the criteria which the journal uses for selecting articles and subsequently a large number of articles get rejected.

The fact remains the quality of Higher Education in the country is poor and enrollment too is poor. There is an urgent need for substantial improvement.

If Higher Education must aim at providing a position, that epistemic position should be from the outside.

Corporatization is a phenomenon that governments encourage, for, they can gradually and happily withdraw from funding. But commoditization of Higher Education, is paradoxically bad, for it removes the possibility of intellectual nourishment. If you commoditize education, you fail to ensure quality.

Significantly, one should also remember that the moment you have one-sidedness, you fail to see a multiplicity of positions... It leads to lowering of quality of education and a kind of social crisis.

**The next speaker was Mr. Bhargava**, a Bio-technology expert. He began by affirming that the education system- particularly school and college is in a crisis in India and education ought to get a great deal of attention like 'agriculture'.

But first, we ought to discriminate between knowledge economy and knowledge society. If you can make every citizen knowledgeable then the economy that derives from it is a knowledge economy. The sole purpose of Higher Education is to acquire and generate knowledge. Commodification of Knowledge has resulted in loss of this focus. 80% of the graduates we produce are unemployable.

At the same time, it is not possible to affiliate all engineering colleges to a single university. The best way out is to give university status to some and to form cluster of colleges.

We ought to realize that undergraduates are essential for universities. The best example of this is if you ask Nobel Prize winners to teach they would prefer teaching undergraduates not Post Graduates.

It is worth recalling the Yashpal Committee recommendation.. We need Engineering, Medicine the Arts etc to be in the same university to help multidisciplinary transaction.

Higher Education in some States have become corrupt. In Andhra Pradesh there were instances where seats to professional colleges were made available through brokers. Universities should take the responsibility and see that students stay and do not drop out of university.

Another flaw in the University system is 'inbreeding'. The students of the same university getting jobs in the same university. Usually there is no representation from other universities or other states in the selection of faculty.

We ought to ensure that all children gets the same quality of education as the other child.

We also need a reform of the evaluation system. It ought to be flexible. At present everything depends on the final exam and suppose a student falls ill on the day of the examination, he loses a year!

We ought to be flexible too in the intake of students. At present those students who have opted for vocational education at the Higher Secondary level are denied admission for the arts or science stream!... This should change.

Perhaps the worst form is that all agencies including NAAC, the Medical, the Pharmaceutical, the technical council etc. are corrupt.

It is a pity that we bestow undue importance and respect for the post of Vice Chancellor. At times it is possible for those with political connections without a good background in education to become a Vice Chancellor in India!

The worst part of Universities is that there is no transparency and accountability in the financial transaction and utilization of funds...

Minor things of the kind mentioned above need to be addressed if we wish to bring about qualitative change in the University education system.

Time bound promotions of faculty is in fact absurd. Students should have a say in the performance of a teacher.

We should also think of setting up Virtual departments in emerging fields such as 'Nano technology' where people working elsewhere can be serving another university at the same time.

Finally who should decide the content of the topic to be taught. It should be the teacher. The speaker admitted that what has hitherto been presented is only a glimpse of certain problems. We do not have solutions to all of them!

Following the presentation by Mr. Patnaik and Mr. Bhargava several questions were raised by the audience and clarifications had to be given by the speakers. The session concluded with the unanimous admission that we need to admit that the intensity of intellectual engagement has gone down in our universities.

**The second session** which commenced after a brief tea-break had for its theme: "Public-Private-Partnership in Higher Education". The speakers were Prof. P.K Michael Tharakan, Vice Chancellor of Kannur University, Prof. Jandhayala B.G.Thilak of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, and Mr. K.K.George, of the School of Environmental Studies, Kochi.

They spoke at large about Public funded programmes and Private Service delivery.

**Prof. Tharakan** enunciated the PPP model as applied in Kannur University: Public-Private-Panchayat partnership, where privatization was seen as a way of decentralization. The PPP mode was contractual and service delivery was governed by the contract not democratically refutable.

Prof Tharakan also opined that the problem of unevenness and exclusion in Higher Education is systemic. We could think of setting up a private provider conforming to socially and publically set rules and regulations and accepted norms as it once functioned in Kerala way back in 1957-59.

Prof. Thilak's write up on 'The Foreign Educational Institutions Bill : A Critique which appeared in the Economic and Political Weekly May 8, 2010, Vol XLV No. 19 , " The Proposed NCHER: A Solution Worse Than Disease? Which appeared in the Economic and Political Weekly dated May 1,2010 Vol XLV No. 18, " The Public-Private Partnership in education which appeared in The Hindu on line dated 25.5.2010 [<http://www.thehindu.com/2010/05/25/stories/2010052551031200.htm>] along with a two page write up entitled 'The Bill and the Unfair Practices in Educational Institutions were distributed to the participants of the seminar at the time of registration.

**Prof Thilak** made use of PowerPoint slides for his presentation. The background and need for Public- Private- Partnership and the way it is practiced in India was highlighted.

Perhaps the main advantage he opined was that PPP would provide flexibility in relaxing restrictions associated with the public sector. He also felt that PPP in education may not succeed unless profit motive was permitted.

**Mr KK. George** began with a disclaimer that what he intends to present are a few stray thoughts. In the course of his presentation, he made a significant affirmation : " In Kerala funding of education fails to provide political mileage". He also added that it is possible to explore NRI funding in Kerala .

During the comment and Question session, a few points were raised by the audience.

Prof. Philip G. Altbach, the presenter of the Foundation Day lecture in the forenoon opined that in the US, there are certain philanthropists engaged in Private sector, but it is hard work... keeping track of the alumni particularly the rich ones and in fund raising. It is a fact that there are private institutes where philanthropy is at the top but in most other countries, profit making is at the top.

There was one significant observation by a speaker that PPP has now reduced itself to Partnership for Private Profit!

The need for addressing the weaker sections, the tribals, the dalits and women through private philanthropic trusts, a speaker felt, should be explored.

The session concluded with the solemn affirmation by one of the speakers that the social values rapidly change in India and selfishness and greed have replaced other considerations.

**Day Two: 13<sup>th</sup> July 2010 ( Tuesday)**

**The third session** had for its theme National Commission for Higher Education and Research Bill, 2010.

The only speaker of the session was **Mr. Vinod Raina**, a Physicist and Homi Bhaba Fellow.

Mr. Raina began by emphasizing the need as mentioned by many speakers the previous day, to catch up within our own needs and we have to accept that there is a huge amount of problems and that solutions are required, but legislations are only a part. We ought to realize that there are contradictions within legislations.

Reference was made to the setting of a seven member team, the Collegium and the general body and the need for autonomy. He felt that academic standards have to be maintained.

Mr. Raina affirmed that the actual power will vest with the people who will give money to the University. He also pointed out that the first draft of the bill said nothing about research and the fact remains that autonomy and quality in research cannot go together.

From the **comments** by the delegates:

- We need to check whether the operational strategies of foreign universities will actually work in our system.
- It is the quality of knowledge that ultimately matters not the acquiring of degrees!

**The fourth session** had the Prohibition of Unfair practices in Technical Educational Institutions and Medical Educational Institutions Bill, 2010 as the focus of discussion. A seven page critique of the Bill by Mr. Subimal Sen of the West Bengal State Council of Higher Education was made available the previous day, to the delegates at the time of registration. **Mr. Sen** read out the whole critique with occasional elaborations.

Here is an interesting reference made by Mr. Sen : we miss in this “age of so- called liberalization, privatization and globalization...what Prof Noam Chomsky called “Privatization of Aspirations”- A culture of extreme selfishness and craze for so called better life pervade all strata of society”.

Another reference reads “One general observation is why the institutions offering other professional courses including teacher education are kept outside the purview of the bill.” Mr Sen felt that there is a need for social accountability...”

The presentation concluded with a reference to a crisis in Higher education in our country “ The crisis is so deep to be cured by bringing in the concepts of the corporate world in the education sector, creating a so-called level playing field for the private entrepreneurs both foreign and Indian, and monopolizing the regulatory powers in the hands of a few, all in the name of ensuring quality and excellence”

The next speaker was **Mr. Thomas Joseph** who began by stating that he was only complementing what Mr. Sen said . The six page handout entitled ‘Bill on Prohibition of Unfair Practices and Corporatization of Professional Education” already made available the previous day during registration, was referred to. He began by expressing doubt whether the bill was actually framed by the Hon Minister for Human Resources Development, Mr. Kapil Sibal. Mr. Joseph affirmed the need to place the bill in the proper context. We need to realize he said that the life to education is a right to life.

The hand out which is also a critique of the bill points out that by “identifying transparency as the only mandatory good practice, the Bill seeks to equate good corporate practices with good educational practices... The bill enlarges the freedom of educational entrepreneurs by restricting the regulatory functions of the State. At the same time, it restricts the freedom of the individual citizens for judicial remedy against violations of the provisions of the bill.”

Following the presentation questions were raised. Many felt that the courts need to be more sensitive to social demands .. We need to accept the truth that dominant minorities are now drawing additional rights!

**The second theme of the fourth session** was the Foreign Educational Institutions Bill, 2010. The presenter of a critique of the Bill was **Dr. Rajan Gurukkal**, the Vice Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University. As stated in the abstract of the paper made available at the time of registration, it sought to critically examine the justificatory claims of the Foreign Educational Institutions Bill(FEIB 2010) and appraise the possible consequences of its enactment.

The main intent as stated was “to analyze the socio- economics of low GER as well as the poor quality with a view to exposing the political economy of the legislative remedy in general and Foreign Institutions Bill in particular”.

According to Dr. Gurukkal there is a hidden agenda :

A few facts which he presented included the following:

- \* We actually need to train students with greater analytical skill and communication skills.
- \* Good students will simply not join an off campus course of a foreign university simply because it will lack the original campus ambience which it is supposed to have in the home country.

\* It is a fact that the younger and the best have a tendency to migrate. Only the second best stay back.

\* The state universities and premier institutions will encounter the problem of dearth of good teachers and researchers. Academic impoverishment and quality degeneration with indigenous institutions will be the net result.

\* Emergence of corporate houses will affect universities in India.

\* Quality institutions being very expensive will be less accessible.

To deliberate on the lecture the floor was open to discussion inviting a number of **observations and comments**. These included the following:

\* There are certain areas in which foreign universities need to step in.

\* There was criticism in the press that granting of acres of land to foreign stake holders to set up institutions, destroys the culture and heritage of some regions of the country. People have begun to perceive the entry of foreign universities as one having a business motive.

\* The percentage of success in Medical Colleges is almost one hundred percent in almost all colleges. This was not so earlier and the whole evaluation system in our country is now farcical.

\* True, there is the possibility of new foreign Universities to lure away the best faculty we currently have and even the best students are likely to seek admission in these universities.

\* Let us not forget that this bill does have certain provisions for regulating the foreign institutions. The insistence on agencies with a good track record of at least 20 years will only be permitted to set up a foreign university. The directive to reinvest the profit earned by such universities in their own off campus funds should be appreciated.

\* Our students do not have credibility about our own institutions hence they go abroad.

\* The presence of foreign universities will not affect our educational system drastically.

\* The welfare state ideal is absent in most of the reforms we have introduced in our country. Had it been so it would have been the responsibility of the state to provide education to every child. Are we legitimizing a new calibre institution which will not carry any credibility either in India and abroad?

\* Legislations in an egalitarian system should actually focus on accessibility of education. Higher education should only be given to those who have proved their ability for higher education. It is worth remembering the directions in Educational Management: the right student entering the right institution at the right time and getting the right quality of education. Legislations cannot be 100% full proof and there will be gaps ... what are yesterday's solutions may become tomorrow's problems- So legislations have to take place and only through legislations can will of the society find expression in controlling Higher Education. We have to see that the maximum benefit accrues to the maximum number ... that should be the approach. Let us also remember that we have for years been debating how exactly we can balance the individual aims with the aims of society. If legislations are properly controlled and properly operated and if there is the political will to operate them, we can look forward to a new educational

culture where Indian education can rise to the levels expected by the international community

\* There are also instance of many foreign universities failing to be successful in operating their off campus programmes. The failure of the Michigan State University in the gulf is a case in point.

It appeared that the entire audience was loaded with sufficient ammunition to strip down or even punch holes in the bills that came up for discussion in the forenoon. So lunch break was also an chance for many not to socialize but to present additional critique of the bills discussed in the morning.

**The fifth session** focussed on The National Accreditation Regulatory Authority for Higher Educational Institutions Bill, 2010 and The Educational Tribunals Bill, 2010.

**Mr. Venkatesh B. Athreya** of Bharatidasan University presented a scathing criticism of the first. The following is an extract from the hand out supplied:

“ It is clear, both on a perusal of the NAAHEI Bill draft, and on a perusal of the recommendations of the Planning Commission Subcommittee on Accreditation, that the Bill needs to be rejected lock, stock and barrel. The attempt to impose exclusively the needs of private profitability on academic institutions in the name of ‘employability’ and ‘global’ standards as the key drivers of accreditation processes is violative of all notions of academic autonomy and creativity. It is also fundamentally undemocratic..... The idea of periodic self- and even external-assessment of an academic institution is eminently worthy of acceptance, the process cannot be guided by the needs of globalization as seen by profit-driven corporate entities...”

In short, Mr. Venkatesh rejected the whole idea of mandatory accreditation. One significant observation made during the question answer session was that the UNESCO is actually working on a Common Accreditation criteria.

The second speaker **Prof. N.K Jayakumar**, Vice Chancellor of the National University of Advanced Legal Studies, Kochi, dealt in detail with the Educational Tribunals Bill, 2010.

With his legal background, the speaker began by admitting that some problems indeed have been aggravated through the intervention of the judiciary and that the adjudicatory mechanism does not instill any sense of confidence.

He also pointed out that tribunals have certain advantages over courts because it is less expensive and there are expert members in the tribunals unlike in courts. His presentation was not a detailed analysis of the provision of the Bill but a few observations to show that the Bill may not achieve anything substantial. It ended with a grim note that the cases may drag on for indefinite periods rendering any remedial measures infructuous in the end and the powerful lobby of educational entrepreneurs will always be the winners.

There was not much discussion and the delegates took a short tea break

**The sixth session** had two speakers . The first was **Dr. B.Ekbal**, former Vice Chancellor of the University of Kerala who dealt with the challenges in the globalized world related to Science and technology.

The speaker refereed to the General Agreement on Trade in Services, issues related to Intellectual Property Rights and Information technology.

The talk concluded by making two sound observations:

1. We require “Internationalization: a process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the Higher Educational institutions  
- Knight and de wit: 1999 International Higher Education
2. We also require “partnership based on common interest, mutual respect and credibility” – World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century UNESCO, 1998.

The next speaker was **Dr. A Jayakrishnan**, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Kerala. The Protection and Utilization of Public Funded Intellectual Property Bill, 2008 was the focus of this presentation. For over six hours the delegates had a serious dose of diatribe aimed at blasting the legislations. So when it came to Dr. Jayakrishnan’s turn many participants had a deflated look. But the speaker appeared different. He had the gift of the gab, was comfortable in his playground where he is the Boss (the venue was the Senate Chamber of the University of Kerala), had personally felt the strangulation effect of the Bill as he himself has twelve patents to his credit.

So he dexterously regaled the audience through his light-hearted critique of the Bill from a gentleman-scholar’s perspective, highlighting the trials and tribulations normally experienced by the head of a research department and the Vice Chancellor of such an University. Clause by Clause, the Bill was stripped apart for being anti-scientist and anti-research and especially for being heavily controlled by the government. For almost an hour one had the feel that Dr. Jayakrishnan was actually a living embodiment of what the Mystic-cum-Sage, Osho once said: “...Laughter is part of the highest consciousness achieved by man... only the sick mind is serious.. the youthful, the young, laugh, dance, sing, giggle...Laughter is the most sacred phenomenon on the earth-because it is the highest peak of consciousness...”

The last and **final session** had **Dr. K.M.Panikkar**, the Vice Chairman of the Higher Education Council of Kerala offering the concluding remarks

Given below are a few observations made by the Vice Chairman:

\* The discussions the two days have shown that none of us are very sure about the directions in which we should move. Alternatives have been suggested. We have realized that a new face of Capitalism is developing globally.

\* We have noted the attempts at centralization in all the bills and the need for respecting federal principles. We have found the move towards democratizations with anti-democratic tendency as in the nomination of the Collegium. It is foolish to believe that when foreign universities and teachers come our teachers too will compete...instead our educational institutions will become 'educational slums'.

\* He insisted that we ought to remember that, our educational institutions are the first important venue for socialization and for establishing and nurturing an individual and national identity. When this is so, how can we expect someone else to dictate how our educational system should function. It will have serious implication for the sovereignty of the country. We may have attained Independence from British rule, but we have not decolonized intellectually. A typical case in point is the highly literate class in Kerala. How many of the elite class in Kerala can read Malayalam literature? We tend to forget that our sense of identity is related to our culture.

\* It was disheartening to note that no mention in the bills is made about undergraduate education. We even have created a mind-set where Professors of universities consider it infradig to teach undergraduates! It may be good to create institutions of excellence, but laying a solid foundation is even more important.

This year too from the best professional institute in India, the All India Institute of Medical Science, 62% doctors have left for foreign countries after completion of their course.

We also have an unfortunate situation where there is a heavy rush for engineering and medical courses and for the Arts and humanities stream those with poor academic ability seek admission.

The remarks ended with the speaker referring to the new scholarship scheme which the Higher Education council has introduced for children from a low socio-economic background. He requested the audience to give due publicity through the brochure circulated to the delegates. The curtains fell on the seminar a few minutes past six o' clock in the evening.