

Address By Smt. D. Purandeswari (MoS-Hzrd) at The Valedictory Session Of The Southern Regional Conference Covering The States Of A.P, T.N, Karnataka, Kerala And Pondicherry Held On 19-9-07 At Hyderabad.

Mr. Chairman, U.G.C and the Vice-Chancellors of the various universities in the Southern Region and other distinguished guests and friends.

It gives me great delight to address the valedictory address of the Southern Regional Conference organized by the U.G.C in order to discuss the problems relating to higher education with special reference to reforms in this sector.

While higher education in India has achieved remarkable progress in regard to increasing number of institutions, faculty, teaching-learning infrastructure, and enrolment, there are yet a number of challenges that need to be addressed urgently. The foremost priority, to my mind is the problem of enhancing access to higher education. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has to be raised to a minimum threshold level of about 20 percent for sustained economic development. The target of 20 percent shall require us to substantially increase the intake capacity. So the 11th plan has set the target of 15 percent and this appears reasonable. As we do so, we have to also ensure that the higher education is made equitable and inclusive, meaning thereby that the regional and social imbalances prevailing in the higher education system will have to be tackled. No less critical is the issue of relevance and quality of higher education. Quality and excellence in higher

education has been a matter of concern and we have to take necessary steps towards promotion of excellence in teaching-learning processes and outcomes in the forms of research, publications and creation of intellectual capital. These call for improvement in the higher education system, particularly focused on the implementation and operationalisation of a host of measures that have been recommended since the Radhakrishnan Commission of 1948. This is crucial in order to make our higher education system responsive to the needs and challenges of the knowledge economy. As of now, while the 11th plan proposals for higher education are at advanced stages of finalization, it is high time that we undertake thorough stock taking and review of the higher education scenario in the country.

Higher education in India has expanded manifold during the past six decades. Since the advent of independence in 1947 the number of universities in the country has increased from 20 in 1947 to 378 whereas the number of colleges, which were no more than 1500 at the eve of independence, has gone up to 18064. No less significant has been the increase in the number of teaching staff, which has gone up from a meagre 15,000 to nearly 4.80 Lakhs during the same period. The number of students enrolled in higher education too has gone up from 1 Lakh in 1950 to over 112 lakhs in 2005. Obviously, the institutional capacity of higher education has increased by several folds. Increase in educational institutional capacity has improved access to higher education and enrolment ratio increased from less than 1 % in 1950 to about 10% in 2007.

Notwithstanding this progress, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in relative terms is still no more than 10%, which compares poorly with 60% in USA and Canada, and over 40% in several developed European countries and more than 20% in many developing countries. International experience shows that no country could become an economically advanced country, if GER in higher education is less than 20% which on all accounts seems to be the threshold level of higher education to contribute to rapid and sustainable economic progress.

However mere access to higher education is not enough for the purpose. Making quality education accessible is as important as the access to higher education. We must also ensure that the higher education system is able and made capable of providing quality education and achieve excellence in the arena of creation and dissemination of knowledge. Our higher education system is characterized by varying degree of inter-institutional differences in quality and excellence. I understand that as per the rating of universities and colleges by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) a dominant majority of the higher educational institutions can at best described as average or below average. This is an extremely depressing situation to say the least.

It is really disappointing that the quality of college and university education in India has not kept pace with its quantitative growth. This is all too evident at the beginning of each academic year, when students and their parents have an agonizing time trying to get admission in good colleges,

whose number is too small to cater to the growing demand. With a background of about more than 150 years of Modern Education in English medium, this languishing trend of quality education in the country is beyond one's comprehension. One needs to ask why it is so despite India having a long tradition of English-based higher education in over 350 Universities and institutes at comparatively cost-effective prices. If our IITs and IIMs today have a global brand value, why shouldn't we groom many universities and colleges across the country to acquire similar national and international acclaim? However, to do this, we need to carefully understand the reasons for the success of the IITs and IIMs and ensure that the lessons drawn there from are also followed in the field of higher general education. We must do some self-introspection and some honest heart-searching to find why we are unable to improve the brand image of our universities.

The spread of higher education was achieved through active state support whereby public funding was considered necessary in order to provide equitable opportunities of higher education to all. It has, however, been a proclaimed policy of the country to also encourage private investment in higher education so long as they are driven by charitable and non-profit motives. Although the Government has considerably increased spending on higher education, it is obvious that the need far outstrips the provision. Hence, we need to adopt innovative and flexible methods of leveraging the financial, managerial and teaching resources in the private sector.

The phenomenon of privatization has led to the emergence of market economy. In the field of education too, there have emerged various compulsions in the public provision of education, which have given rise to the growth of private educational institutions in the last two decades. It is however imperative that a regulatory frame work is put in place so that there is no commercialization of education and also there is effective prevention of racketeering and exploitation in this regard. Subject to this, we have no inhibition to allow private players to function in the country with a reasonable degree of autonomy and freedom for providing quality education.

We do need draw up proper regulatory guidelines for the private sector, to ensure the quality of higher education. It is, therefore, important that we develop effective regulatory framework for the private universities, particularly in terms of their admission, fees, teaching-learning process and governance

I hope that these issues have been adequately deliberated upon and discussed by the participants of the South Regional Conferences so that their views and recommendations could be considered while framing the necessary policy prescription in this regard. With these words I thank the U.G.C for organizing such meaningful discussions on the need and feasibility for reforms in the higher education sector.

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