AUTONOMY OR ACCOUNTABILITY- A CASE STUDY FROM UNIVERSITY OF DELHI, INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Autonomy is crucial for the growth and development of higher education. The university governance has been for long guided by rigid bureaucratic framework of policies, rules & regulations. Bureaucratic regime under state control has led to various pulls and pressures from external environment. Nonetheless, higher education emerged as a vehicle of change and has been able to carve a special place for itself. Now with the changing conceptions of how a university must run from a typical educational to bureaucratic to new public management arena, the focus is on accessibility, efficiency and accountability. After 1990s, due to neo-liberal globalization which required the withdrawal of the state and leaving the market open for private capitalists motivated by profits, the conception of accountability in higher education began to be directed towards academic capitalism. Academic capitalism means that in order to get funds the universities have to be responsive to markets and the needs of the economy. As a result there is a stress on the managerial notion of accountability that emphasizes on output and answerability. This has led to radical changes in the role of the stakeholders and the structure of universities. It is in this context, the paper examines the recent controversy surrounding the semesterisation of undergraduate education in one of India's premier universities, namely, the Universityof Delhi (DU).

Delhi University is around 89 years old with around 3 Lac students and 80 affiliated colleges which work as autonomous institutions and around 8000 teachers (Manglik, Mukul. 2011). The implementation of the semester system at the undergraduate level or to say the shift from annual to semester mode has been surrounded by a lot of controversies. The issue of implementation of semesterisation in Delhi University began in 2008 and by July, 2011 it has been fully implemented in almost all undergraduate courses of University of Delhi. However, the implementation of semester system has raised several fundamental questions as to why do we need to shift to semester system from annual system? Why has a thorough critique of the annual system not publicly circulated for discussion, before proposing an alternative? Why such an urgency to implement the so called academic 'reforms'? Should such a critical process not constitute the first step in any reform? These fundamental questions were never publicly addressed, debated, deliberated or discussed till date. It is these that the paper will discuss and address.

The teachers are the ones who are actually going to implement any kind of'academic reform' like the semester system. But what is most disturbing is that there been a repeated refusal to engage with the teaching community regarding the semester system – the very community that is expected to actually implement the 'reforms'? If so, why this urgency? It shows a sense of urgency from the administrator's part that emergency powers were evoked by the Vice-Chancellor to implement the semester system. Doesn't this urgency have to do with the executive or legislative measures being brought about by the government? How does this make the public universities forego their autonomy by forcing them to effect changes as per the needs of the market forces? The paper also critically looks at the intervention of the judiciary i.e., the High Court through a PIL and a writ petition and a special Leave Petition in the Supreme Court [1]which has led to resistance among the teaching community and acceptance of semester system. In this process the teachers' voices and concerns were not given their due consideration whether academic or pedagogically.

The desirability and feasibility of the semester system at the undergraduate level were not debated in the university; the Vice- Chancellor did not allow any structured debate in the Academic Council (AC). He merely announced outside the AC on 5 June, 2009 that the semester system would be introduced at the undergraduate level with effect 2010-11session. The Vice - Chancellor amended/added in the existing ordinances regarding the last date of admission and examination (OrdinanceVII and VIII) on semester system, 2010 under his emergency powers[2.] This is for the first time in the 89 years history of University of Delhi that any Vice - Chancellor has sought to amend an Ordinance under his emergency powers. Subsequently, Delhi University Teachers Association (DUTA) organized rallies, dharna's, strikes, symposiums etc. so that the Vice - Chancellor would come to the negotiating table but he instead went to the court. When on the instruction of the Hon'ble High Court of Delhi, he met the DUTA office bearers, he insisted on discussion only on the implementation part of the semester system and not to look at the issues raised by the DUTA. The DUTA filed a writ petition in the Hon'bleHigh Court of Delhi and Special Leave Petition in the Supreme Court to quash the order for the introduction of the semester system and another PIL was also filed, but in the final order[4] the court upheld the semester system and it has been introduced in all the courses at the undergraduate level from the academic year

2011-12. The teachers had no choice but to accept the semester system. It is important to note that in recent times the judiciary has been coming to the assistance of various governments and institutions so as to curtail the autonomy and academic freedom of the teaching community so as to get all the decisions accepted. The haste shown by the Vice - Chancellor and without proper consultationwith all the stakeholders has led to a feeling of mistrust and resentment between the teachers and the administration and it is a more a top – down approach, where teachers concerns and voices have been silenced by whichever and whatever means and methods.

After the court order the semester system was introduced in all the courses at the undergraduate level from this academic year 2011-12, but the syllabus were not ready for quite a few courses, the VC then asked the Deans and Heads of various departments to get the syllabus ready as quickly as possible. So in many instances the syllabus were either bifurcated, compressed, or to merely drop some papers which otherwise requires a lot of time and effort was done in such a haste. As a result the syllabus is ready for the first semester while some are still under the process and the syllabus which were covered in a year are being done in 4-5 months but the references and reading material is not updated and not available to all the students in all the colleges. Does this all emanate from the UGC proposal to make all the universities switch to the semester system during the XI plan? The Vice - Chancellor has an ambitious plan but no model/blue print as to how it is going to be implemented in such a large public university. The Vice- Chancellor is aiming to achieve and find a global ranking for the University of Delhi that move is appreciable but at what cost. Without consulting the teachers DU has also joined the race for global ranking, what benefit we are going to achieve onlytime will tell. Many universities have had semester system since its inception, so there is nothing new in semester system in India, but many universities have been able to resist the move to follow global standards and rankings. DU has been let down on this front by the Vice- Chancellor and the DU administration.

Whenever university standards are talked about, the basis for comparison is taken to be the annual THE-QS World University Ranking[3],every year since 2004; these tables have appeared under some variation of the headline 'US Universities Dominate World Rankings.' And every year the picture has been more or less the same: on an average, US universities have occupied 13 of the top 20 positions, while British universities have occupied four. US universities outnumber their UK rivals further down the league table too, and no other country remotely challenges America's effortless supremacy.It isn't difficult to see how these tables have helped push government policy towards its current infatuation with markets. All but one of the 13 American colleges following the neoliberal ways of thinking are unlikely to see this as a coincidence. In India, also the government is also pushing the policy and wants higher education to be responsive to the needs of the market.

The Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities and Times QS World University Rankings attract media attention and DU has not been able to excel at any place in these global standards and that is why the recently implemented academic reforms are so framed so that we can achieve global ranking soon. Recently, within Indian Universities and with the switchover from annual to semester, DU has achieved the first position on the AC Nielsen Ranking 2011; this clearly reflects where we all are moving.

In this era of neo liberal reforms, the fee inflation is a major contributor to the increased cost of higher education in America and UK which stems from the pervasive assumption that students are "customers", and that the customer is always right and whatever he or she demands must be purchased. In this phase of global changes it seems that slowly and gradually India is also heading towards these kinds of reforms and somewhere it seems that government policies are also pushing us towards 'opening up' the higher education to world universities. The basic thrust on which education stands to think critically, rationally and open up the young minds is being destroyed and that knowledge should be available in packages and can be used as a commodity is gaining ground the world over.

Will the University of Delhi cope up and able to perform and achieve excellence in such a scenario? DU is such a large affiliating university whose academic resources and infrastructure facilities have not been able to keep pace with them in recent times. The OBC expansion and the semester system have put severe pressure on the college infrastructure and resources. It is not to suggest that there are no problems with the annual system but to destroy a working system to end in complete chaos is also not the way forward.

The University has listed some of the advantages of the semester system[4] which are as follows:

- Continuous learning and assessment and hence a better paced understanding of the subject.
- Interdisciplinary and knowledge integration across disciplines.
- An accumulation of credits and movement of students across universities in India and abroad.
- In harmony with changes at the post graduate level and courses.
- In conformity with global practices and standards.

But there are certain problems which need to be addressed-

The global standard being referred to, demand very different working conditions, not a minimum of 18

periods of teaching (including lectures, tutorials and interactive periods). The student teacher ratio is a major concern for all teachers where the student class size varies from around 40-60 students in the classrooms. Now, there is no time to create a base for students who come from different learning backgrounds, socio economic milieu and different needs like visually challenged, hearing impaired, autistic etc. There is no scope for leisure and giving some aspects more in-depth or intensive coverage now it is more at the superficial level.

The interdisciplinary aspects of various subjects is being emphasized but let it be clarified that has nothing to do with annual or semester system it has more to do with the content of the course being taught.

The syllabus needs to be restructured so as to be able to be taught in the semester mode, this is a lengthy exercise which requires time, debate and discussion. But the courses have at most times being divided, compressed, merged or shortened or certain papers have been dropped. The science courses were made without even consulting the teachers from the colleges. The courses which have been developed at such a short notice and in such a haste are oblivious of the ground realities. The reading list and references are to be developed also and made available to the students which is a daunting task in itself.

There is no scope for any co- curricular activities, annual day, sports day, festivals, various dance, drama societies etc. for which University of Delhi is famous and a sought after destination has completely been ignored. There is hardly any time left to devote for co - curricular activities in the present system.The credit system would allow movement of students across universities in India and abroad. Is there any data available with the university as to what kind of course do students want to enroll and to which universities? What is the number of students who wish to come to study in DU and which college, which course? Have the Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) being signed with various universities in India and abroad? What is the procedure and how long will it take to get the permission and the financial cost involved?

With respect to the evaluation, in the semester system the external exam is going to be held for 75% and for the internal assessment[5] in the semester system i.e. 25%, the students will be given marks for -

- Attendance - lectures and Tutorials and Interactive Periods - 5%
- Written Assignments/Tutorials/Project Reports/Seminars - 10%
- Class Test(s)/Quiz(s) -10%

Isn't it asking too much from the students with respect to internal assessment? But the external examination is going to be held twice in a year in the semester system for so many students. The examination branch has not been able to declare the results on time in the annual mode and now with the exams being held twice for such a large number of students let us see what happens will the university be able to deliver, as the real scenario will emerge only after 3 years, when all the I, II, III years will be in the semester mode. For the semester system there will be no supplementary exams, and the VI semester student will have to wait for a year to give the reappear exams and the students will not be able to apply to any post graduate coursesis too harsh on the students[6].

In the University of Delhi a top down approach is followed where there is a disconnectand hierarchy between the DU administration, university departments and colleges. Where teachers' concerns and issues are not debated or discussed and everything is imposed –the curriculum, courses, syllabus, reading list etc. or the scheme of examinations - external or internal. Within the process of achieving the semester system the teachers' autonomy and academic freedom are getting diluted. The semester system is being seen as a panacea of all ills by the administration. The DU administration is out of sync with the ground realities in the colleges and how it is affecting students and putting undue pressure and raising their anxiety levels. The democratic 'space' and 'rights' to protest, criticize, agitate, express etc. are being taken over by authoritarianism.The politics of 'exclusion'is being played to succumb to political pressure. The need to excel and achieve global ranking has forced the DU administration to take such steps which may not prove to be beneficial in the long run.

Conclusion-

In the end, whatever has happened at the DU is a reflection of thetimes we live in. Are we becoming a more self centered and intolerant society? Is debate, discussion seeing different viewpoints, perspectives not what universities are meant for? Or do we want to produce 'robots' who will do what they have been equipped with or to say what is imposed from above. Autonomy is the foundation on which any university functions but if we want greater accountability from the teachers it is important that all stakeholders be involved in the process of decision making also as for any good practice to survive all stakeholders should be as equal partners rather than imposing any decision on them otherwise in the process it is the ethos and culture of our university which is getting eroded and becoming more autocratic and less and less democratic. In the end, it is the *process* which is important rather than the product, which University of Delhi has not been able to live up to.

Notes:

1. The latest court order are available on DUWebsite www.du.ac.in
2. The latest court orders are available on DUWebsite www.du.ac.inunder semesterisation at undergraduate courses, accessed on 20.10.11.

3. The rankings can be accessed at www. topuniversities.rankings/university-ranking where all rankings are given.
4. The **letter** by Deepak Pental to all students and Faculty dated May 12, 2009 and earlier letter dated October 16,2008 'Introduction of semester system at undergraduate courses', accessed on 20.10.11 from DUWebsite www.du.ac.in.
5. Thenotification is available on DUWebsite www.du.ac.in see under Guidelines and Notification 'Internal Assessment under semester system at undergraduate courses', accessed on 20.10.11 from DUWebsite www.du.ac.in.
6. Thenotification is available on DUWebsite www.du.ac.in see under Guidelines and Notification dated Internal Assessment under semester system at undergraduate courses, accessed on 20.10.11.

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