

Identifying the Institutes of Eminence

In one of the most influential books for historians of Science- *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn proposed that a paradigm is that fact which has gained worldwide acceptance after having considered all prevailing opinions, but not merely the current theory of the concerned fact. A forceful proposition by one section of learned people, however eloquently submitted, without resorting to debates on alternate views would not constitute emergence of paradigms. A case in point is the most recent decision of the Government to declare six Institutions as Institutes of Eminence, which has drawn large attention from educationists, scientists, historians and others. All the views in the print and social media point to acts of omission and commission on the part of the Government and therefore people like me are led to believe that a paradigm has already evolved- that is, the decision of the Government in identifying six Institutions as Institutes of Eminence, especially declaring the Jio University supported by the Reliance Foundation as one of them, is unjustified, grossly wrong, and possibly mala fide. Unfortunately, for those- who like to rationalise observations around them- mostly trained scientists, the alternate view is not available. This write-up is an attempt to present the alternate view so that the said paradigm is yet to evolve.

The panel members of the evaluation committee were perhaps presented with a task from the Government that keeping in view that India currently lacks any University in top 100 global rankings, that there is a need to identify Institutes which the Government can facilitate upgrading to achieve better global rankings. The debate on our fascination, almost bordering infatuation on the global rankings can be saved for later. If these identified Institutions were publicly funded Institutes/ Universities, they would receive generous financial support apart from relaxing procedures to operate their resources. If they were Privately funded Institutes/ Universities, they would have the flexibility of operations, but without the funding from public resources. Indeed, this appears to have been a bold move on the part of the Government, which all of us ought to have applauded, but we have sadly missed discussions around this. In any case, for several years, we have been bearing with the complaints on how public funding of the Universities/ Institutes has gradually diminished, and how badly that has impacted the quality of education in the country. The previous Government did indeed make an effort in similar direction by offering grants of 100 Crore Rs to a few selected Universities in the hope that these will upgrade their infrastructure to offer better education. The unstated wish was to see these Universities in top global rankings. Such a move by the previous Government was highly commendable but was not put to public scrutiny as much as the present debate.

The forceful point that has emerged in the past few days has been on the inclusion of Jio University, purportedly on par with other well-established Institutes. The fallacy of this argument by its proponents is that the yet to be established Jio University is not being considered on par with two IIT's, IISc, BITS-Pilani and Manipal University, but rather for its potential. Whereas, when the process of identification of Institutes of Eminence began, it

was very clear that there would be two categories- Greenfield and Brownfield. Such categorization did not appear to have raised objections in the current debate (sic), and in any case this ought to have been debated when the rules were set a few years ago. The genesis of this categorization is in the belief that to fix problems with the existing institutions, the best solutions are offered by creating new institutions in the hope that the newly formed institutions will not suffer from the drawbacks of the existing institutions. The existing institutions would have a chance to either redeem themselves or allowed to decay if they don't seize such chances. This view has dominated the evolution of Universities in India and has even led to establishments of Central Universities and IISER's etc. In any case, the country of size of India deserves to host many more institutions of higher learning. In the view of the Government, this categorization might therefore have been necessary given the state of all prominent Institutes and Universities in the country.

I am an alumnus of one such fine Institute which features in the three publicly funded Institutes, and I have been associated in different capacities with all other Institutes of Eminence in some capacity or the other, and therefore I am fully aware of the potential drawbacks of each of those Institutes. For example, the lack of breadth of disciplines, which an ideal University should possess, is clearly lacking in all of them. I do hope that with the tag of Institute of Eminence, such a correction would happen, but I have doubts if this will happen unless there is a strong intent to do so. Moreover, the manner in which current higher education and research system has evolved in India is by compartmentalizing different branches of learning as separate Institutes (IITs, IISc and CSIR are the prime examples). If we were to radically take steps in establishing an Institute of global eminence, clearly the probability of success would be higher in establishing new Institutes. Therefore, the Greenfield category as an exploration of establishing Institute of Eminence is a welcome move.

If the Government were to spend its resources judiciously while promoting objectives of establishing of Institutes of Eminence, and allow flexibility to achieve these objectives, indeed inclusion of Private parties would be a welcome move. The private parties, however, would need to convince very strongly that they have honest intentions of doing so, and not simply start yet another Private University in the country. The history of Private Universities in India and their move towards achieving global eminence is sadly against this fact. The proliferation of Private Universities in the last 30 years has indeed been disappointing as almost none of them has lived up to the expectation of offering high quality education. The former Prime Minister of India, who also was once the UGC Chairman, was on records stating that the state universities ought to earn their resources from non-Governmental sources reducing their dependence on state funding. This view approximately coincides with the time of the proliferation of Private Universities in India, which has sadly failed. On the contrary the onset of decay of the state Universities also coincides with this approximate time period. It will, however, be unfair to blame these two phenomena only on the views of the then UGC Chairman, or the then Government. We are therefore faced with the reality that with the exception of the two identified Private Institutes of Eminence and a couple of others, most Private Universities are unable to boast of quality faculty or quality education. Thus,

utmost care has to be observed in supporting any Private University for its potential to achieve global eminence.

Imagining to get into the shoes of the committee that shortlisted Institutes of Eminence, I would have liked to assess the genuineness of the applications from Private parties. The proposition of setting up a new Institute requires astronomical resources, willingness, but more importantly financial capability. These would have to be assessed critically. The final outcome of selecting the Jio University in the Greenfield category appears to have been reasonably rationalized. All the criticism around it by the intellectuals is quite unjustified, and at least the proponents of that view should have subjected themselves to a debate. More importantly, presenting only one side of the view to public, condemning the Government and the decision-making committee, is fully unjustified. Instead, this move should have been applauded by those who would like to see better quality education in the country in the coming years.

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