

Autonomy in Higher Education Institutions: From Colonial Period to 21st Century India

Shubhra Singha Chowdhury, Asheesh Srivastava

School of Education, Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari, Bihar
Inter-University Center for Teacher Education, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi
Corresponding author: shubhra.vbu@gmail.com
Available at <https://omniscientmjprjournal.com>

Abstract

Autonomy is the backbone of Higher Education Institutions. Autonomy means independence or self-rule. When an institution has the power to prepare its guidelines, curriculum, syllabus, methods, evaluation procedures, and certificates, it is considered autonomous. This autonomy is not a new concept; it started after independence and is still in demand as institutions evolve. Many committees and commissions have recommended autonomy over the years, but some challenges remain obstacles to its implementation. Higher education should take this issue seriously and practice it from the ground level. In this study, the researcher discusses the recommendations and challenges of various committees and commissions from the colonial period to the present.

Key Words: *Higher Education, Colonial Period, 21st Century*

Education is the key to a progressive nation, helping to develop society economically. Educational institutions create skilled youth who will take care of the future nation with their knowledge. However, these institutions have been witnessing the ups and downs of higher education for several years. Recently, higher education institutions in India have been facing several challenges. Like the political influences and bureaucratic control in higher education bring stress and strain to the work of stakeholders, along with that, lack of academic standards, inadequate financing, poor governance, and leadership have caused the failure of higher education institutions in India. (J N Kaul, 1988). Further, NEP 2020 noted several key challenges facing the higher education system in India, including the rigid separation of disciplines, limited autonomy for teachers and institutions, lack of institutional leadership, ineffective governance, and a flawed regulatory system. These are common problems in today's higher education institutions (HEIs). Therefore, the policy recommends redesigning HEIs and granting them greater academic and administrative autonomy (Development, 2020).

Higher education institutions in India form a third large system after China and the US (AISHE 2021-2022). Since independence, the number of colleges and institutions has been increasing. The higher education system has become increasingly complex, dealing with various activities, including courses of study, methods, modes of examination, and the duration of examinations. These institutions need autonomy to govern these activities themselves. For example, when a

person manages their life by their own choices, they are seen as responsible and capable of leading a happy and independent life. Similarly, in academic life, autonomy means setting their own goals, study, method, curriculum, exams, etc., so that institutions can achieve their goals without external help. Autonomy is essential in higher education institutions.

Autonomy is derived from the Greek words "auto," meaning self, and "norms," (Pramanik, 2023) meaning laws, so the meaning of autonomy is self-laws or self-governance. Essentially, a person is responsible for controlling their own life. This means that no one will have control over another, and all stakeholders will have the power to make decisions. It indicates the freedom of institutions to manage, and take responsibility by themselves. A person or group with full autonomy can perform better than those who do not have it. According to (Sarup, 1998), autonomy helps to increase creativity and productivity because our minds are free from control. Specifically, autonomy is related to responsibility. When someone gets the freedom to manage something, it automatically reflects their responsibility towards the work, and the result of their work will be better. It also refers to the decentralization of work. When it comes to institutional autonomy, it automatically relates to the responsibility of all academic activities, including governance and financial management of the institution.

1.1 INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Autonomy in higher education means academic freedom. According to UNESCO, academic autonomy is built on self-governance, providing stakeholders with academic freedom. The University Grants Commission grants autonomy to colleges so they can enjoy their freedom of work, govern their activities, and improve academic quality. The University Grants Commission's 2018 guidelines noted that excellence and quality education in undergraduate colleges would result from independence or freedom of work. Therefore, affiliated colleges should be separated from their parent universities. However, institutional autonomy indicates that the decision-making power of internal stakeholders (Sancheti, 2020). It has some dimension, Organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, and administrative autonomy. Stakeholders will get the power to involve and take decisions regarding all these factors.

1.2 NEED OF AUTONOMY

Higher education has been struggling for years to achieve autonomy. The reasons behind this push for autonomy include:

1. The UGC recommended increasing flexibility in higher education institutions in the Tenth Plan profile. As a result, higher education institutions have been changing their structures, curricula, methods, ICT, and CBCS systems. The UGC suggested providing sufficient funding to universities to enhance their flexibility (Pramanik, 2023)
2. Universities are financially controlled by external stakeholders.
3. Students have no choice in their learning.
4. Colleges have no direct role in social change and progress.
5. Universities have been unable to produce skilled manpower for the nation.

2. Methodology of the Study

This is a qualitative descriptive study and the author has collected the data from secondary sources like journals, books, policies, reports, and various committees. Data were analyzed through content analysis.

3. Discussion

3.1 UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY –A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Higher education has a long history, marked by many changes, ups, and downs. The journey towards the autonomy of higher education institutions began in the pre-Independence era.

Pre-Independence Era

In the pre-Independence era, the journey started during the Vedic period. During this time, Brahmins learned the Vedas and Dharmas, and the administration structure was autonomous. They could manage and direct the system independently, and students had the freedom to choose their teachers and institutions. Students enjoyed full autonomy in their work, including choosing their methods and assessment procedures. Teachers had the freedom to decide the admission procedures (Majhi, 2021). During this period, both teachers and students enjoyed the highest degree of autonomy and were responsible for their duties.

In the medieval period, many colleges were established in different places, but the responsibility for management and governance was vested in the hands of rulers. The state had no power to control the institutions. The contemporary rulers helped to build and maintain the colleges. These institutions were maintained by the kings of the country.

During the 19th century, the power of universities was shifted into the hands of the existing British Government. They had given priority to promote the effect of the English language all over the country. English education in Higher education began in 1817 at the Hindu College of Kolkata.

That was the first 'Europeanized' institution of Kolkata. Subsequently, they developed the contemporary Higher education institutions influenced by the London University Model, the first three universities in India were established in 1857: the University of Calcutta, the University of Bombay, and the University of Madras were governed by the London University Model. According to Narula Vaishali 2023, the structure of the university was so rigid and centralized.

However, the Sadler Commission recommended minimizing government control over institutions and making them more flexible. It also suggested granting institutions autonomy in recruitment, examination, and curriculum development (Calcutta Commission Report, 1917). The first campaign for an autonomous college was led by the principal of Presidency College, Kolkata, which was affiliated with Calcutta University, claiming the right to conduct their own examinations and curriculum.

Post-Independence Era

The direction of higher education has been changing since political independence. The pattern of higher education is transforming to meet the needs and demands of the youth. The first Education Commission (1949), headed by Dr. Radhakrishnan, emphasized the need for autonomy in affiliated institutions, likening them to machines. He mentioned that universities should have democracy and need government support in academic activities, but opposed government control over the institutions. In fact, the UP legislature enacted the Agra Amendment Act to revive institutional autonomy, which was successfully implemented.

The first instance of college autonomy was introduced by the Education Commission (1964-66). Teachers should not be ordered or forced; they should direct themselves independently, engage in discussions and debates, and address various national and international issues.

However, in 1962, the All India Federation of University and College Teachers' Associations expressed opposition to autonomy. They pointed out some drawbacks of autonomous colleges, including a lack of infrastructure and resources, which became burdensome for teachers. Teachers were anxious about maintenance.

According to the Education Commission (1964-66), all colleges should be granted autonomy to perform better. The UGC provided guidelines for autonomous colleges in 1974, detailing the structure required for a college to become autonomous. However, most colleges did not agree because they did not want to be overburdened with constructing syllabi and curricula, and did not want to take on additional responsibilities.

The National Policy of Education (1968) emphasized changing the affiliation system because the increase in affiliated colleges had created an unmanageable situation. In March 1979, CABE recommended that at least 5 percent of colleges should be autonomous by the end of 1979. The UGC guidelines recommended creating provisions for autonomous colleges. According to the National Education Policy, universities must have autonomy in admissions, recruitment, promotion of teachers, updating syllabi, etc. More deserving institutions should be provided with autonomy.

The National Policy of Education (1986) also suggested promoting autonomy. It noted that the structure of universities was rigid, and there was a need to promote flexibility and creative work. However, twenty colleges were established as autonomous institutions, having the opportunity to decide their own courses and curricula (CABE, 2005). However, these three universities managed 27 colleges and followed the same course structure pattern. These non-autonomous institutions faced many problems, such as a lack of teaching departments, faculty members, and residential facilities.

3.2 UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY (PRESENT PERSPECTIVE)

Autonomy is the backbone of higher education institutions. Various policies have been attempted to implement autonomy in colleges and universities over the past decades, but they have often failed. While many colleges have autonomy, several remain affiliated under universities, lacking the ability to govern themselves. After years of struggling to establish autonomous institutions, a new education policy, the National Education Policy 2020, has taken initiative to promote autonomy and self-governance.

The level of autonomy in higher education is still inadequate. Among over 45,000 existing colleges in India, only 995 are autonomous (The Times of India, 5 July 2024). Traditionally, colleges were governed under the supervision of parent universities, with no power to make decisions until 1978. Tamil Nadu developed an act to grant autonomy to its colleges, starting on June 8, 1978, when eight colleges under the University of Madras and four under Madurai Kamaraj University gained autonomy. By 1984, 21 colleges across 19 states in India had autonomy, including Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh (The Times of India, 5 July 2024).

In 2011, the number increased to 374 colleges in 19 states, and by 2013, it grew to 441 colleges in 21 states in India. Additionally, on March 31, 2017, the University Grants Commission approved several autonomous colleges in India.

| Sl No | Name of State | No of Universities | Total Autonomous College |
|-------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Andhra Pradesh | 11 | 83 |
| 2 | Assam | 1 | 02 |
| 3 | Chhattisgarh | 3 | 11 |
| 4 | Goa | 1 | 01 |
| 5 | Gujarat | 1 | 04 |
| 6 | Haryana | 1 | 01 |
| 7 | Himachal Pradesh | 1 | 05 |
| 8 | Jammu & Kashmir | 2 | 03 |
| 9 | Jharkhand | 2 | 05 |
| 10 | Karnataka | 11 | 70 |
| 11 | Kerala | 3 | 19 |
| 12 | Madhya Pradesh | 9 | 39 |
| 13 | Maharashtra | 9 | 42 |
| 14 | Manipur | 1 | 01 |
| 15 | Nagaland | 1 | 02 |
| 16 | Orissa | 7 | 41 |
| 17 | Pondicherry | 1 | 03 |
| 18 | Punjab | 4 | 08 |
| 19 | Rajasthan | 3 | 04 |
| 20 | Tamil Nadu | 12 | 176 |
| 21 | Telangana | 5 | 55 |
| 22 | Uttar Pradesh | 6 | 11 |
| 23 | Uttarakhand | 2 | 04 |
| 24 | West Bengal | 4 | 12 |

Source: Effectiveness of Autonomy in Higher Education Orissa (Deo, 2018)

This data shows us a picture of significant autonomy in India, but it is primarily concentrated in states like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. However, many states in our country

have a low number of autonomous colleges, such as Jharkhand, Manipur, Rajasthan, and Goa. These issues cannot be overlooked.

The University Grants Commission released a notice regarding university autonomy, notified under the regulations of 2018. UGC granted autonomy to 8 central universities, classified into two categories (Authority & Delhi, 2018). The list is as follows:

| NAME OF THE UNIVERSITY | CATEGORY |
|--|------------|
| Central University of Rajasthan | Category 1 |
| Central Sanskrit University | Category 1 |
| University of Delhi | Category 1 |
| Central University of South Bihar | Category 1 |
| University of Hyderabad | Category 2 |
| Maulana Azad National Urdu University | Category 2 |
| Central University of Punjab | Category 2 |
| Central University of Himachal Pradesh | Category 2 |

Source- (Authority & Delhi, 2018)

NEP 2020 recommended institutional autonomy, emphasizing "graded autonomy" encouraged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This promotes healthy competition between universities, believing that the best results come from competitive minds. NEP 2020 envisions transforming Higher Education Institutions into multidisciplinary institutions, categorizing them into Research Intensive Universities, Teaching Universities, and Autonomous Colleges. The policy aims to convert traditional single-stream HEIs into fully autonomous multidisciplinary institutions. Faculty will have autonomy to engage freely in curriculum and pedagogy construction. The CBCS system will be modified to enhance flexibility, along with revisions to the examination system. For non-autonomous institutions, a transparent system of graded accreditation will guide them towards autonomy. Colleges will be encouraged to achieve accreditation benchmarks to eventually become autonomous or constituent colleges of universities.

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS OF NEP-2020 REGARDING INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY-

They emphasized on "graded autonomy" which was encouraged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It is basically promoting a healthy competition between the universities, because it believes that the best result will come from the competitive mind of universities. NEP 2020 also envisaged

that Higher Education Institutions will be transformed as multi-disciplinary institutions. So that it is classified into different institutions like Research Intensive Universities, Teaching Universities, and Autonomous Colleges. Along with that, National Policy Education tried to transform the traditional single stream HEIs into a multi-disciplinary institution, and that will be fully autonomous institutions. Faculty should have the autonomy they freely engage in the construction process for curriculum and pedagogy. CBCS system will be modified to enrich the flexibility of the system. They will revise the examination system as well. And those who are in an autonomous institution, for them a transparent system of graded accreditation will help the institution to become an autonomous institution. To achieve the benchmark required for the level of accreditation, all colleges will be encouraged. By the time all the colleges had transformed into autonomous colleges or constituent colleges of a university.

To implement the Policy, the University Grants Commission released a revised regulation for autonomous colleges in 2023. There will be no need to pay for affiliation fees to their affiliated university. UGC will be the mentor for the fee structure, the governing board members of the university. UGC also prepared a regulation for Ph. D programme. New revision of UGC has simplified the new provision of autonomous colleges. To run a regular morning college, an autonomous college will collaborate with another autonomous college. These autonomous colleges are free to offer diploma courses, postgraduate, undergraduate, Ph.D. programmes. Autonomous colleges will maintain their records in the examination cell. The governing body of the autonomous college will be the Academic Council, BOS, the Finance Committee, and a non-statutory committee.

3.4 Impact of Autonomy on Key Stakeholders of the university-

Autonomous institutions in India perform better than non-autonomous institutions. Non-autonomous institutions do not cater to the needs of stakeholders. These institutions are governed by authoritative bodies or external stakeholders, with decision-making power centralized in upper authorities. Consequently, stakeholders in lower positions have no voice and cannot express their needs (Ganesan, 2000).

According to the CABE Committee report on Autonomy and Accountability in Higher Education, the governing boards of higher education institutions determine admissions, curriculum construction, and fee structures. However, the autonomy granted varies from university to university, indicating a need for more consistent autonomy across institutions (CABE, 2005).

To run a university effectively, many actors work diligently, including faculty, students, non-teaching staff, and administration.

Student

Students are the central stakeholders in the development process of higher education institutions. The impact of autonomy on students can enhance learning outcomes by strengthening critical thinking. They also have the freedom to choose subjects. Tagorian thoughts on learning state, *"Where the mind is without fear."* With this ideology, autonomy provides students with various opportunities and freedoms related to admissions, scholarships, examinations, and curriculum. Moreover, universities will consider student feedback (Park, 2019).

Faculty

Autonomy in higher education ensures freedom for stakeholders in the teaching-learning process. Faculty members have the freedom to design curricula and choose teaching methods (Jones, 2019). They also have the opportunity to lead their own work, which contributes to their job satisfaction. Additionally, faculty members can participate in university governance (Brown, 2021).

Some benefits of faculty autonomy include:

1. Teachers can innovate and apply the best teaching methods in the classroom (Williams, 2020).
2. Teachers can participate in the university's decision-making process (Park, 2019).
3. According to Kim (2020), autonomy fosters a cooperative environment and builds rapport between teachers and students.

Administration

Autonomy supports a self-governance system where all stakeholders can participate in the governance process. It also improves research quality. Financial autonomy provides independence in financial matters, contributing to economic growth. Furthermore, it promotes diversity and inclusivity.

3.5 CHALLENGES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The CABE Committee discussed issues of autonomy on November 30th and December 1st at the University of Madras, focusing on academic concerns. They highlighted that autonomy is not being properly utilized by universities as intended, but some universities do not allow complete autonomy because they are reluctant to handle the hassle of creating syllabi, curricula, and designing examinations.

Autonomy and fear of Privatization

The status of autonomy raises concerns about privatization. Affiliated universities receive funds from their affiliated colleges, but if these colleges become autonomous, they will no longer contribute to this financial pool. When colleges operate on a self-financed model, tuition fees will inevitably rise, creating economic disparities among students.

For example, an autonomous university like Calicut charges ₹1.2 lakh for a self-financing course, whereas a government-aided college charges only ₹33,090 (The Times of India, July 5, 2024).

In some cases, reputed colleges under Delhi University, such as St. Stephen's College and Hindu College, have protested against the University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines on autonomy. The guideline states that a single university cannot meet the needs of multiple colleges, so affiliated institutions should be independent to pursue their own activities. However, the Delhi University Teachers' Association opposed this move, fearing it as a preliminary step toward privatization. They also expressed concerns that colleges would be forced into self-financing models. Moreover, they questioned how colleges could be granted autonomy when they are already governed by the Delhi University Act (Indian Express, March 8, 2017).

In a recent report by *The Times of India* (August 21, 2024), teachers' and students' organizations at Punjab University protested against the push for eight colleges to become autonomous, fearing that it would lead to privatization.

However, some other points are as follows-

1. A teacher in Thrissur district complained to UGC that they have additional workload. They have to evaluate papers from their own college as well as from other non-autonomous colleges. (The Times of India, 5th July, 2024)
2. Most colleges in India are affiliated and do not take on administrative responsibilities due to excessive autonomy, they primarily focus on teaching and learning. Due to the perceived workload of autonomous colleges, they prefer to avoid additional responsibilities.
3. There is a lack of teacher training, adequate funds, and resources in universities. Therefore, managing colleges independently becomes stressful.

There are several issues regarding autonomy. While the government promotes autonomy to enhance academic freedom, students and teachers complain that universities, with increased autonomy, introduce self-financing courses and raise student fees. This situation becomes problematic for socially disadvantaged sections of society. Additionally, accountability is often

misused alongside autonomy, highlighting the importance of maintaining a balance between autonomy and accountability.

4. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES REGARDING AUTONOMY-

Proper Guideline

There should be a proper set of rules and guidelines in the regulatory system of higher education because autonomy depends on the accreditation of educational institutions, which in turn depends on the quality of education. Improved rules and guidelines will enhance institution accreditation.

Governance. Leadership and Management

According to NEP-2020, all stakeholders of the university should have the power of decision-making. Therefore, all stakeholders should be given the opportunity to express their opinions, raise complaints against unethical practices, and engage in debates. So university must emphasize on share or participatory governance and shared leadership strategies.

Transparency

Universities should prioritize transparency. They should avoid providing incorrect information and engaging in corruption. All information must be disclosed on their websites and updated regularly.

Participation

Genuine participation and willingness of stakeholders are crucial for the effective implementation of autonomous colleges. Without these factors, autonomy cannot function effectively. NEP-2020 has developed guidelines for Individual Development Plans where every stakeholder, including faculty, staff, and students, will create plans regarding academic activities and curriculum. This allows all participants to have autonomy in the academic decision-making process.

Autonomy of colleges or university can't come alone, cooperation of every stakeholders whether it is Faculties, students, political parties, governments are much needed. Autonomy is not a force in itself: it should only be applied after consultation with the stakeholders. National Education Policy 2020 emphasized to implement autonomy within 15 years but it is suggestion here that, Instead of hastily imposing something, it should be done in a manner that prevent the difficulties. We must need to concern that quality should not be compromised for the coast. Before the implementation of autonomy, the university must take proper concern for the welfare of students, teachers, and parents.

5. CONCLUSION

Autonomy, individuality, and freedom have always been essential for us. India fought for its autonomy to free itself from slavery. Autonomy shapes us into open-minded individuals. Autonomy in education is not new; in the past, glorious higher education institutions like Nalanda, Taila, and Vallabhi provided the best quality education in India. Many autonomous colleges existed during pre-independence India. However, their autonomy was reduced by Lord Curzon in the Indian Universities Act of 1904 (IJMR). Several committees and commissions were formed to recover the autonomy in higher education institutions. Now, the NEP 2020 and UGC are trying to reconstruct higher education institutions with the guarantee of flexibility, autonomy, and self-governance.

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