

NOTE

Land Grant University

B J writes :

National Knowledge Commission has suggested that the Union Government establish 50 new Land Grant Universities along the lines of those in the United States. The Government should allot large piece of land in excess of their academic needs so that they may raise resources by commercial use of the surplus land. The entirely laudable objective of the Commission is to make top-grade higher education accessible to the common man.

About 150 years ago the Federal Government in the US established a Land Grant University in each of the 50 states. At that time only a few private universities like Harvard and Yale were in existence in that country. These universities provided top-grade education to the elite. The Federal Government wanted to promote the spread of quality higher education but was short of funds, hence it made available large tracts of land. The running expenditures were mostly provided by the State Governments. The Federal Government provided running grants for specific purposes such as extension but the State Government had to make available a matching grant to avail of this. The explicit objective of these Universities was to provide practically useful education, not only theo-logy and philosophy as was the tradition in Europe at the time. Secondly, they were to provide education to the common man. These Universities even today have provision of a fee waiver for 'sons of soil' students of their State. These Universities made a decisive contribution to the expansion of higher education, particularly in agriculture, engineering and applied sciences and had a major role in the emergence of the United States as a world economic powerhouse in the twentieth century.

Taking lead from this happy American experience, the National Knowledge Commission has suggested the establishment of 50 Land Grant Universities in India. But there is a fundamental difference in the conditions of the US in the nineteenth century and present day India. Only a few elite Universities were in existence in the US then. The Government had no role in higher education. There existed a case for government intervention to break this stranglehold of the elite. But Indian situation is qualitatively different. There exist no private universities of importance. The government is already running 150-odd universities. Obviously these universities have failed to take education to the common man, hence the Commission has suggested establishment of new universities to fulfil that mandate. But to establish new Govt. Universities to manage the stiffness of existing Govt. Universities is like putting a sword in the right hand to manage the sluggishness of the left hand. The need was to set the existing university structure first, lest the new system followed the same disgraceful route. The American Land Grant Universities are in a similar sad situation today as Indian Govt. Universities. In a paper read at Michigan State University in 1996, James T Bonnen says: "Today, I find Land Grant leadership is in trouble. Land Grant faculty are confused. Our island empire, our isolated self-sufficiency, has collapsed. We only infrequently stand together and our critics are accumulating. As the federal government has withdrawn from public responsibility, the leadership has devolved to the States. In response, legislatures have looked to 'their university' for help only to be disillusioned. While their expectations were often unrealistic the universities were unresponsive." The situation of Indian Universities is strikingly similar. Vice Chancellors are appointed according to their political connections. Faculty take their salaries for granted. There is no compulsion to do research. Often

they do not teach either. The Universities contribute little to the development of their state except churning out sub-standard graduates that are employable only by the government. Universities are unresponsive to this crisis or to the needs of the people. The Knowledge Commission points out that salary consumes 75% of their budgets and telephone and other essential administrative expenses another 15%, leaving a paltry 10% for research and other growth activities. The long term outcome of the Land Grant Universities in the US as well as Indian universities is equally dismal. The establishment of a new series of Land Grant Universities in India will hardly remedy the problem.

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