

Is assessment and accreditation a farce?

Although there is a tall claim that we are the 'superpower in the making', in reality there is only an 'explosion of numbers' and very little is happening in terms of science, technology and academic quality in this country. According to the Human Development Report 2002, 'India could claim only one patent per million residents in 1998' and similarly the CSIR report reveals, 'In the entire history of CSIR of India, only three out of over 20,000 papers published by the scientists have been cited more than 100 times against a world average of one in every 250.' It is a matter of regret that the papers with 'thousand citation counts' are either non-existent or rare with the researchers from the National Research Institutes with fabulous funding and equivalently, the papers with 'hundred citation counts' are extremely rare with the researchers of ill-funded state Universities with heavy teaching load.

It is a matter of pride that the first Parliament and the Legislatures of Independent India had housed a galaxy of politicians of very high quality and considerable vision. It is unfortunate that there is deplorable decline both in their quality as well as vision over a period of fifty years.

There is also an equal decline in the 'fourth estate'. Clearly, there is a deplorable decline in all spheres of human activity including higher education. Therefore, 'the assessment and accreditation which has been recognized as the quality-ensuring mechanisms all over the world' has become necessary and relevant to all spheres of human activities.

The UGC has established the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) on the recommendation of the Programme of Action Document that provided guidelines for the implementation of the National Policy on Education to assess quality and to link quality with funding. If UGC has genuine concern for quality, instead of confining itself to higher education, it must do the needful to persuade and provide the modalities as well. It can be a role model to ensure quality, to other spheres of human activity including human rights, dignity, freedom, justice, etc. which are universal and more important than higher education.

Further, since the 'citation counts' being transparent and objective has emerged as the acid test of quality all over the world, it must be made mandatory by the UGC for assessment and accreditation. To

illustrate, a respected European journal in physics having an impact factor as high as 16.2 (while the CSIR published best journal of physics of India has impact factor as low as less than 0.3) had conducted a study after 50 years of its existence and found that out of all the papers published in the journal, only 201 papers have citation counts more than 100. Clearly 'citation counts' can only reveal quality. The UGC can make this as the starting point. If the UGC is honest about quality, it must conduct a study through NAAC and publish the results of the study (as done by the European journal). Without demonstrating a genuine concern for quality, any attempt on the part of the UGC to assess quality through NAAC will encourage further bureaucratization, will stifle academics, will also enlarge the gap of haves and havenots and reduce the entire process to a farce and sheer paper work.

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Sir Arthur Cotton

To elaborate on the Editor's Note on Sir Arthur Cotton¹, Cotton went further than just suggest the linking of rivers for navigation and irrigation purposes. He supervised the construction of what is now known as the Cotton barrage across the river Godavari, at Dhavaleswaram (5 km from Rajahmundry) in a record time of six years (1846–52). This was the beginning of a canal system that converted a barren wilderness into the rice bowl of India. Cotton was a mere executive engineer and he was not liked by his administrative superiors. An impeachment proceeding was even initiated against

him for carrying out the construction without prior permission. Perhaps, if he had not been thwarted throughout his career, he might well have accomplished his dream of linking the Godavari and Krishna rivers.

An interesting sideline about the barrage is that Cotton gave it a life of 100 years. However, no one cared to maintain it properly and after surviving for 130 years, it started giving way. The repairs were taken up quickly and it continues to be the lifeline of coastal Andhra Pradesh to this day. Residents of Hyderabad/Secunderabad know that Cotton is

the only foreigner whose statue may be seen in the long line of statues along the Tank Bund which is in the heart of the twin cities.

1. Radhakrishna, B. P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **84**, 1390–1394.

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