

Functioning of Unitary University: A Perspective of India

Prahallad Majhi^{1*} and Ashok Dansana²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha, India

*Corresponding author: prahalladmajhi8457@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Unitary universities in India have relatively more freedom in their functioning as compare to affiliated universities. Besides a general perspective of unitary universities in India, the main focus of this paper is on the nature of the functioning of Ravenshaw University particularly in the context of its autonomy and accountability. This study found that Ravenshaw University has evolved as the first higher education institution in the State of Odisha to fulfill the needs and inspirations of its people mostly located in Eastern India. So far as academic autonomy and accountability are concerned, as a unitary university, it has demonstrated stability with persistent efforts in the given array of constraints posed there in taking the responsibility of teaching, research and extension activities and has earned credits among people. In the context of administrative and financial autonomy, the University is restricted and found to be grappling in the matter of staffing and allocating funds for the creation of various teaching-learning support systems, welfare services including providing financial support to needy and meritorious students. However, irrespective of the positions and nature of works carried by the university functionaries and university as a whole it claims to be held accountable to all stakeholders and takes an important place in Eastern India with restricted freedom and limited supports in hand.

Keywords: Autonomy, Accountability, Higher Education, Ravenshaw University

The system of the unitary university in India is an ideal condition for nurturing quality and excellence both in teaching and research. The unitary universities offer undergraduate, postgraduate and research programme with a special focus on research and innovation and in most situations, they are confined to a single campus. Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Mysore University are notable examples of unitary university in India. Since the unitary universities do not have the extra burden of managing the affiliated colleges these universities get more scope of exercising autonomous power and accountability. Studies suggest that the functioning of unitary universities is not so simple as they appear rather, they often posed by series of challenges and constraints like the financial deficit, lack of administrative transparency and introduction of

self-financing courses leading to the exclusion of economically and socially disadvantaged section of society, quantitative growth without complying with qualitative inputs to ensure equity, access and quality in higher education (Ghos, 2018). There are prevalent of unexpected circumstances mostly politically motivated groups in the functioning of university and corruption in the appointment of VCs, teaching and non-teaching faculty (Kumar, 2018). Prakas (2011) devaluated with the remarks that there is the erosion of the principles of autonomy in academic institutions and lack of accountability in the overall environment of higher

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education in India. It is reported that the university autonomy in the present context is not absolute as the universities function with the regulatory framework of states. Due to other reasons like the inability of universities to protect their autonomy, political interference, over assertive bureaucracy and lack of money power resulted in the loss of autonomy in higher education institutions. Pathak (2019) critically analyzed about the attacks on many universities in India and remarked that many finest universities of this county are dying and moving to become a private institution because of politically motivated appointed vice-chancellors, philosophically improvised managers, new technology of surveillance militaristic notion of discipline and punishment. The alternative voices of academics have been repressed by politically motivated power in the universities like JNU, Jadavpur University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Viswa-Bharati University, Aligarh Muslim University and the University of Hyderabad and many more universities. To understand the functioning of unitary universities in India from a greater depth a case of Ravenshaw University has been undertaken here.

Case Profile

Ravenshaw College prior to becoming university as an institution of higher learning is the oldest and largest in Eastern India. Ravenshaw University came into existence as a Unitary University on the 15th day of November 2006 from the status of autonomous college. Ravenshaw College with all its glorious academic achievement and ceaseless scholastic pursuits had created a distinct niche for itself in India and beyond. The history of this great institution is, in a manner of speaking, the history of modern Odisha, a major State in the Indian Union. It was the cradle of ideas fostering national unity and nationalism, promoting social mobilization and gearing up the freedom struggle. Ravenshaw represented and symbolized the history of modern Odisha like no other institution has, beginning as the harbinger of higher education in the state, nurturing its budding talents who heralded a renaissance in the state, contributed to the process of the creation of a separate state for its people, who ignited the freedom struggle in the Ravenshaw Republic and who helped this College emerge as one of the

foremost in the country (Tripathy, 2017). Ravenshaw College came into being at a crucial moment in the history of modern Odisha. The language agitation which gathered a perceptible momentum in mainland Odisha bore testimony to the fact that the latter was ready to protect itself from an attempted cultural invasion and to aim at an all-around growth of the land. Ravenshaw College in a way became its intellectual nerve-centre and a symbol of the fulfillment of the aspirations of the people of Odisha (Mohanty, 2017). Even today also every individual aspiring for higher education in Odisha would keep enthusiasm to be part of this University. Now Ravenshaw celebrates 150 years of its foundation with more than 8000 students in the various stream such as Arts, Science, Commerce, Information Technology, Computer Science, Management, Hotel and Hospitality Management. The Ravenshaw University offers undergraduate, postgraduate, M. Phil and Ph.D under 26 academic Departments. At present, the university actively engages in teaching and researches cutting across disciplines and subjects. The university campus is also known for its student politics and activism. There have been several incidents when campus politics have gone out of control when the management ignores the student's opinions, views and interests when making decisions on behalf of their welfare and studies (Aswin 2015). Student politics introduce different political ideologies and ideas and provides an opportunity for young men and women to emerge on the political scene. This increases their understanding of political, social and economic issues and their solutions (Bhatti, 2019).

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the status of academic, administrative and financial autonomy and accountability of Ravenshaw University.
2. To study the nature of problems and challenges faced by students, teachers and administration of Ravenshaw University while exercising autonomy and accountability.

Methodology of the Study

In this study Ravenshaw University as a whole had been taken as case and Case study method was employed. The required data for this study had been collected from 450 students, 28 teachers

and 10 administrative Heads of the Department through Open and Closed-ended Questionnaires on Google Forms and from secondary sources. The data have been analyzed using percentage and content analysis techniques. The students' responses have been analyzed in percentage, followed by teachers and Heads of the Department respondents through content analysis techniques. The findings of the study have been drawn by adopting the triangulation technique.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study have been drawn under autonomy and accountability, which comprises matters related to academic, administrative, financial autonomy and accountability of students, teachers, administrative heads and Ravenshaw University as a whole.

Academic Autonomy and Accountability

Academic autonomy and accountability are the heart of any university which could sustain its identity as an apex body of knowledge generation and expansion. In this regard, Ravenshaw University demonstrates moderate status in its existence. In the university students have the autonomy for opting courses, freedom to participate in academic activities and they also maintain regularity in reading, writing, and completing assignments as a practice of accountability towards teachers, departments and university. The students of the university viewed that due to the limited nature of choices in selecting courses coupled with semester system and support services they compromise in their autonomy and accountability. The teachers have autonomy in reading, writing, adopting teaching methods, research activity, organizing and participating in the seminar, conferences, and workshops. Most of the student and teacher respondents reported that there is an acute shortage of teachers in the University and due to the shortage of teaching staff there is an increased load of teaching which also causes restricted nature of attention, guidance, research and extension works. The teachers also unanimously owed this to insufficient infrastructural supports. However, most of the teachers have been found to be accountable in terms of their engagement in all possible affairs of the university which includes regularity in classes,

completion of courses, updating knowledge, and providing guidance, supervision, supports and counselling, encouragement for innovative and creative works to the students. However, it was also reported that in some Departments, the existing teachers do not have expertise in their respective field of study and the skills of using information and communication technology. Some teachers were not much deliberate, detailed and updated in their respective subjects. This has been felt by students in times of need. Due to lack of experience and qualified teachers the act of teaching and learning is largely carried out by guest-teachers. Most of the students expressed that the teaching-learning process as theoretical, monotonous and there is lack of practical exposure. Most of the student respondents reported that there is no research environment inside the campus. In most of the teaching Departments, the research scholars had no separate cell to carry out research work, discussion, debates and deliberation on major issues in their respective subjects and disciplines.

Administrative Autonomy and Accountability

Administrative autonomy and accountability of the university determine its success and position to a great extent. By taking advantage of administrative autonomy an institution can take major decisions related to the development of infrastructure, recruitment and staffing which eventually enable it to function in a responsive manner. In this context, the existing support services in the university such as libraries, classrooms, books, journals, and other reading materials are not sufficient for a large number of students, and it lacks smart classroom with Wi-Fi facilities, the library is not updated with new books and world-class journal and magazines. The glorious *Kanika Library* now has been neglected and outdated. In the case of the Digital library, most of the computers are not updated and operational with the provision of all-time internet connectivity. Almost all computers have old version software and not providing the services for data analysis and plagiarism check. Although the University has reasonable autonomy in these regards but it is found to be lacking in creating enabling situations for students and teachers while carrying academic activities. The University has the autonomy for

launching new courses or programs at UG and PG levels. However, while launching the new courses of study/programme the concerned Department/University needs to take permission from the Government. The opening of new programs and courses has been challenging because of insufficient resource support. The University has the freedom to design the syllabus, courses of study for new programmes in different fields of knowledge. But while designing syllabus/courses of study the University has to follow the common curriculum system at the Under Graduation level prescribed by the State Government which curtailed the institutional autonomy in designing UG curriculum. Hence, there is a need of flexibility in deciding the courses of the study as per the need and demands of the students and time. More than half of the teacher respondents viewed that the University has restricted autonomy in giving admission as State Government interferes by imposing the common admission system and deciding the fee structure for some courses. The fee structures in self-financing courses are decided by the University itself.

However, the administration of Ravenshaw University is transparent and accountable while giving admission to students and setting the fee structure although protests surfaced against the fee structure of self-financing courses. Most of the teachers and Heads opined that the University has full autonomy in conducting the examination. During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic also it has successfully conducted and published the results in time. The examination is conducted fairly with accountability as per the rule and no unfair activity is promoted in the examinations. Most of the teacher respondents reported that the University has below-average autonomy to develop required infrastructure and teaching-learning support materials. Required financial supports are not available and internal administrative policies are not so conducive to develop these facilities in the University. The University administration also lacks accountability in terms of effective management and proper planning for teaching-learning support materials with suitable infrastructure. The University provides health and fitness support services such as physiotherapy, gyms, yoga, and medical facilities. But almost all the teachers reported that only a substantial number of students are active

in availing these resources and the rest large number of students do not. It is found that hostel accommodation is a major issue for many students as it is not provided to every needy and deserving student. The quality of food is not so good and the boarders face the problems in getting safe drinking water, deals with unhealthy and unhygienic toilets and bathroom. Most of the teachers also have not been provided with the required residential facilities and many of them staying outside of the Campus. Teachers and Heads of teaching Departments viewed that one of the major issues in the management of the University while guided by the principle of autonomy and accountability is the interference of the Government of Odisha in the affairs of the University by amending the Odisha University Act, 1989 and repealing the Ravenshaw University Act, 2005. The University had full autonomy to recruit teaching staff but after the Odisha Universities Amendment Act, 2020, the autonomy of the University to recruit teaching faculty has been handed over to Odisha Public Service Commission (OPSC).

Financial Autonomy and Accountability

Financial autonomy and accountability play a major contributory role in the effective functioning of a university. Ravenshaw University in this regard possesses an average character through the mechanism of transparency and auditing. Viewing on this matter the teachers of the university stated that they have very restricted autonomy and low accountability in procuring the required support system for reading, writing teaching, and research. No incentive and encouragement are given to the teachers to procure these support systems with existing autonomy and ability. Most of the teacher respondents and Heads of the Departments viewed that the Departments and University have very restricted freedom and ability to remunerate teaching and non-teaching staff. The different departments of the University also do not enjoy full autonomy and unable to procure required support systems with respect to reading, writing teaching and research. The Departments running self-financing courses get better facilities and autonomy in comparison to other Departments. The departmental financial autonomy is limited to spending development grants and utilizing seminar

funds only, generated by them from students. The University also has very limited autonomy and ability to create welfare activities, recreational scope and providing scholarship and financial supports to poor and meritorious students. Most of the students get financial supports and scholarships mainly from the Central, State Government and NGOs. Bureaucratic delay and Government policies stand as a barrier in the financial uses and affairs of the Department and the University as a whole. Lack of funds at the disposal of the university and rigid nature of government financial rules are the major challenges to run itself as an autonomous body and ensure its accountability towards different stakeholders.

DISCUSSION

University is ideally an autonomous educational organization with a set of responsibilities towards the stakeholders. An ideal institution with autonomy and accountability provides quality education, teaching with high quality of research and innovation and strives towards excellence. It has the scope of experimentation, innovations, quality improvement with transparency in teaching, evaluations and providing other academic services including the scope of educational reforms and speedy implementation (CABE Committee Report, 2005). Ravenshaw University in this regard has enough strength and potential, barring some avoidable constraints and challenges, to carry out the work of teaching, research and extension. Being a Unitary University, it has autonomy with many avoidable restraints and challenges. Ravenshaw University has full academic autonomy to carry out academic activities at different levels such as the students have freedom in opting courses, freedom to participate in academic activities such as in classroom discussions, seminars, and workshops, selecting the research area and undertaking research work.

However, due to limited courses offered in the University, they get limited choices to select course of study of their interest. Most of the students also found accountable while ensuring regularity in classroom activities, reading, writing, completing assignments, and participating in other academic activities along with the responsibility assigned by their teachers and Department. The teachers

have autonomy in reading, writing, selecting teaching methods, research activity, organizing and participating in the seminar, conferences, and workshops. Most of them have been accountable while ensuring regularity in classes, completion of courses, updating knowledge, and providing guidance, supervision, supports and counselling, encouragement for innovative and creative works to the students. However, the students and teachers are not in a position to take full advantage of with their autonomy due to inadequate and insufficient man and materials resources. University with its oldest library is providing limited academic support services. Since the university is grappling with inadequate resources its effects are visible in teaching, reading, writing and research. The University carries some reasonable autonomy and maintains accountability in the matter of admission, formulation of syllabus and courses, regulation of courses, the opening of new programmes and terminating obsolete ones, deciding fee structure, conducting the examination, publication of results, maintenance of law and order of University. The University's financial autonomy is limited to spending development grants and the fund from Government. Bureaucratic delay, Government policies and lack of effective management and proper planning stand as a barrier in the financial uses and affairs of the Department and the University as a whole. Lack of funds, supports, leadership, and too rigidity in governance are the major challenges for this University system to run itself as an autonomous body and ensure its accountability towards stakeholders in the form of teaching, research and extension activities.

CONCLUSION

From the given realities in India, it is quite clear that there is need to strike a balance in terms of supports and interference of government, Central or State, in the functioning of unitary universities. So, far as the situation of Ravenshaw University is concern, given with the glory of the past and challenges of the present the University has to function more independently and holistically. The University cannot afford to function in isolation to the needs and demands of immediate stakeholders or the distance one as felt by the respondents. It has to function beyond a limited boundary of locals.

It has to work by keeping the global needs and circumstances in mind as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The University should have more enabling environment with all required resources and decision-making power in its hand so as whenever time and situations need it can act in an accountable manner. It requires more academic autonomy with respect to launching new programmes and prescribing norms and standards. At the equal capacity in the academic matter, it should have more administrative and financial authority especially in the matter of recruitment and channelization of resources without any external interference. Taking feedback on the present circumstances and the possibilities in the university where the existing faculty members quite unstinting to express their serious concerns that there is need of intervention of Central Government. The name and reputation associated with the university and its existing nature of governance, where it is found to be restricted in many ways in its functioning, make it deserving for becoming a Central University in Eastern India.

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