

## BEST UNIVERSITIES

# Take a qualitative leap



BY C. RAJ KUMAR

THE INDIAN HIGHER education system is facing many challenges, as issues related to quality, quantity, accessibility and equity are simultaneously being addressed. While there has been an effort to address the challenge of expansion and provide opportunities to access higher education, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) continues to be low in India in comparison with most developed countries and many developing countries. This challenge becomes even more acute when we examine the issue of quality; not a single Indian university figures among the top 200 universities in the world. It is in this context that the role of private universities in India has become a matter for discussion and debate.

### History and context

While there is the need for the expansion of the higher education sector, there has been criticism on the role of private sector, owing to the dubious and irresponsible growth of private universities and their lack of vision, academic commitment and commitment to institution building. This situation, however, has begun to change and a new generation of private universities is assuming a leadership role in raising the quality of higher education.

### Not-for-profit universities

It has to be recognised that education in general and higher education in particular requires a commitment to not-for-profit engagement. Private universities established under a not-for-profit framework include O.P. Jindal Global University, Azim Premji University and Shiv Nadar University. The founders of these universities are people who have created wealth in other businesses and are not looking at them as a source of income. Most private universities in India, however, are created as business ventures.

### Institutional excellence and regulatory framework

Some of the top universities in the world, such as Harvard, Yale, Stanford and MIT, are private. World-class universi-

ties are not developed through government departments exercising powers over institutions; they are nurtured when faculty members, students, staff and other stakeholders are able to take decisions about the university in an independent and transparent manner.

After a university is established, it needs autonomy and freedom to innovate. Such innovation, autonomy and vision are possible in private universities. Higher education in India cannot be reformed unless we develop strong private universities that are truly nonprofit, philanthropic and committed to promoting academic freedom.

### The way forward

A committee constituted by the Planning Commission and headed by N.R. Narayana Murthy submitted a report that focused on the role of the corporate sector in higher education. This committee acknowledged the importance of stronger private initiatives in higher education and recommended pathbreaking measures such as free land for 999 years, 300 per cent deduction in taxable income to compa-

nies for contributions towards boosting higher education and 10-year multiple entry visas for foreign research scholars. It also recommended mandatory accreditation for universities. To promote greater accessibility of higher education to the underprivileged, the committee recommended the establishment of a ₹1,000-crore scholarship fund with tax exemption for contributions made by the corporate sector.

In the course of a quantitative leap resulting in the expansion

of higher education in India, quality has suffered. The celebration of a few islands of excellence, mostly in the form of specialised single-discipline institutions, is not going to address the larger problem of lack of creativity and innovation. In this environment of mediocrity, some private universities have been able to provide quality education through their vision, innovation, investment and resources that are required to build world-class institutions. These experiences need to be shared and expanded so that both public and private universities can contribute effectively to the development of a knowledge society in India.

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