India's Proposed Reforms: Somewhat Half-Baked

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From down here in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala in south India, the government's higher education reform proposals look a bit different than in glitzy New Delhi. Kerala, ruled now by mild-mannered communists, who have had power here off and on for the past half century, is less market oriented and commercialized than up north. The state has universal literacy, the highest in India, a lack of visible poverty in striking contrast to much of the recent state of affairs in India, and a higher education access rate of about 18 percent—double the national average. Kerala's main export is its people, many well educated, who work all over the world but particularly in the Gulf countries. Indeed, a quarter of the state's income consists of remittances from those workers—many of them well-educated professionals.

A conference devoted to a discussion of the reform policies, soon to go before Parliament with a strong likelihood of passing, was unsurprisingly critical of most of the measures. The overriding criticism involved the underlying commitment in the reforms to linking Indian higher education to global trends of commercializing higher education and uncritically linking India to the global knowledge economy. The spearhead of internationalization is the bill to open India's higher education system to foreign institutions. The proposals were criticized for uncritical acceptance of yet to be determined foreign institutions and initiatives, unrealistic expectations for foreign institutions to provide

significant access, and new ideas for India's admittedly moribund academic system. Some see the proposals as a kind of "new neocolonialism."

While the foreign providers' proposals have received the most international coverage, they include only a small part of a large package of changes. There was wide criticism of "dictation from Delhi" and the "regulation raj" of too much centralization of a higher education system that has traditionally given a great deal of autonomy for the states—as stipulated in India's constitution. A proposal to set up a powerful self-perpetuating panel to rule on a range of higher education issues faced criticisms, as did a bill that would set up tribunals to adjudicate problems in the system.

Accreditation has long been a problem in India. The agency set up several decades ago has only accredited a small proportion of India's universities and colleges. The reforms propose a new mechanism and dismantled the old one but do not clarify exactly how the new arrangements will work. The reform proposals recognize that Indian higher education suffers from significant corruption and proposes new mechanisms to prevent that. Several of the existing key agencies that have controlled higher education nationally, such as the University Grants Commission and the All-India Council for Technical Education, have uncertain futures.

The critics pointed to problem after problem in the actual forthcoming legislation: unclear wording, incomplete plans for specific agencies, unrealistic expectations for proposed committees, and other lapses. For this observer, it did seem that the legislation, at the very least, needs some significant tweaking if it is to have a good chance of success even on its own terms.

Additional proposals, not specifically tied to the legislation, also seem rather unrealistic. The minister of Human Resource Development, Kapil Sibal, who is a powerhouse of ideas and proposals, has by fiat set up at least one central government university in each of India's states. He has proposed an expanded number of Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management, crown jewels in India's postsecondary system, and promised a dozen or more "world-class research universities" in a short period of time. The problems involving all of the proposals are manifold—perhaps the most significant issue is personnel, since there are simply not enough high-quality academics to take up jobs in these new institutions. Indeed, the existing IITs are facing serious staffing problems as many academics are reaching retirement age. Further, the amounts of new funding being made available for these initiatives is completely inadequate.

Viewed from down south, the flaws in India's grand plans seem rather clear. Perhaps the Delhi power elite believes that change can come on the cheap with somewhat half-baked plans. Perhaps they just want to get the country's higher education system out of its lethargy. The current set of plans, like many of the ill-fated reform proposals of the past, does little to change India's 20,000 undergraduate colleges—currently steeped in bureaucracy and outmoded teaching methods—and little to reform the country's 400-plus universities. Without grappling with the existing universities, reform will in any case be very incomplete. It is all daunting—perhaps "mission impossible."