

Friends,

The Kerala Club, New Delhi organized a seminar on “Planning Higher education in Kerala 2014-2020: Challenges and Possibilities” as part of their celebrations of its 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations on March 16, 2014. The speakers included Shri. T.K.A. Nair, Adviser to the PM, Prof. N.R.Madhava Menon, Prof. V.N.Rajasekharan Pillai, Prof. Jayakrishnan and Prof. Meenakshi Gopinath.

The other speakers described the higher education scene in Kerala graphically and suggested remedies and I tried to showcase the efforts being made by the Government and the KSHEC to bring about change. My speaking notes are herewith for your information and comments.

Sincerely,

TPS

Mr. Chairman,

The President and other leaders of the Kerala Club,

Mr.T.K.A.Nair,

Prof. N.R.Madhava Menon,

Distinguished speakers and participants,

I am grateful to the Kerala Club for inviting me to this timely Seminar on Higher Education in Kerala. I have happy memories of my days in the Kerala Club in Connaught Place in the late sixties when I met people like O.V.Vijayan, Kakkanadan, IKKM, M.P.Narayana Pillai and Sethu, who later became celebrated masters of the Delhi genre of Malayalam literature. Omchery was already a big name then and I am glad that he continues to lead the Kerala Club today. I extend my greetings and best wishes to the Kerala Club on the occasion of its Platinum Jubilee Celebrations.

I am glad that my turn to speak has come in the second half of the Seminar as it gave me an opportunity to reflect over the presentations of the earlier speakers. What occurred to me when I heard those statements was the saying about India that whatever you say about India, its opposite is also true. The same is the case with higher education in Kerala. Prof. N.R.Madhava Menon’s contention that we need more universities in Kerala and Shri.T.K.A. Nair’s apprehension that more institutions are not the answer are both valid. Whether we go by the cynical comments of Dr.Jayakrishnan or the optimistic and poetic assessment of Prof. Meenakshi Gopinath, the higher education scene in Kerala has both good and bad points. It is true that many of our graduates are weak, compared to those from the better universities outside the state. But it is also true that three of our graduates occupied the three top positions in the Civil Services examination last year. Our accomplishments in higher education are not insignificant, but we need to strive more for excellence.

I take it that I have been included in this session on financing development of higher education since RUSA envisages that the Higher Education Councils will be entrusted with funding of higher education in the future, together with planning and monitoring responsibilities. But as it happens, funding of education is one area in which I have gained no experience in the last two years that I have been the Vice-Chairman of the Council. It is only a few days ago that the Government authorized us to open a joint account with the Government to receive RUSA funds and to begin setting up a Technical Support Group. Although the Chief Minister of Kerala is of the view that RUSA should be implemented strictly as envisaged by the MHRD, the process of empowering the Council to implement RUSA has been painfully slow and I have no hands-on experience to share as yet.

Although RUSA marks a paradigm shift in funding state educational institutions, I anticipate some problems in its implementation. Higher Education Councils have not been recognized as bodies capable of planning, funding and monitoring higher education, even in states like Kerala, which has had an active Council since 2007. At best, the Council is treated as a think tank or a sounding board and at worst as a sinecure for sectarian political nominees. The relevant departments of the Government and the Planning Board call the shots and universities and colleges regard the Council as an unnecessary distraction, except as a source of scholarships and minor contributions for seminars and the erudite programme. The philosophy of RUSA that higher education should be entrusted to an academic body like the Council cannot be accomplished without political will and relaxation of bureaucratic controls.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the states have to find 35% of the RUSA resources. The state machinery will be wary of the Council drawing up ambitious programmes as every rupee that is spent on RUSA, 35 paise should come from the state treasury. Moreover, the aided colleges, which make the bulk of the educational institutions in Kerala, will have to find 50% of the allocations made to them by RUSA. The present system of haphazard funding from multiple sources with little accountability will be preferable from the point of view of individual institutions. I have inaugurated many “national” and “international” seminars on esoteric subjects, held simply because a grant was received from one source or another. They become “national” with an odd participant from Chennai and they become “international” by the participation of a Sri Lankan scholar. Money is spent on ceremonies, flowers wrapped in plastic sheets and wooden or plastic souvenirs and even flex boards. The strict performance criteria of RUSA will be a disincentive to many institutions. A complete transformation of the mindset will be imperative. And mindsets, as you know, are not easily susceptible to change.

We can curse the darkness in many ways, but the efforts to light a candle to remove the darkness should also be noted. We have not removed the darkness as yet, but the Government of Kerala and the Kerala State Higher Education Council have not been idle. We started working from day one on a blue print for designing what we called a “Higher Education 2.0”, bearing in mind that fundamental changes are necessary in six areas we identified as crucial--- infrastructure, use of technology, teachers training, research, autonomy and internationalization. We set up groups of eminent experts on each of these areas and developed plans, which were submitted to the Government. These were not mere recommendations, but schemes ready for implementation. A Kerala State Accreditation and Assessment Council, a first of its kind in India, a Faculty Training Academy, a plan to link universities with industries, a new higher education policy with concrete suggestions for enhancing expansion, equity, excellence and employability, a plan for autonomous colleges and a scheme to improve the working of the administrative staff have been submitted. Initial funding was allocated in certain cases, but they are stuck somewhere in the labyrinths of political and bureaucratic decision making. A report on reform of statutes of universities is

unfortunately mired in a controversy on the qualifications of Vice-Chancellors.

Concretely, we have made advances in attracting foreign students to Kerala, developing cluster colleges, creating awareness of MOOCS and Flip Schools, TED talks and other tools for using technology, recommended honours courses in selected subjects and we have been running training programmes for young teachers and administrative staff. Seminars and conferences, including two international consultations on quality and transnational education have been held. Our monthly lectures focus on a wide variety of topics of current interest. Sage has just published the first issue of a high quality academic journal, 'Education for the Future'. We are presently studying issues relating to Arabic studies, foreign travel of teachers and possibility of setting up a University for Police Studies and Forensic Sciences. An area of concern we need to address urgently is the creeping elimination of English as the medium of instruction at the university level. A conference of foreign students in Kerala brought out the fact that much of the instruction is given in Malayalam, leaving these students in the lurch. In a situation where most of our young people have to live outside the state, the neglect of English will severely damage their prospects for employment. The Council is also looking at ways and means of incentivizing teachers, who put in their best.

The Higher education Department runs its own imaginative schemes for skills development, teachers training etc, in addition to their traditional role in nurturing higher education.

In other words, though we have not been able to submit our perspective plan because of the problems enumerated earlier, I dare say that we are more prepared to utilize RUSA funds than any other state in the country. But from a point of elation about the recognition of our work we received initially, we have entered a phase of frustration on account of delays and hurdles. We see a ray of hope in the small beginning we have made in implementing RUSA, but much more needs to be done to make the Higher Education Council an instrument of change.

Apart from RUSA, financing of higher education has to come from private sources. The self-financing colleges were instrumental in increasing the number of engineering colleges in Kerala. Some of these colleges can match the best institutions in India in terms of quality. A Commission led by Mr. Narayana Murthy has established that at least half of the outlay in education should come from private sources. We have identified the ways and means to accomplish this, but the most effective way for higher education to grow is by having private universities. The policy of the Government, however, continues to be not to permit private universities in Kerala.

I apologize if my presentation sounded like a commercial for the Higher Education Council. I was merely trying to show that we are striving to change the higher education scene in Kerala. Change will be slow in coming in Kerala because of the cynicism that has crept into the Kerala psyche. Corruption, mediocrity, sectarianism, lethargy and lack of efficiency are not just tolerated, but also considered part of our system. Higher education sector is no exception to this general environment. But dream we must of good infrastructure, efficient use of technology, committed teachers, purposeful research, increased autonomy and international linkages, in short, world class education. We hope and expect that the Higher Education Council, which is presently a dream factory at best, will turn into a dynamo for true reform in higher education in Kerala.

Thank you.