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INTERNET EDITION

Financial Daily from THE HINDU group of publications

Monday, Jan 09, 2006

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Front Page
Corporate
Markets
Info-Tech
Marketing
Money &
Banking
Agri-Biz &
Commodities
Industry &
Economy
Logistics
Government
Opinion
Variety
Columns
Index
Archives

Features

Investment
World
eWorld
Catalyst
Mentor
Life
Canvas
Praxis
Urban Pulse
Brand Quest

Stocks

Quotes
SE Diary
Scoreboard
Open-End Mutual
Fund

Shipping

Ports

Archives

Yesterday
Datewise
Resources

Opinion - Education

Central institutions and regional disparity

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There is a need for educational institutes of national repute in backward States such as Orissa to bridge regional disparity and trigger local development.

SINCE the introduction of economic reforms in 1991, some States have been on an accelerating growth path, while a few have not only been lagging behind, especially in socio-economic aspects.

Though we have made significant strides in education and health, their benefits have not reached all citizens in equal measure. Needless to say, a successful federation can become a reality only when there is equality in both social and economic indicators. Recognising the increased disparity among States, the National Common Minimum Programme of the UPA Government refers to the need to bridge this divide and promote all-inclusive growth.

One case for overcoming regional imbalance and restoring equity is that of locating central institutions. Although the country has made impressive progress in scientific and education research, it is inadequate to power a knowledge revolution. Moreover, such progress has been possible only because of "pockets of excellence" — a few elite institutions such as the IITs, the IIMs, and the IISc. By and large, universities have remained ineffective; barring a few, and such excellence has not reached all fields.

While a few States house nearly all the elite central institutions, many others do not have even one. In fact, taking note of this, the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, while releasing the India Science Report, said: "I trust our Government as well the State governments will take note of these findings and evolve policies to remedy these regional imbalances."

This came as a reassurance at a time when several States are agitated over regional imbalance. However, the Prime Minister announced the setting up of the Indian Institute of Science for Education and Research (IISER) in Pune and Kolkata at the same meeting. While setting up new science and technology institutions is a step in the right direction, one wonder whether the IISER will replace the National Institute of Science announced by the previous government.

Two years ago, the then NDA Government had initiated a similar exercise of upgrading scientific and technological research in the country by instituting the National Institute of Science (NIS) in Pune, Bhubaneswar, Chennai and Allahabad. One of the major objectives behind this was to correct the

Stories in this Section

[Food for thought](#)

[Needed a soil, not green, revolution](#)

[Reflections on turning points in the economy](#)

[Unemployment, inflation and education](#)

[Listing the tools of management](#)

[Central institutions and regional disparity](#)

[Corporate remuneration](#)

[Excise duty on sugar](#)

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regional imbalance.

These new-age centres for cutting-edge scientific research were mooted by a group of Pune-based scientists and received strong support from the then Human Resource Development Minister. On December 10, 2003, the Government of India announced the setting up of four NIS. Since Orissa (Bhubaneswar) and UP (Allahabad) lag behind other advanced States in higher education and research due to lack of institutes of national importance, this announcement was welcomed by all, especially the people of these two States. The Orissa Government allotted 75 acres of prime land in Bhubaneswar towards this venture. But nothing has progressed from the Centre since then.

The aim of the National Institute of Sciences is the same as that of IISER. Thus, NIS and IISER both refer to the same concept.

Despite a lower population than the other States, Orissa is one of the top three States that send the highest number of students to other States to pursue a degree in medicine and engineering. This reflects the lack of good educational institutions in the State. It does not have any central university or institute of national repute such as the IIT, IIM, IIIT or ISI (Indian Statistical Institute). The State also does not have any premier autonomous science and technology institution funded by the Government of India.

Our system of proportional representation leads to the Centre neglecting smaller States such as Orissa. The Central Government must make sure resources are distributed fairly and the interests of economically backward States are protected.

In a recent address, the Prime Minister referred to regional imbalance in case of educational institutions and urged the State governments to deal with such issues. Such a balanced outlook is expected even in the setting up of NIS/IISER in Orissa.

The decision to relocate (and possibly rename NIS) IISER from Orissa has perturbed many, both within and outside the State. A PIL was filed in the Orissa High Court regarding this and the court stalled the setting up of IISER for the time being. In this context, it would be prudent for the Central Government to come out clearly on the progress of NIS and also the terms of reference of IISER.

The people, the Oriya community in particular, are confused about the developments. Are both NIS and IISER the same, but with different names? If not, what is happening to NIS? If they are the same, why has the institute been shifted from Orissa? The Government must clarify these.

If both NIS and IISER are the same, the news is disturbing from the point of view of attaining regional equality in higher education. This step will increase the regional imbalance of key central institutions. While no body has any grudge over locating the proposed IISERs in Pune and Kolkata, backward States such as Orissa must receive their due. Orissa has been demanding for a central university in the backward KBK region (Kalahandi, Bolangir, Koraput) and for an IIT, for quite sometime.

But these have fallen on deaf ears. The Pathak Committee set up to recommend upgradation of engineering and scientific institutions into IITs too does not mention any institution from Orissa.

Orissa being a backward State needs a research institution; this will help develop growth strategies for the State.

There is a need for an institute that offers education and training in basic science, integrated with state-of-the-art research. An NIS in Bhubaneswar will fulfil the long-standing demand of a Central Government-funded institute in the State and act as an agent of change. Moreover, institutes of national importance should be as widely dispersed as possible for balanced regional development.

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