

Social Scientist

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Source: *Social Scientist*, Vol. 17, No. 9/10 (Sep. - Oct., 1989), pp. 4-14

Published by: Social Scientist

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3517199>

Accessed: 02/10/2008 15:31

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BADRI RAINA*

Education Old and New—A Perspective

When Dronacharya demanded of the untouchable, Eklavya, his right hand thumb as *Guru Dakshina* he was, after all, vindicating the truth of the Marxian maxim that the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class. In claiming that the cruel punishment had been visited on Eklavya not on account of his lowly social position but the fact that he had stolen knowledge, the Guru, wittingly or unwittingly, only further reinforced the materialist view of knowledge as privileged though stealable property. In that age of the epic, it was unthinkable that the socially outcast, however endowed, should be so equipped as to offer challenge to the powers of the entrenched. Something similar applies to the story of Karn—the denial to him of the right to call Arjun to account in arms on the legitimising ground of the inequality of station, and his liquidation subsequently by treachery at the politic behest of no less than the Lord himself. Let us also remember that Ram, the quintessence of virtues, did not think twice in decapitating Sambook, the meditating Shudra in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, and to the consistency of the same Marxian historical truth. Power, then centred in Brahminical *Presence* and the incantatory magic of Vedic mantras, was not for sharing with the lower orders. And the most numerous among the lower orders, women, had especially to be excluded from Sanskrit learning if hierarchy and division of labour had to be maintained. Recall that as late as the latter half of the nineteenth century Ramabai Pandita's entire *Chitpawan* Brahmin household in Pune was mercilessly ostracized because her enlightened father took it into his dangerous head to impart Sanskrit learning first to his wife and then to his famous daughter who, after all, had to convert to Christianity to find an emancipatory platform outside the dominant, patriarchal Hindu fold. That the firebrand nationalist Tilak was to be abusive of her, and that even the reformer Ranade was to desert her tells us something instructive about the ways in which education as a supposedly autonomous archive has had to struggle against power-structures that perpetuate the myth of autonomy from time to time but always know better. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than is provided by the sad story of that first

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potential Indian science, *Ayurved*. Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay has shown us how *Ayurved* was systematically thwarted, decanonised, excommunicated by the Brahminical authority structure because it did not place causality in *Karm*, nor cure in priestly intervention, but within an analysable and verifiable matrix of materiality.¹ To this day, long after allopathy, *Ayurved* remains the Shudra among the Vedas.

Thus, every education policy from the beginning of historical time in all hierarchical and class societies has been much more than an education policy. All such policies have aimed either at consolidating existent structures of dominance, or at forging with the perceived requirements of the ruling classes. It is another matter, of course, that almost without fail such enterprises yield in turn countering structures of resistance, causing transformations without which history as a dynamic event cannot be conceived. Not that this is always a comforting, linear, positivist occurrence; often, in moving onward history falls among deflections, zig-zags, regressions, but move it does. So that an epistemology of struggle is not merely a wishful chimera to keep social hope alive; its justification lies in the totality of the historical process—now sluggish, halted, hopeless but under our very eyes breaking out in battle to new vistas of endeavour and social reconstruction.

When Hastings gave his blessings to a system of *Gurukuls* and *Madrassahs* he was only keeping in place a civil formation that had the most to offer John Company. It kept the two religious orders in helpful contention, and it encouraged the hegemony of secrets of the very complicated indigenous land revenue system.² Further, an 'orientalist' direction in education consolidated the myth of a transhistorical, mystical India quite above the mundane and murky concerns of trade and materiality, which mundane concerns the Company benevolently took upon itself to plough and to profit by. The story is indeed too well-known to need belabouring. Classicism was thus patronized as an archive of received truths that made history a matter of subsidiary importance in the colony. That not every orientalist had a cognition matching such a historical fall-out is true enough. Yet, it is hardly the purity of individual exertions that history makes its epistemological object. There cannot but have been well-meaning people who *believed* Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian education to be the *sumum bonum* of attainment, incidentally best restricted to the endowed social groups alone (after all, Plato had a vision of guardianship as well); and yet another, admittedly less favourable, nomenclature for all such 'felt' perceptions, however nobly held, is ideology. And all ideology is pregnant with consequences.

And precisely because the dynamics of history constantly reformulates interests and ideologies, orientalist education had to yield place to English education in 1837. Suddenly, full in the face of the brotherhood of Jones, Wilkes, Wilson and others Macaulay could

assert that a single shelf of European books was superior to all the learning in Sanskrit and Arabic. And that he could say this without a knowledge either of Sanskrit or of Arabic suggests that the impetus for the historic policy change lay not in education but elsewhere. Owing to a combination of exigencies, it became necessary for the colonizers to generate a qualitatively new civil society in India. As the administrative costs of running the colony became unacceptable, the British had to have on hand an English language-knowing low-order native bureaucracy, the famous or infamous 'babu' breed. English language soon led to the import of English literature, sold now as *the* repository of stable human wisdom, and a nicely secular substitute for the troublesome Bible. The Derozians, the Brahmos, and others across the colony, justly suspicious of the regressive social and political load of orientalist education, were happily to swallow the new hegemony, both as a supposedly 'modernizing' event and as an avenue to enhanced personal status. As we know, the modernisation came only as cultural fad bereft of any progressive economic or democratic content (in fact, as camouflage to a rapacious colonial industrial policy), even as sections of the newly minted urban middle classes became admirers of empire for decades to come.

The day could not but come when Anglicist education produced an awareness antagonistic to its hegemonic designs. The new native elites, products of the universities in the three metropolitan Presidencies, became wise to the hiatus between the purported content of English Liberalism and its actual practice in the colony. Thus three distinct counter-hegemonic impulses took shape: one was to ask of the colonizers that they match precept with practice within the claims of their own ideological state apparatus; a second was to go native in full revivalist colour for forging a national identity; a third sought for such identity formation within a reformed native matrix. The Indian Association became the precursor of the Indian National Congress. By the turn of the century, the three universities set up in 1858 as a consequence of the recommendations of Wood's despatch of 1854 came to be seen as the breeding grounds of an anti-colonial consciousness. Consequently, the Education Commission of 1902 appointed by that rank imperialist, Curzon, made new recommendations that remind us rather ominously of the central political thrust of our own New Education Policy of 1987. The commission stated: 'In all matters relating to higher education, efficiency must be the first and paramount consideration. It is better for India that a comparatively small number of young men should receive a sound liberal education than that a large number should be passed through an inadequate course of instruction leading to a depreciated degree' (Raleigh Commission Report, 1902, p.14). Curzon's undemocratic and severely restrictive injunctions in the matter of higher education and the new official controls on grants-in-aid and affiliation were to be the panicked expression of a colonialism at siege.³

As political independence came in 1947 the new need to translate such an attainment into 'economic independence' and an 'effective democracy'—all this no doubt on class lines—led, among other things, to the establishment of the first University Education Commission in 1948.⁴ It would seem that the major thrust of the report of this Commission was to refashion higher education in particular as an ideological support to parliamentary democracy. The report said: 'We know what Hitler did in six years with the German youth. The Russians are clear in their minds about the kind of society for which they are educating and the qualities required in their citizens. . . . Our education system must find its guiding principle in the aims of the social order for which it prepares' (p. 19). Thus, the Commission expressed itself broadly along a two-pronged strategy: one, the 'urgent need for technicians' who would 'ensure a continuous flow of skilled workers for several modern industries' (pp. 59-60), and, two, the need to emphasize the humanities in order to furnish a continuing tradition of liberalism of the acquired colonial variety—this latter couched in the language of the 'spirit': 'If we wish to bring about a savage upheaval in our society, a *raksasa raj*, all that we need to do is to give vocational and technical education and starve the spirit' (p. 66). We recall that Matthew Arnold and others of his ilk were rather similarly alarmed at the prospect of an indiscriminate spread of scientific education among the lower orders. Thus, the needs of the new ruling classes were articulated along two distinct axes. One kept in mind the necessity to draw large numbers into the productive process (something that led to the recommendation of the mother tongue as 'medium of instruction throughout the secondary school stage'—p.226); the other provided the super-structural wherewithal to keep in place an English-educated guardian class at the controlling echelons of the State machinery.

By the 1960s certain disquieting trends were in evidence. Whatever the requirements of the masses may have been, education was seen to have expanded too rapidly, especially at the higher levels. Somewhere, it was a process that was perceived to have contributed to the political reverses and 'disorientation' of the decade leading to the formation of the SVD governments in many states. The Kothari Commission of 1968 was thus to make, at least in part, Curzon-like recommendations. While it reiterated the Constitutional injunction about free and compulsory education upto age 14 and spoke of increased outlays for education, it also advised the curtailment of higher education. Predictably, the State took over only such of the recommendations that suited it—the three-language formula, the notion of the centres of excellence, strict provisions as to the governance of the universities, and so on. The Gajendragadkar Commission that followed on the heels of the Kothari Commission sealed the new centralising thrust in the governance of universities; its recommendations about the appointment of Vice-Chancellors and the structure and composition of university senates were quickly

implemented since these gave the State greater control of higher education. This authoritarian restructuring was formalized during the Emergency when education was transferred from the State to the Concurrent List. The Janata government sought to tailor the education system to the Draft Education Policy of 1978, suggesting 'non-formal' education along Gandhian principles chiefly for village communities, while keeping in place private and State-funded higher education for the urban elite. It also for the first time introduced in parliament the Hospitals and Other Institutions Bill (1979) so as to curb what it saw as potentially dangerous trade union and other undesirable political orientations among teachers, doctors and others whom a convenient Supreme Court judgment deemed not to be covered by the provisions of the Industrial Disputes Act.

II

What of the New Education Policy-1986? Thanks to the government's own documents, the infrastructural detail on which the policy grounds its ideological diagnoses and proposals are by now well-known. In this, the document *Challenge of Education—A Policy Perspective* is indeed a most commendable confession. For a start, the document admits with candour that the single major reason for the phenomenal drop-out rate at the school stage (implying thereby the failure of all previous policy implementation) is 'poverty': '96 per cent of children who never attended schools and 84 per cent of the drop-outs come from families whose annual income is less than Rs.4000.' Further, the bulk of this population 'come from families whose occupations are agriculture and labour' (para 4.5.2. Ch.1, Vol.II). Having admitted that hard truth, the thrust of the policy perspective is not so to integrate education with developmental goals as to alleviate poverty and produce equity, but, assuming the sad fact of 'poverty' as an unchangeable given, to go on to frame education for those that are not poor and will not drop out. The ideological matrix within which the New Education Policy takes shape is in part quite eloquently Carlylean; we remember how anxious Carlyle was (in writing on the French Revolution) that unless some minimal alleviation of the condition of England were effected by the British ruling class in the 1830s the French revolution could not but happen in England as well. *Challenge of Education* worries unashamedly along the same self-serving lines; to wit, if by the time the country enters the '21st century' 55 percent of the world's illiterates are Indians then such creatures will not but be 'millstones' around the 'necks' of the 'more happily placed.' Therefore, 'to do nothing is to invite tensions beyond the control of the law and order machinery' (para 3.9) Visions of Arnoldean 'anarchy' loom large; hence in order to ensure that social unrest remains within the ambit of the 'law and order machinery' the Indian ruling classes must at least be seen to be making some minimal gesture. Such a course becomes particularly

pressing in view of the rapacity of the 'national' (read 'class') goals which inform the overall politics of the New Education Policy: 'it is not a matter of seeing how many people are employed and how many are not employed, but what is the productivity for a given investment' (the Prime Minister in a Conference of State Education Ministers—August, 1985). This 'developmental' direction of course flows rather straightforwardly from the recommendations of the World Bank slated to apply to developing countries, India included: 'the development of upper levels of formal education will be selective and carefully planned, taking into account the limited absorptive capacity of the modern sector for labour, and the needs of both public and private sector for managerial and technical skills to meet the needs of increasingly sophisticated economies will have priority' (Education Sector Policy Paper—April, 1980, p. 87). Another somewhat more mysterious document from abroad will show how the entire blue-print of the NEP with regard to higher education was in hand with the Government of India *prior* to the first of its own public formulations. Of that later.

The *Challenge* document provides a fairly outspoken critique of erstwhile educational policy and practice; this critique, however, is not offered on the side of a truly national equity but with a view to the changed requirements of the ruling class. Let us look at the contradictions between the direction in which some of the statistics the document furnishes points to and the actual decisions taken. For example, within the general argument that the government must take hard decisions in regard to fund allocations if education is to be righted at ground levels, the document computes that for attaining universal literacy (free and compulsory education upto age 14 no longer being talked about) Rs. 25,000 crores need to be set aside for the year 1990-91 at 1980-81 prices.⁵ Staggering as this seems, it works out to only around 6 per cent of the overall seventh plan outlay, precisely the level of investment that the Kothari Commission has recommended as a minimum in 1968. Yet, the plan document reveals that for the entire plan period ending 1990-91 the allocation is to be Rs. 4775.3 crores for general education, including adult education. Of this amount elementary education receives only 1830.45 crores. When indices of projected population growth over the period are taken into account, this statistics will leave around 60 million students outside the schooling system. Over the five-year plans the share of education in the total public sector outlay has declined from 7.3 per cent in the first plan to 2.5 per cent in the seventh. And the bulk of this depleted allocation has been earmarked for model schools and centres of excellence!

The *Challenge* document admits that 'the proportion of GNP spent on education in many countries ranged around six to eight per cent' (para 2.32); most Indian states spend from ten to twenty five per cent on education. In West Bengal, for instance, education is free upto class XII.

Uniforms, mid-day meals, text books and stationery are provided free to the school-going children. As a result, enrolment there has shot up. The state has registered the highest increase in the enrolment of girls since independence. The total allocation for education in the state is 25 per cent. Clearly, West Bengal provides evidence for the fact that funding on education and particular kinds of political will go hand in hand.

Despite all the rhetoric about education to the people, the NEP seeks at bottom to emulate the Jeffersonian principle. Jefferson, in arguing for a 'more general diffusion of knowledge' (1779) had really in mind preparing two sorts of civil societies, the 'labouring and the learned,' so that a tiered system could effectively disengage 'a few geniuses from the rubbish,' Quite simply, in offering 'non-formal' and 'distance' education to the 'rubbish' the new policy seeks to cut down 95 per cent of the current expenditure on education constituted by teacher's salaries, to legitimise child labour, to remove the potentially subversive interaction between the teacher and the taught, and to leave enough investment for the production of the geniuses that the State now requires for the fulfilment of its economic goals.

The *Challenge* document argues that vocationalisation has failed in India because of 'cultural prejudice towards skill-oriented education' (para 4.30). The fact, however is that vocationalisation has failed because the economy has shown little capacity to create any commensurate employment. The registered educated unemployed in India, an appalling 112 lakhs, constitute but a fraction of the total educated unemployed. The reality is that given the transformed manpower needs of a capital intensive economy vocationalisation cannot but be further restricted if labour is to be contained to minimal limits. The new policy, in true Malthusian terms, blames the unemployed for unemployment, or the educational system for producing too many unemployables. The point of the attack indeed lies elsewhere: a large body of the educated unemployed (as opposed to the uneducated unemployed) presents a threat of a very different order. Educated unemployment tends to have a direct equation with an enhanced social and political awareness; hence the baseless war-cry that higher education in India has crossed acceptable quantitative limits. This hysteria is totally repudiated by the statistics supplied by the *Challenge* document itself. Whereas in 1981 even developing countries had between ten to thirty five graduates per hundred of population, the corresponding Indian figure was a measly 3.12 (para 2.2.1. Ch.V, Vol.II). Likewise, where the Philipines, South Korea, Japan (models for the new economic thinking) had 25 per cent, 18 per cent and 30 per cent of the relevant age group (17-23 years) enrolled in higher educational institutions, the Indian figure was a lowly 4.8 per cent (para 2.4). And, yet, in the face of the Government's own statistics, backed up by the obliging voices of influential educational busy-bodies, we are told that there is overcrowding in Indian higher education.

It is just as well to recognise, therefore, that the New Education Policy is not just a policy about education; it is really an aspect of the State's new economic thinking. Put simply, an Indian State that under the overall direction of international monetary institutions and multinational interests seeks to launch a capital-intensive and consumerist economy requires a crucially altered 'human resource' infrastructure and fund allocation pattern. The policy documents thus everywhere acknowledge that the goal of education can no longer be education. The last thing the State now needs are communities of people brought up to think critically—indeed, to think at all. What it does need are 'resource persons' who can be fitted into slots and trusted to carry out 'tasks' and achieve 'targets' previously laid out by the controlling economic elite. The package is sought to be grounded now in the ideological supposition that hard technology carries an 'objective' status not amenable to debate, an occurrence that reminds us of the way in which eighteenth century reason as an open-ended cognitive methodology gave way in Europe to a positivist science in the nineteenth century after its alliance with Capital.⁶ Having said that the current 'national' economic ideas are drawn from international agencies, it should hardly be any surprise that the new 'national' thinking in education equally comes to us from abroad (Canada and Japan being explicitly mentioned as paradigms in the government's 'Concept Paper' on 'Accreditation and Assessment Council'—December, 1987). It is time then to disclose a rather little-known fact. This concerns a document titled 'Memorandum on Indian Higher Education' dated 19 February, 1986, that is months before the new policy was unleashed.⁷ The Memorandum is addressed to 'The Prime Minister's Office,' no less. 'The Problem' it tackles is defined thus: 'to assess the pros and cons of separating colleges and universities in India, and ending the college affiliation system.' The document is signed by one Mr. Paul Flather who describes himself as 'former correspondent of Times Higher Education Supplement, London.' The fact, however, that the document (copy, no doubt) came to us from the local office of the Ford Foundation must put a somewhat less innocuous label on Mr. Flather.

It is of course not possible here to reproduce the entire Flather memorandum; but let it be said that it contains very nearly the complete blueprint of the New Education Policy with respect to higher education. Autonomy, disaffiliation, accreditation councils, national assessment teams, discretionary funding to non-viable colleges, the desirability of nurturing colleges such as St. Stephens and Presidency, Calcutta as the nucleus of a potential 'Indian Ivy League', centres of 'excellence', down-playing the humanities and the social sciences, establishing a 'Government's Education Inspectorate,' all this and more finds fairly final formulation in the Flather memorandum. The above memorandum, then, is eloquent testimony to the wholly native and indigenous exertions of our policy makers!

Cutting through the disingenuous froth and verbiage of the policy documents some plain positions emerge. Thus Indian industry which has so far spent no more than a shameful 0.6 per cent of its resources on research and development is now to be provided the low-cost facility of university science departments to conduct sponsored research (improving fluoride content in toothpaste?). Such facilities are to be 'networked' into industrial interests so that useless fundamental science yields place to commercialized technology for the bourgeoisie. Since that is the role envisaged for the universities, it stands to reason that affiliated colleges are a burden and a nuisance, especially where the emphasis is on the humanities and the social sciences which yield no tangible technology or usable consumer items within an exchange economy but, if anything, only gratuitously critical citizens.

The jettisoning of non-viable colleges and universities (viability now a candidly fiscal rather than academic concept) is to be effected through the newly discovered legitimising passion for 'autonomy.' And autonomy is to be granted by a University Grants Commission which lost its own autonomy many years ago, and which is now even more explicitly to be subservient to an Apex Body—a severely centralised command post at the head of the 'pyramid' that will have the power to override any or all of the the UGC's decisions. Autonomous colleges, passed on to private and sectarian interests with not a single elected representative on their governing bodies,⁸ are to seek accreditation from an Accreditation Council whose membership is to be nominated by principals and vice-chancellors from among the ubiquitous tribe of obliging, out-of-work, ex-academics close to the sources of power. And if such an accreditation commissioner were to find a college 'non-viable' for one non-academic reason or another the college will receive no central funding. The policy stipulates with great anguish, no doubt, that where colleges are unable to raise their own resources (by foolishly refusing to levy capitation fees, for example) 'painful decisions' may have to be taken. It is of course nowhere indicated what is to happen to the students, faculty or other staff of colleges that may thus be shut down in mid-stride. And all this is sought to be sold as 'autonomy.'

As to the question how much autonomy teachers are likely to enjoy in autonomous colleges, the Government's own NIEPA review committee report on the functioning of the existing autonomous colleges says all there needs to be said on the subject. The report cites the case of Loyola College where a whole department was summarily wound up by the Management because a new paper the department sought to introduce was seen as being potentially subversive. This in an area of decision-making where we are told faculty Boards of Studies are to have complete jurisdiction, namely, syllabi, pedagogy, and so on. Needless to say, that teachers thus dismissed from 'autonomous' colleges are left without recourse in the new scheme.

There is one other dimension to the situation. This concerns the frustrating potential that various sections of the academic community have demonstrated in recent years to thwart repressive Government policy through collective democratic action. This time the authorities have fully recognised that the new package of regimentation may not pass muster if the democratic and constitutional rights of the academic community are left intact. An inseparable component of the new policy on education is the curbing or denial of such rights. To this end has been resurrected the old and infamous Hospitals and Other Institutions Bill. Already passed by the Rajya Sabha in a shape vastly more repressive than the original text of 1979, the Bill is calculated unashamedly to abrogate the fundamental right under Article 19 of the Constitution to form associations for purposes of collective bargaining.

A word in conclusion. It is strength of the bourgeois-democratic system that the Government's own presentations with respect to the formulation of the NEP have provided the materials for critiquing the policy *per se*. Thus we do recognise that the bureaucracy entrusted with such homework has sometimes both the equipment and the will to call a spade a spade. Perhaps the bureaucracy need not be looked upon as an undifferentiated monolith. One would like to think that much progressive, if not positively radical, potential exists within its ranks, however muted for reasons not far to seek.

It is not our position that the policy as it now stands need wait for a systemic political change for enlightened transformation. Indeed, however much its provisions may benefit the ruling classes in the short term, we do not believe that the long-term fall-out can be conducive to the more enduring interests of the Indian State. Till such time as the latter is relatively autonomous of and above turn to our republican constitution for legitimation, we believe that whether it be economic or educational policy its credentials are best served by an adherence to principles of equity. And the NEP, as has been repeatedly pointed out, is dangerously inequitous. The least that the Indian State as at present constituted can do is to match fraternal bourgeois-democratic States in its attentions to people's education (and not just as slogan or as something merely to be junked into the 'non-formal' stream), in providing at least 10 per cent of GNP to education, in seeking truly a devolution of educational thinking and practice (autonomy as at present proposed being the opposite), in putting teachers and the taught at the centre of academic formulation and decision-making, in offering strong support to languages other than English as media of instruction and testing all the way upto the university level, in increasing enrolment at *all* levels, in allowing the social sciences and the humanities to grow and to become sources of historical critiquing and agents of the suspended social revolution. We believe all this is not only desirable but possible, and, ultimately, supportive rather than antagonistic both to our democratic polity and to economic growth.

Centralising, regimenting and depoliticising education is a sure road to a sick and soulless society.

NOTES

1. See 'Science and Society in Ancient India,' *Marxism and Indology*, ed., Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, K.P. Bagchi and Company: Calcutta, New Delhi, 1981, pp.231-263.
2. See Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and Its Implications* (K.P. Bagchi and Company: New Delhi and Calcutta, 1988), pp.4-5.
3. See Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947* (Macmillan India, 1983) pp.105-6; see also S.N. Mukerji, *History of Education in India Modern Period*, Acharya Book Depot: Baroda, 1951, pp.182-195. Mukerji's book is an invaluable mine of detail, even if theoretically innocent.
4. The 'Universities Education Commission Report', p.411; more popularly known as the Radhakrishnan Commission.
5. For this computation I am indebted to the monograph *New Education Policy: A Cruel Hoax* brought out by the Democratic Teachers' Front, Delhi University; the monograph deserves to be read in full for its analysis of the question.
6. We recall what Marx wrote about; science becoming 'a productive force distinct from labour and pressed into the service of Capital' (*Capital*, Vol.I, p.361). For a discussion of the ideological shift from Reason to Rationality in the nineteenth century and the beginnings of a 'scientific' critique of ideology see Jurgen Habermas, 'Theory and Practice in a Scientific Civilization,' *Critical Sociology* ed., Paul Connerton, Penguin: Harmondsworth, England, 1976, pp. 330-362.
7. The government's documents *National Policy on Education* and *Programme of Action* are dated May and August, 1986 respectively.
8. See *Revised Guidelines on the Scheme of Autonomous Colleges*, University Grants Commission, 1986; see Annexure-III, p.23 and *passim*.