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Higher education in India has been stifled by overregulation. The opening of private universities has been severely restricted, and all but a few exempt institutions have had to comply with rigid curricular and organizational dictates. The system has been characterized by rote learning, high-stakes examination, premature specialization, and limited flexibility. In the most sweeping transformation to the system in the nation's modern history, India's new National Education Policy 2020 (NEP2020) seeks to change all that. With half of the world's university-age population residing in India, bursting with aspiration but frustrated by limited access to quality institutions, new universities are emerging. One is Sai University, the first in the nation to integrate heretofore siloed programs in arts and sciences, technology, and law into an integrated ecosystem at the undergraduate level.

A wave of reform has swept over higher education in India, bringing hope to a stifling system. After seventy-five years as an independent, democratic nation, Indian higher education is finally breaking free of the mental shackles of colonial rule and the regulatory juggernaut that replaced it. In 2020, a new National Education Policy (NEP2020) was introduced, the first new policy since the National Policy on Education in 1986, and the first ever whose recommendations are transformational rather than incremental.¹ The NEP2020 calls for dramatic expansion of the education sector to serve India's vast youth population. It also calls for deregulation, liberal education, and more autonomy and flexibility for institutions and faculty.

The NEP2020 is scathing in its critique of a system that issues “heavy-handed” requirements “with too little effect,” that for too long has compelled all but a few exempt institutions to march in lockstep to a mindless, bureaucratic drum: “The mechanistic and disempowering nature of the regulatory system has been rife with very basic problems, such as heavy concentrations of power within a few bodies, conflicts of interest among these bodies, and a resulting lack of accountability.” The policy calls for “a complete overhaul” of the regulatory system “in order to re-energize the higher-education sector and enable it to thrive.”² While these new proposals are not novel ideas in education, they are radical for the current system in India. Proposals include moving away from curricula stuffed with information to be mastered, to move “towards less content” and increased “learning

about how to think critically and solve problems, how to be creative and multidisciplinary, and how to innovate, adapt, and absorb new material in novel and changing fields.” As stated in the NEP2020, students must “not only learn, but more importantly learn how to learn. . . . Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centered, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable.”³ Calling for “no hard separations between arts and sciences” is a sea change in a system that elevated science and engineering for sixty years while diminishing the arts, humanities, and social sciences.⁴

The most dramatic recommendation in the original draft of the policy was to disband the all-powerful University Grants Commission (UGC

As the name suggests, the University Grants Commission is a government agency originally set up to award grants that create or upgrade universities. It was formed in 1945 to manage India's three central universities and establish standards for applying for the commission's grants. But its regulatory reach expanded in accordance with the UGC Act of 1956, when it was made the omnibus regulator for higher education, even for institutions not seeking grants.⁶

Starting in the ninth grade, students choose between science, arts, and commerce. Four years of high school are reduced to an exam in each subject, conducted by one of several examination boards serving tens of millions of students. Once they complete these board examinations in twelfth grade, students then prepare for specialty entrance examinations if they want to pursue engineering, law, or medicine. Their scores on examinations at each stage follow them at every subsequent stage and switching fields during this process has been almost impossible. All these restrictions are now being relaxed for the better.

A confluence of factors has led to an urgency for change among policymakers, to the dismay of those who drew power from their mastery of the maze. First, the average gross enrollment ratio (the percentage of university-age students enrolled) was only 28.4 percent in recent years, compared with China's 59.6 percent for tertiary education, even though both began the post–World War II era at low single-digit rates.¹¹ Second, India has a young population: half of the inhabitants are under the age of thirty, compared with the aging populations of China, Japan, and the Western economic giants. This demographic advantage has been touted as promising a “youth dividend,” but the realization has sunk in that the higher-education system cannot scale up fast enough without opening the door more widely to autonomous private universities that can be scaled quickly.¹² Third, the exponential growth of Indians going abroad for college—spending billions of dollars in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere—was a wakeup call for India to build quality universities at home that adopt international best practices, and that students see as viable domestic options. Fourth, there is a new appreciation for the fact that ancient India was a hub of education

just as an individualistic philosophy but also as a strategic national imperative to unleash talent and innovation. Private universities are sprouting like fresh shoots in spring. Suddenly, “interdisciplinarity” and “critical thinking” have become buzzwords that, until recently, cut against the grain of a hierarchical culture—one in which thinking beyond the knowledge required to get a good job was the domain of tradition and family. Such buzzwords connoted idealistic luxuries of an opulent West where children could do whatever they please. Now these terms imply advanced cognitive development.

Among the most recent visionary universities to spring up in this new dawn is Sai University in Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, India’s southernmost state. It was founded by software entrepreneur K. V. Ramani, who also serves as its current chancellor. His software companies were among the few fledgling startups that launched India’s software industry in the 1980s, when tight import and foreign-exchange restrictions made operating these enterprises such an uphill battle that even importing desktop computers was a nightmare. Later, he helped organize his fledgling competitors to form the National Association of Software and Service Companies, an organization that tried to persuade the government to recognize India’s future in software and to consequently lower commercial barriers to entry. Today, he and his fellow startup founders from that era are credited with seeding an industry that brought India to its current position as a major exporter of software, the most sought-after provider of competitive tech jobs, and the most powerful engine of socioeconomic mobility.

Many private institutions in India have financial models in which profits from auxiliary enterprises like Ramani’s software companies are invested in the university. In this way, the university can become financially self-sustaining, and even profitable for the founder and/or sponsor, although it must be a nonprofit organization by law. Ramani represents a rare instance of pure philanthropy, however, with no business interests linked to the university. Instead, he has donated most of his acquired wealth to a trust that provides the seed funding to get the university on its feet.¹³ Equally inspired by the altruistic opportunity to impact a region of the world bursting with talent but underserved by the system, and encouraged by deregulation, I returned from the United States to serve as Sai University’s founding vice chancellor. Rarely does one get to start a university from scratch. And rarely does one encounter the paradigm shift currently seen in India, where the status quo is being disrupted and fresh ideas are changing higher education.

Such ideas are exemplified by Sai University, one of a group of so-called new-age universities moving into this unprecedented space. It is a “state private university,” a designation of the central government, which means it is private but can only be established by an act of the state legislature. It was the first of two such universities created in Tamil Nadu, and one of many launched by private philan-

thropy.¹⁴ The trajectory of private universities, which constitute the fastest growing sector in Indian higher education, also suggests that they will soon overtake public universities funded by the states, which remain the most common type of institution. Another interesting and related category resulted from the UGC Act of 1956 that prohibited the establishment of private universities, but created a small loophole, such that an institution could be “deemed to be” a university if it met certain benchmarks.¹⁵ These institutions (uniquely Indian inventions) cannot have the word “university” in their title. Thus, most call themselves institutes, even though they are universities in all but name. Now, private universities are permitted in this category and can even be called the same.¹⁶

Sai University admitted its first undergraduate class in 2021, during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the resulting lockdowns and quarantines, the university operated online at first. After restrictions were lifted, it moved to a temporary campus, and finally to its permanent campus located near an emerging corridor for education and information technology that runs parallel to the coast of the Bay of Bengal. A master plan has been completed for the one-hundred-and-three-acre property situated in a new tech park, expanding southward from Chennai, and three buildings have been constructed as part of the university’s first academic block.¹⁷

Speaking as its vice chancellor, Sai’s vision is to build a globally eminent university based on principles of liberal education designed to harness talent; develop independent, critical thinkers; and forge socially conscious citizens hungry to discover and pursue their skills. “Spark the imagination, liberate the mind” is the motto behind our mission to develop talent, not just churn out degrees.¹⁸ Thus, our principal innovation has been to expand the possibilities for cross-disciplinary education beyond what has been envisioned to date in India. Liberal arts education is catching on, but it is still viewed narrowly as excluding the sciences, engineering, and law, whose education tracks start at the undergraduate level. By contrast, Sai University characterizes its liberal education philosophy to include the humanities, sciences, technology, and law.

This inclusive disciplinary organization of knowledge and education has been essential to the advancement of expertise in and mastery of subjects, which can provide a more holistic and integrated education. In techn

established professions do not, with minimal consequences for errors. That, in a nutshell, is one of the most compelling reasons why undergraduate education must be liberal, and why, consequently, Sai University champions liberal arts education starting at the undergraduate level.

Engineering remains the dominant aspiration for college education in India, however, and preparation for the JEE-Main remains the exclusive focus of many stakeholders during students' four years of high school. Engineering is typically taught at stand-alone institutions, the vast majority of which have names like "XYZ Institute of Technology," emulating one Massachusetts institution that is revered in India perhaps more intensely than in its home country. (And indeed the most popular value of X is M, at least twenty-seven by my count.) Some new-age universities have launched multiple schools within the same institution, and the NEP2020 strongly encourages the transformation of stand-alone institutes of technology into multidisciplinary universities.²¹ A few liberal arts institutions have sprung up in India, but it's still a struggle for students and parents to grasp that liberal arts can also include the sciences. Thus, "liberal arts and sciences" has become a way to make the label palatable to a mindset oriented toward science and mathematics.

Despite these collaborative approaches, mental silos persist. Liberal arts schools, which award mostly undergraduate degrees in the arts or sciences, are still seen as distinct from schools of engineering, which award the degree regarded as the coin of the realm in India: the bachelor's of technology (or BTech). Some universities offer a BTech or an undergraduate law degree from a school embedded within the university, but none integrate these specialties into liberal undergraduate education as Sai University does.

At Sai University, we strive to create as much of a cross-disciplinary ecosystem as possible while preserving disciplinary rigor. All undergraduates are required to take a set of foundation courses: among them, Global Challenges; Frontiers; Environment and Sustainability; Writing and Communication; and Critical Thinking.²² The first two courses are designed differently from most college courses. Global Challenges exposes students to current issues – environment, war, migration – under the guidance of leaders who address them. While Frontiers uses the same format to study innovations in the arts, sciences, and technology, both are col-

substitute for travel abroad, but they enable students to feel connected internationally, even while at home. The model raises their awareness of postgraduate opportunities abroad and of emerging trends and careers.

Indians place a premium on higher education but have a low opinion of the domestic system that governs it. Case in point: India represents half the world's college-age population, the highest of any country, but a staggering 72 percent (or roughly seventy-one million individuals) are not enrolled, despite a yearning to advance themselves.²³ And those who are enrolled do not receive the caliber of education they seek. Competition for the miniscule number of seats at quality institutions is also fierce, and the pressure on students to prepare for national entrance exams continues to be a major source of stress. Considering their domestic options, the number of Indians applying for undergraduate programs abroad is increasing exponentially, and the amount of money spent by these families to send their children abroad is staggering, particularly if you contrast tuition in India versus the United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ministry of Human Resource Development, “About National Education Policy,” Government of India, September 1, 2023, <https://www.education.gov.in/nep/about-nep>. Following the publication of the NEP2020, the Ministry of Human Resource Development was renamed the Ministry of Education, its original name from 1947 to 1985. Manish R. Joshi, *National Credit Framework: The Report of the High-Level Inter-Ministerial Committee Comprising Members from UGC*,

cation in China from 1990 to 2022,” Statista, February 20, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1113954/china-tertiary-education-college-university-enrollment-rate>; and World Bank Open Data, “School Enrollment, Tertiary (% Gross),” September 19, 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/se.ter.enrr>.

- ²¹ Ministry of Human Resource Development, *National Education Policy 2020*, 50.
- ²² Sai University, “B.A. (Hons.) / B.Sc. (Hons.) (3 years + Optional Advanced 4th Year),” <https://saiuniversity.edu.in/arts-and-sciences-programs> (accessed March 13, 2024); and Sai University, “SaiU Foundation Courses,” <https://saiuniversity.edu.in/saiu-foundation-courses> (accessed March 13, 2024).
- ²³ UNESCO Institute of Statistics, “UIS Statistics,” UNESCO, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx> (accessed March 12, 2024).
- ²⁴ At Sai University, average annual fees for residential undergraduate students total an estimated 480,000 Indian rupees (or roughly US\$5,797) for the 2023–2024 academic year. In comparison, at private nonprofit institutions in the United States, the average annual total cost for first-time, full-time undergraduate students living on campus was US\$55,800 (or roughly 4,620,256 Indian rupees) for the 2021–2022 academic year. All currency conversion is based on the xe.com exchange rate on March 12, 2024. See Sai University, “Sai University Academic Programs 2023–Fee Structure,” <https://saiuniversity.edu.in/sai-university-fees> (accessed March 12, 2024); and National Center for Education Statistics, “Price of Attending an Undergraduate Institution,” *Condition of Education*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cua>.