National Institute of Technology, Silchar, Assam, India

From the Selected Works of Kishor Chandra Satpathy, PhD

2013

National Integration through REC / NIT System in India: An Overview

Kishor Chandra Satpathy, PhD

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kishor_chandra_satpathy/39/
VISTAS OF EDUCATION

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N E BOOKS AND PUBLISHERS
Silchar-788005, Assam, India
CONTENTS

Foreword
Preface
Profile of the Editors

SECTION I : TECHNICAL EDUCATION

   Dr. Amarendra Pani  
   1 - 11

   Prof. K. M. Baharul Islam  
   12 - 30

3. An Analysis of Vocational and Technical Education for Persons with Disabilities of North East Region.  
   Prof. K. M. Pandey & Shri. Abhishek Kumar  
   31 - 46

4. Total Quality Management in Technical Education.  
   Smt. Asha Rani & Smt. Mamta Rani  
   47 - 54

   Dr. Ashim Kumar Das  
   55 - 60
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Importance of Leadership in Total Quality Management.</td>
<td>61 - 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Manoj Kumar Verma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>National Integration through REC / NIT System in India: An Overview.</td>
<td>78 - 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shri. Bata Kishore Ray &amp; Dr. Kishor Chandra Satpathy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SECTION II : HIGHER EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Scholarly Publishing of Higher Education: A Contemporary Issue.</td>
<td>88 - 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Pubalika Bhattacharya Maitra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dr. Sreeparna Bhattacharjee &amp; Smt. Ranjita Chand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Higher Education and E-learning in this Knowledge Explosion Era.</td>
<td>110 - 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smt. Rupashree Paul</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Response to Globalisation with Reference to Human Development and Education in India: Problems and Prospects.</td>
<td>116 - 131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prof. N. B. Biswas &amp; Dr. Kishor Chandra Satpathy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12 ICT Literacy Among +2 Students in Relation to Their Gender and College Management.
Shri. D. K. Pradhan & Dr. B.P. Sahu

13 Quality Dimension of Student Evaluation at Elementary Stage – From North East India Perspective.
Dr. T. K. Basantia and Smt. Munmun Banerjee

SECTION III : GENERAL EDUCATION

14 Evolution of National Policy on Education in India.
Shri. Bata Kishore Ray & Dr. Kishor Chandra Satpathy

15 Teacher Education in the Light of Inclusive Education in Assam: A Critical Analysis.
Smt. Mouchumi Deka

16 Employee’s Motivation for Quality Excellence in Educational Institutes.
Prof. N. N. Pandey

17 Human Rights Education and North-East India: Some Reflections.
Dr. Remith George Carri & Dr. Sreeparna Bhattacharjee
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Page Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Education for National Development.</td>
<td>Dr. R.K. Mujoo</td>
<td>217 - 220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Building Sustainable Society and Commoditized Philosophy of Educational Institutions.</td>
<td>Dr. Nigamananda Biswas</td>
<td>221 - 234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Popular Education – A Strategy for Social Change.</td>
<td>Dr. Sreekala Edannur</td>
<td>235 - 239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Promoting National Integration in Education.</td>
<td>Prof. K. M. Baharul Islam</td>
<td>240 - 248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>National Integration and Communal Harmony.</td>
<td>Shri. Radhapada Dutta &amp; Dr. Kishor Chandra Satpathy</td>
<td>249 - 253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Media and its Role in Education and Women Empowerment.</td>
<td>Dr. Payel Das &amp; Smt. Rupa Rani Sonowal</td>
<td>265 - 282</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SECTION IV: ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

24 Environmental Education: An Appraisal.
   Prof. Chira Ranjan Bhattacharjee

   Smt. Rupashree Paul & Shri Bata Kishore Ray

SECTION V: EDUCATION & THE YOUTH

26 Youth Development Through Cultural Competence.
   Dr. Y. Venakta Rao

27 Approach to Mitigate Drug Abuse in Educational Institutes.
   Shri. Manoj K. Dutta

28 Involvement of Youth in Primary Healthcare.
   Prof. Gopalji Mishra

29 Community Centred and Co-Curricular Activities for Students: A Need of the Hour.
   Prof. Asim Kumar Sil & Dr. Kishor Chandra Satpathy
| 30 | **Need of Awareness of HIV/AIDS Among the Indian Youth.** | 329 - 337 |
|    | Dr. Manoj Kumar Sinha & Dr. Kishor Chandra Satpathy |

| 31 | **Need of Guidance and Counselling for Indian Youth.** | 338 - 367 |
|    | Dr. Manoj Kumar Sinha & Dr. Kishor Chandra Satpathy |
1.0 Introduction:

Few countries in the world have such an ancient and diverse culture as India’s. Stretching back in an unbroken sweep over 5000 years, India’s culture has been enriched by successive waves of migration which were absorbed into the Indian way of life.

It is this variety which is a special hallmark of India. Its physical, religious and racial variety is as immense as its linguistic diversity. With about 800 dialects and 15 officially recognized languages, several religions including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism, various styles of art, architecture, literature, music and dance, and several lifestyles from the urban and rural to the tribal, India is a melting pot of cultural diversity. Underneath this diversity lies the continuity of Indian civilization and social structure from the very earliest times until the present day. Modern India
VISTAS OF EDUCATION

presents a picture of unity in diversity to which history provides no parallel.

In this paper a short review has been made on the expectations from RECS and NITS. The process of conversion from REC to NIT has also been considered briefly in the perspective of National Integration.

2.0 National Integration:
As per Dorothy Simpson, National integration means “creating a mental outlook which will prompt and inspire every person to place loyalty to the country above group loyalties and the welfare of the country above narrower sectarian interests.” National integration is the awareness of a common identity amongst the citizens of a country. It means that though we belong to different castes, religions and regions and speak different languages we recognize the fact that we are all one. It is the Identification of people with nation as a whole and not with sectional identities. It means doing away with inter-state, inter-linguistic, inter-religious and inter-cultural differences and fostering a spirit/attitude of tolerance, respect and an appreciation of the viewpoint of those belonging to other states or other linguistic, religious and cultural groups. National Integration does not imply ‘similarity’ or becoming ‘identical.’ It is unity in spite of all differences, in other words, Unity in diversity. India is a diverse country with people belonging to different religions, cultures, races and those who speak a several languages. Education helps bring about unity in diversity. National integration is unity in diversity. It implies social, political, economic, linguistic and cultural unity. His kind of integration is very important in the building of a strong and prosperous nation. In fact, national unity and integrity, i.e. national integration has been one of the most important priorities of our country.
2.1 Role of Education in National Integration:
India’s first Prime Minister Pt. Nehru while forming National Integration Committee in 1961 said: “One of the hardest problems before us today is the building up of a national mind by curbing religious, linguistic and communal conflicts which tend to disunite us. NI cannot be built by brick and mortar, it cannot be built by chisel and hammer. It has to grow silently in the minds and hearts of men. The only process is the process of Education. Education can play a vital role in strengthening emotional integration.”

3.0 Regional Engineering Colleges (RECs):
In this diversity there is a unique unity facets of this unity are many which have maintained the togetherness of India as well as Indians. In this context the role of National Institutes of Technology [NITs] is quite significant. When India began its planned development in early 50’s, we didn’t have adequate technical manpower to man various developmental projects being contemplated at that time. On the recommendation of Engineering Personnel Committee (EPC) set up by the Planning Commission in 1955, eight RECs (two in each regions-east, west, north & south) were set up in early sixties as joint and co-operative ventures of the Central and State Government concerned with a view to providing the required technical man power for the industrial projects being contemplated during the 2nd Five-Year Plan (1956-61). These institutes were registered as autonomous bodies under the Society Registration Act 1860 and affiliated to the State Universities in their respective regions.

3.1 Conversion of RECs to NITs:
The Programme of Action (POA), 1992 of the National Policy on Education, 1986, vide para 15.8.3 had recommended that “in order to enable the RECs to effectively act pace setting
institutes and to provide leadership to the Technical Education Institutes in respective regions, steps will be taken to give maximum autonomy …..and detailed review will be conducted for deciding the future thought and orientation so as to broaden their horizon by improving the existing management structure.” As a corollary to the direction of POA (1992), the Union Government had set up a High Powered Review Committee (HPRC) under the Chairmanship of Dr R A Mashelkar, Director-General, Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR) in 1996 for

(i) Reviewing the progress made by RECs and suggest their future role in building high quality Technological Education base in the country,

(ii) Examining the administration and funding arrangement of RECs and propose changes keeping in view the challenges offered by the Global Technology scenario, and

(iii) Suggesting a mechanism for closer participation of RECs with industry, society and other institutions etc.

The High Powered Review Committee (HPRC) submitted its report in 1998 which was further examined by another Empowered Committee (EC) set up under the chairmanship of the then Union Education Secretary which broadly accepted the recommendations of HPRC and suggested further improvement in funding pattern of these institutes. After due consultation with the State Governments, the process of conversion for erstwhile RECs to NITs began in 2002-2003 with the grant of deemed university status. Finally, the Union Cabinet accorded its approval on February 19, 2003 for making all NITs as fully funded institutes of the Central Government. Subsequently, NITs were brought under the National Institutes of Technology Act 2007 w.e.f. 15th August 2007 and were declared to be Institutes of National
Importance for providing instructions and research in branches of engineering, technology, management, education, sciences and arts and for the advancement of learning and dissemination of knowledge in such branches and for certain other matters connected with such institutions

3.2 Rationale for Conversion of RECs into NITs
RECs have very considerable achievement to their credit and have made their mark as better-endowed technical institutions of the country. But in the backdrop a liberalized economy and rapid change of technologies, the country’s expectations from these colleges had significantly changed over the four decades since the RECs were established. Besides, developing technological capability is recognized as a key strategy for economic growth in an internationally competitive environment. Production of world-class technical manpower is a matter of great urgency for the country’s rapid economic development. However, the number of world-class engineering institutions in the country has been so far limited to IITs and a few other institutions.

It is in this backdrop that the Government had set up a High Powered Review Committee (HPRC) in 1996 under the chairmanship of Dr. R A Mashelkar, DG, CSIR to look at the strategic actions, which would help develop RECs into such institutions.

The recommendations of HPRC were further examined by an Empowered Committee chaired by the Union Education Secretary in 1999 and specific areas that emerged as the core issues requiring policy direction from the Central Government related to (i) administrative, financial and academic autonomy by granting RECs deemed to be university status, (ii) changing funding mechanism & funding pattern, (iii) re-shaping governance structure (iv) re-naming RECs (v) re-designating Principals as Directors, (vi) re-
orientation of PG Courses and (vii) overhauling admission procedures through National Education System Testing etc.

3.3 Role of the Central Government:
The Government of India also felt that there was a need to produce quality graduates like those coming out of our IIT system at all levels so to fulfill the increasing technical manpower demand by optimal use of resources. Whereas opening new IITs is a very expensive and costly proposition, the need of the Industry could be met by up gradation of RECs to NITs by granting them deemed to be University status having structural changes in governance, academic programmes, financial management, funding arrangement etc. Setting up of IIT costs about Rs.800 crores at current prices while upgrading an REC to a comparable level would cost one-tenth of that. By converting RECs into NITs, the Central Government did not any way try to bring these institutions under its control by diluting the stakes of the State Governments. What it has tried to do is to put in place a completely autonomous apolitical and professional management set-up [Board of Governors-BOG] having administrative, academic and financial autonomy.

3.4 Spread of NITs
Engineering College, Agartala were converted as NIT Patna, NIT, NIT Raipur and NIT Agartala respectively in 2004, 2005, and 2006 by the Central Government. Further the Government of India on 17th September 2009 announced setting up of 10 more NITs in Manipur; Meghalaya; Mizoram; Nagaland; Goa (which would also cater to UTs of Daman & Diu, Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Lakshdweep); Puducherry (which will also cater to Andaman & Nicobar Islands); Sikkim; Delhi (which will also cater to Chandigarh) and Uttrakhand. The objective behind this expansion was to increase access and to cater to the needs of States/UTs which did not have NITs especially to benefit the North East which were lacking in national level technical institutions and thereby bringing them to the main stream of the technical education.

4.0 Structure of Governance:
President of India is the visitor of all NITs. At the apex level, there is NIT Council to lay down policy guidelines of common interest to all NITs. At the Institute, there is a Board of Governors to decide about the policy and governance of the Institute. Board in discharge of its duties is assisted by the Finance Committee, Buildings & Works Committee and the Senate. The Director who serves under the Board of Governors, is the chief academic and executive officer. Academic policies are decided by its Senate, which is composed of all professors and other representatives. The Senate controls and approves the curriculum, courses, examinations, and results. Senate committees examine specific academic matters.

5.0 Vision & Mission Statement for NITs:
As recommended by HPRC [para 9.2], the statement of vision & mission for NITs reads as follows:
“To provide education and training at the highest possible level of excellence in engineering and technology and produce quality graduates at all levels to fulfill the technical manpower demand of industry, services and society in a most cost-effective manner; to act as drivers for all round industrial growth through upgradation of knowledge and skills of working engineers and technologists and adoption, development and transfer of technologies; to create innovative models and approaches for educational delivery; to act as pace setters for the other technical institutions in the region; to establish strong links with all stakeholders viz; industry, government, alumni and society, in order to provide best professional capabilities for problem solving; to live continually towards the aspirations of the vulnerable section of the society; and to promote national integration and development of the country as a whole.”

6.0 Unique System of Admission:
The very foundation of NITs and its gradual spread all over the Country is based on the principle of National Integration. These institutions are no doubt national level Institution with an All India Character. But one unique thing about NITs/RECs which distinguishes them from other national level institutions are its system of admission which is both local and at the same time national. Fifty percent of the total seats of NITs are reserved for the students of the state in which these institutes are located while remaining fifty percent of seats of various NITs are pooled together and distributed among all states and Union Territories of the Indian Union. Thus in every NIT one gets students from each state and Union Territory. For admission into NIT system merits as well as locality of the students are two key parameters which decide the final composition of student population in the Institute. This compulsory mix of students from each state
and UT present a unique feature in terms of language, culture, food and attire. Since the undergraduate program in Engineering and Technology is totally residential and the course duration is rather quite long—a little for more than 4 years, Students from each region get to learn new cultural values and appreciate the diversity of Indian ethos—be it food and festivals, food or attire, language and living. This element of subtle cultural infusion in the future citizen of the country in their formative years goes a long way in developing true national integration of India.

We have narrated in the proceeding articles about the theme and process of conversion of RECs to NITs. We may now review as to how far these basic expectations were fulfilled. From personal experience of the author, it may be said that the mixture of REC products were a bit heterogeneous. Homogeneity could not be achieved in the true form. Let us have a look to the following compositions.

(a) Teachers and officers: Recruited through All India advertisements, but due to various factors, mostly, people from neighboring States are attracted and appointed. However, recently NIT Council has decided that ordinarily not more than 50% faculty shall be appointed from the State in which a NIT is located.

(b) Students: 50% from parent State and 50% from rest of the country.

(c) Grade-III & Grade-IV: From neighboring localities.

It is seen that in REC Structures, people from various States and languages affinity made their own groups and division and in some cases these were noticeable. Of course, a slow assimilation regarding cultural mixing were taking place and
staff and students were getting accustomed in using English. Needless to mention that English being the medium of instruction is mostly used as link of communication.

In the late nineties and in current years, due to political turmoil throughout, a sense of disintegration is developing and crystallizing fast side by side along with a sense of unity and integration. The process of assimilation of all regional and language groups of the country are essential.

The present structure of NITs are expected to serve as one of the many ways of uniting the social cultural and religious heritage of the country so that one can say very proudly that we are all Indians and we shall be proud to be an Indian.

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