Autonomous Colleges in Indian Higher Education
India is one of the ancient seats of human civilization. The tradition of intellectual activity was nurtured from the vedic times. The centres of learning and their libraries are the sine qua non of any civilization. Our subcontinent with its hoary past has had the privilege of having on its soil the famous seats of learning with their rich libraries such as those at Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Nagarjuna Kona, Mithila, Somapuri, Varanasi and Vallabhi. Some of these centres and their libraries were visited by Chinese scholars like F-Hien, Hinen-Tsang and I-Tsing [72]. The riches, both physical and intellectual, made it the land of wonder that was India during the medieval ages [8].

Libraries form a vital part of communication and education system. They make available through books and other varieties of media knowledge that has been accumulated through the ages. People in all walks of life, including students, teachers, businessmen, government officials, scholars and scientists use library resources in their work. In addition, a large number of people turn to libraries to satisfy their desire for knowledge or for leisure-time activity [11]. Library therefore ranks first among man’s most useful service institutions.
2.1. A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

India had autonomous colleges as early as in 1834 and only later came the Universities and the system of affiliated colleges (1857), introduced by the British. The Universities in India in early period were only examining bodies and there were no teaching departments attached to them. In 1917 teaching departments were started in Calcutta university which was viewed as an encroachment on the rights of the colleges [38]. The principal of Presidency college, Calcutta for example campaigned for the freedom of his college to prescribe its own curricula and to conduct its own examinations. This was the first earliest attempt at regaining autonomy for colleges.

The University Education Commission (1949) headed by S.Radhakrishnan discusses about autonomy to educational institutions, but no specific mention is made about autonomous colleges. In 1954 R.K.Singh, the Principal of B.R.College, Agra succeeded in getting a resolution passed in the senate of Agra University in support of conferring autonomy to colleges under the University [44] (John, 1970 and Gupta, 1983). UP legislature passed an amendment to the Agra University Act to incorporate this resolution of the University senate and to sanction autonomy to some of its colleges. But unfortunately there was vehement opposition to this novel idea and neither Agra University nor UP state could achieve the distinction of being the first in
starting autonomous college in the country. But as on date UP state has started only three autonomous college.

The Report of the Committee on colleges, 1962 made recommendations for autonomous colleges. “One of the practical methods of improving the standards of higher education in India seems to be to select a few colleges on the basis of their past work, influence, maturity and academic standards, and give them, what might be called for want of a better phrase, ‘Autonomous Status’ with freedom to develop their personalities, experiment with new ideas, frame their own syllabi in consultations with the University, devise and conduct their examinations and initiate new movements. This does not mean that the autonomous colleges will have university status” (Recommendation No.30).

The Kothari commission has reiterated the arguments of this committee and made strong recommendations to confer autonomy atleast to 50 colleges in the fourth Five Year Plan itself. Later on the central government and the University Grant Commission instituted committees to work out the details of these proposals and after much prompting and pleadings the dream of academics for autonomy was realised in the year 1978 in Tamil Nadu and nominally in five other centres in the country. Later on, it was expanded in 1987-88 to other centres and states.
The scheme was implemented on a large scale in mid eighties as an outcome of National policy on Education 1986. Though more than 7500 colleges are functioning under the affiliating system with 148 universities, only 115 colleges are autonomous in seven states. State-wise break up of the colleges is: Tamil Nadu 48, Madya Pradesh 29, Andra Pradesh 20, Rajasthan 5, Orissa 5, Gujarat 2 and Utter Pradesh 2. Though the data reveals that seven states have implemented the autonomous scheme, it is only four viz. Tamil Nadu, Andra Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan that have implemented the scheme in the real sense of the term. In Madya Pradesh it is only on paper while the rest of them are in no way near it.

2.2. GOALS OF AUTONOMOUS INSTITUTIONS

Throughout the country seminars on autonomy arranged to educate the faculty in various aspects of the new challenge are being under autonomy more hours are allotted for Seminar and paper reading sessions [54]. This takes place during the afternoon hours after the teaching is over. This new system encourages the students have an interactive and intensive participation in the extension of curriculum. It also helps the students to spend time in the library to collect information for the related topic to be discussed in the session.
In few autonomous colleges [e.g. Government College (Men), Kumbakonam, The Department of Economics]. ‘Library Work’ [37] is made compulsory for all P.G. Students. It helps the students become regular visitors to the library and make them potential readers. Due to the impact of autonomy better teaching-learning atmosphere is being created. A rule regarding minimum attendance required for appearing examinations is enforced. Apart from the traditional lecture method used for disseminating information, group discussion, seminar and paper presentation form part of teaching in autonomous colleges. Students are given opportunities to do field work. They also have to do study hours and library session beyond the classroom.

The conferment of autonomy amounts to delegation of some responsibilities to the college which includes the framing of syllabus, devising methods of evaluation, constitution of board of studies and academic council. All these require a willingness to innovate experimental methods and update teachers knowledge, the process in which the role of better library facilities plays an important part.

Autonomy seeks to make education relevant and need based [51]. In this system of education students are provided some flexibility in the choice of their study. With this end in view, the curriculum is frequently updated,
availing of the expertise in the university and Industry. In some autonomous colleges new subjects like computer education are integrated with the syllabus. The curriculum strategy and effectiveness of learning may be improved by incorporating such activities as Seminar, and project work as part of the curriculum. To facilitate these objectives of acquiring new knowledge and skills, it is imperative to improve the library facilities in autonomous colleges since the library is the central place of activity for academicians.

Autonomous status has helped to introduce value based education. In some autonomous colleges students are encouraged to read, analyse and review books like Ramayana and Mahabharatha [4]. Students do self study of the book allocated. This helps the library to increase its book collection on classics.

The University Grants Commission [30] emphasises that autonomy should be less a reward for good performance, but rather a means to achieve higher standard in education and greater participation in the educational process. In autonomous colleges teachers insist that the students who do their project work must necessarily have a computer based component. Assignments are given not in the age old, beaten track method, but from latest topics and research fields. In this context the students have no other way except using library facilities. So the library becomes a more important facility in autonomous colleges.
Very often, the teachers in autonomous colleges get feedback from the students to ascertain how useful and suitable the curriculum is. As per the UGC guidelines the autonomous colleges used to convene the Academic council which consists of a very wide spectrum of experts from all sections of academic community, including student representatives to discuss the finalisation of syllabi and other problems relating to learning process by self study. The feedback from the students help the authorities to assess the effectiveness or otherwise of the library.

As per the UGC guidelines, the College will have the following Committees to ensure proper management of academic, financial and general administrative affairs.

1. The Governing Body/Board of Management.
2. The Academic Council.
3. The Board of Studies.

In addition to that non-statutory advisory bodies like
a. Admission Committee
b. Examination Committee
c. Library Committee
d. Students Welfare & Grievances Cell
e. Finance Committee
f. UGC Research Project Committee
g. Planning & Evaluation Committee
also must function in autonomous colleges.
As per guidelines the college librarian will act as Secretary to the library committee. He is a standing member in the planning and evaluation committee and students welfare and grievance committee. The autonomy facilitates the colleges to manage their own affairs without depending on external agencies and this will be conducive to the timely framing and modification of courses, conduct of examinations and release of results.

It provides scope for enriching and updating the syllabus with the inclusion of modern/application oriented/socially relevant courses. It necessitates hard work on the part of both the teachers and the students. Learning is made exacting for students because of the need to make an in-depth study of specific areas of their choice.

Autonomy [46] promotes self-study on account of inclusion of new study patterns in the curriculum. They provided facilities for students to earn extra credits through certificate course. Most of the courses are job oriented. There is a provision to allot funds for purchasing of books for new areas. The teachers were also satisfied because of its scope for deep involvement in the framing of syllabi.
2.3. AUTONOMY, ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In conclusion, autonomy may be described as the power to act without external control. It is to be viewed as an organisational or managerial requirement for the fulfilment of responsibilities [87]. Autonomy and accountability are mutually complementary. An individual or an institution can not be held responsible for (lack of) performance if it has not been given the requisite freedom to act. If an autonomous college is to be held accountable for the quality of its education, or the preparedness of its product (students), then it has to be given autonomy regarding essential matters like selection of staff, content of curricula, minimum standards to be achieved and utilisation of funds allotted to it. It is necessary to attain a balance between accountability and autonomy for, as Berdahl (1990) points out, [10] “too, much autonomy might lead to Universities unresponsive to society; too much accountability might destroy the necessary academic ethos.”

A related issue that is often raised while discussing the performance of teachers is that of “academic freedom”. As Tight (1988) points out “academic freedom refers to the freedom of individual academics to study, teach, research and publish without being subject to or causing undue interference” [97]. The concept of academic freedom enjoins that the teacher be allowed to express his views freely and openly eventhough, they may be at variance with the ‘artificial’ view, without fear of being penalised. However, the academic freedom does not extend to, for example, neglecting teaching assignments in
favour of research interest. Academic freedom is a privilege that carries with it the responsibility of ensuring that it is used only for the welfare of the academic community and the good of the parent institution.

"Responsibility" and "Accountability" are an integral part of Autonomy. Not only the staff, but the students too assume full responsibility and accountability. With this end in view, in some autonomous colleges, the afternoon session is exclusively set apart for assignments, [35] self study and consultation. General reading in the library is a must to the students. e.g. in Sacret Heart College, Tirupattur, in keeping with modern trends, the library catalogue has been computerised. Any one of its terminals provides for the staff and students, bibliographical details of any book. The required bibliographical data is literally available at his fingertips. Students availing themselves of this open access facility are free to choose a subject of their liking.

2.4. STUDENT'S DISCIPLINE UNDER AUTONOMOUS STATUS

Student unrest is the most common cause affecting the academic atmosphere in an academic institution. Many causes could be attributed to the students-unrest. Delay in finding the solutions to the problem of students, failure to provide scope for placement, non-provisions of adequate material comforts and conducive atmosphere for the students to equip themselves academically. Under the autonomous system the objectives of the higher
studies and also of the youths pursuing their higher studies are fulfilled by the following activities:

1. Making attendance compulsory and a component of the internal assessment system.

2. Acquiring latest Books and Equipment required for the students out of the UGC Autonomous Grants sanctioned by the U.G.C.

2.5. EXAMINATION SYSTEM

The evaluation of Academic performance of students is based on continuous assessment, reflected by marks in the semester exams. Libraries must provide question bank services to the students for the preparation of examinations. There is provision for retotalling/revaluation and improvement etc.

In St.Joseph’s College, Tiruchirappalli students are given a chance to get internal assessment marks (UG 25%, PG 30%) for assignment/Library work/ [34] Seminar. Therefore examination reform also induces the students to use library compulsorily. For that, students have a chance to realise the value of library service in the college environment. Question Banks with multiple choice question have been developed in the library for the benefit of the students.
In order to enhance the employability of University graduates on the one hand and to empower them to seek entrepreneurial independence on the other, vocationalisation of higher education at the undergraduate level has been introduced in many autonomous colleges in Tamil Nadu.

In the University, the semester system is optional, there is no credit system and sufficient credits are not a condition for promotion. For UG courses there is one valuation only and continuous assessment is not obligatory. Whereas in autonomous, the colleges semester system is obligatory and credit system is followed and minimum credits of 12 is required for promotion to next year. Double valuation is made for both for UG and PG courses. Continuous assessment is compulsory. Library work/study is taken into account for internal assessment, whereas in the University there is no such system. It is known that students of autonomous colleges are more aware of the library services.

Besides the conventional methods of evaluation viz. theory and practical examination the following methods are being experimented to assess the performance of learners in few autonomous colleges.

By assessing institutional training reports on the job training reports.
By conducting model interview, by conducting group discussion and assessing learner's performance.
By assessing library note-books.
By conducting viva-voce examination.
By assessing projects/practical note-books [36]
By comparing the actual performance of students with the standard norms developed in games and athletic events.

2.6. LIBRARY IN AUTONOMOUS COLLEGES

The University Grants Commission offers financial assistance to colleges with a view to improve the infrastructural facilities of the colleges and to raise the academic standards. The financial assistance reaches the colleges in various forms and for different purposes like funds for building, class rooms, laboratories or in the form of scholarships (fellowships) awarded the teachers for pursuing research [76]. The colleges, especially autonomous colleges, throughout the length and breadth of the country have benefited by the liberal funding of the University Grant Commission.

The UGC at present takes the college as a unit for granting funds for buying library books and library building extension grant. And also it provides assistance to the autonomous colleges for buying equipments to the libraries e.g. Computer or photocopier machine.
In autonomous colleges, it is necessary to have a system for provision of good library and information services, which is an important factor determining the quality of teaching learning process.

The teaching technique adopted by the autonomous colleges, minimises readymade notes, gives assignments to the students, makes the students to prepare their own notes from books, periodicals and other reference sources.

The quality of library and information services offered in a college depends mainly on the position of library in college structure, quality and quantum of staff available, the organization of materials and such other technical factors [55].

The librarian is a member of the college council in all autonomous colleges. His membership in college council helps him to shape the library policy. And also it is necessary for him to attend staff meetings, to acquire himself with the trends in the college and render appropriate service to the students and teachers.

Orientation lectures are given by the librarians in most of the autonomous colleges. It helps the students to use the library resources and also know the arrangement of information in major reference books.
Secondly, autonomy is also to liberate the colleges from the excessive, minute and sometimes oppressive control of the Universities and allow them necessary freedom to chalk out their plan of action including cause, curriculum and examination and subject to the overall supervision and control of the Universities [5].

New methods of teaching, examination and evaluation method, viz. seminar and assignment, library work create reading habit among students in autonomous colleges. For the promotion of reading habit and to attract the students and teachers, the autonomous college libraries are given more importance both in planning finance and a good collection of books. Paul Buck, an eminent Harvard University Librarian remarked “a good collection of books attracts a good faculty, in turn attracts good students” [17]. So, the reputation of a college depends on the status of its library.

In autonomous colleges, the librarian plays a vital role, he can discharge his obligation only by shaping the library-users into self-directed learners, thereby transforming the library into an intellectual workshop. He has to introduce the learner to the world of exploration. He has to intimate him the process of such exploration, personally and by participation. Above all, he should help him to chart the course of action and to make the breakthrough in his way. In this journey of the student for knowledge, the library, its resources, its personnel, its modalities of work, its climate and culture and its various
services have to provide him support which will prove critically vital in sustaining his morale, his commitment and his will to learn on his own.

Academic freedom does not mean academic permissiveness. Autonomy does not mean an authority to do anything we like or introduce reforms of a tinkering nature, or tampering with the system time and again [64].

One of the areas while enjoying autonomy, where extra-ordinary caution and restraint is to be exercised is in the field of examination reforms. It is through internal and external assessment that they allow their students to go in to the world stamping them as full-fledged graduates or post-graduates. If their valuation is not creditworthy, the very credibility of their system in the name of caution and restraint they can not afford to be excessively self-defensive and rigid in introducing the needed reforms.

A library week was organised as part of the National library week in many autonomous colleges. Book exhibition, book reviews quiz programmes, competitions in making book marks of posters and a seminar on the data base and information technology retrieval system was conducted. A Booklet on know your library to the students to make the use of library more effective.

The students of autonomous courses can make representations in respect of grievances related to academic matters including continuous assessment.
When they are not satisfied with the outcome of their representations, the student can make representations to the appeals and grievances committee. The librarian is a standing member in the grievance committee. It helps him to know the problems of students relating to library service.

For the success of autonomous colleges there is need for reorientation of the staff and through preparation of the students and their parents and wholehearted co-operation between these two groups and a close collaboration among the management, staff-students and the community, the University, the UGC, and the State Government. A keen willingness on the part of each of these groups to innovate, to experiment and to adopt and undergo change is a must. It requires on the part of teachers a continuous updating of knowledge and exposure open to the changes in society, industry and environment. The teacher must be conversant with curriculum framing and renewal and new teaching and evaluation methods.

Departing from the traditional methods, the students will have to be exposed to situations like field training community service, project work, library work etc. The general part of compulsory curriculum could be composed of seminars, term papers, minor and major projects, field training, community service, library session, vocational training etc.
2.7. GAINS OF AUTONOMY LEADS TO USE OF LIBRARY

Most of the autonomous colleges have made helpful changes in curricula to reflect local relevance, whereby the study of local history, flora and fauna, soil, political systems, milieu and business became possible for the first time. The shifting of power to make such a change from the University academic council to these autonomous colleges made such changes possible. In a few colleges attempts were made to relate theoretical knowledge to local practical applications. Linkage with industry has facilitated such attempts. The study of chemistry led to an interest in local soil and water analysis; the study of history created an interest in marking histories of local areas, inscriptions and institutions; the study of sociology and social work lead to learner awareness of the problems and possibilities of the community and social milieu. This may be said of both subjects, sciences and humanities [80].

Another gain of autonomy is the sense of pride with which curricula and pedagogic innovations are made. The interaction with experts in the board of studies, the freedom to determine the syllabi for as own students is all done in one campus. The recent scheme of UGC to introduce vocational subjects into conventionally academic courses of study has began to make an impact in this direction.

The liberalisation of the undergraduate curriculum by diversifying it through restructurisation has helped sciences and humanities to cross fences
and discover each other’s potential for knowledge and development. Academic autonomy has opened the way for at least some colleges to try alternative systems of education without the constraints of the affiliating system. New academic and parallel educational agencies in some autonomous colleges have begun to offer a large number of self-financed need-based courses of study which have earned for many a hopeless youth reasonably good careers [28].

Above all, autonomy has made both the teacher and the taught a lot more busy as they work through internal assessment during a given semester. This helps to avoid lost minute cramming before examination.