

Unshackling IIMs, others

Centre's desire to give greater autonomy to higher learning institutes is welcome

The Modi Government must be commended for piloting a Bill to grant greater autonomy to Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and getting it passed in the Lok Sabha. The Bill considerably reduces the Government's control over the IIMs. The IIMs are quality institutes of higher learning in the country, but their functioning had been hobbled by an unduly large extent of Government interference over the years. The Bill seeks to end the Government's role in the appointments to the Board of Directors. Besides, the Indian Institutes of Management Bill, 2017, will give the IIMs a full say in the selection of faculty members and Board of Governors, and to award post-graduate degrees instead of the diplomas they presently give. These are far-reaching changes that should have come years ago. Critics of the Government, who had accused the Modi regime of interfering in the functioning of higher education institutions and seeking to 'saffronise' them, have been silenced effectively. Indeed, Union Minister for Human Resource Development Prakash Javadekar drew praise from members in the Lok Sabha, cutting across party lines, for the Bill. It's a fact that months



ago, the Government had been a target of condemnation over the manner some Directors of higher learning institutions, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, quit in apparent protest. It had been then insinuated that the Modi Government was 'destroying' such institutions. This, despite clarifications that came from the ministry concerned which sought to place the developments in perspective. Now, even the Opposition has been compelled to compliment the Government; Congress Member of Parliament Shashi Tharoor, for instance, found it "remarkable" that a Minister should willingly "surrender powers". Even Trinamool Congress members, otherwise bitterly opposed to the Union

Government, welcomed the Bill. The Government's move is in keeping with its general philosophy of withdrawing as much as possible from areas it should not be in — the Cabinet's decision to disinvest in Air India is one such example. Earlier on, through the dismantling of the Planning Commission of India, it had ended Central hegemony in deciding the planning process of States.

Interestingly, the concern now has shifted to another direction: That of the Government not having a say in the fee structure, for instance, of the IIMs. It is being said that giving more autonomy to the IIMs should not result in the institutes crafting a fee structure that makes it difficult for meritorious though financially weak students to gain access. The other concern expressed has been regarding the fate of reservations in appointment that benefit the weaker castes and classes. There is no doubt that these and other issues which may crop up, will be addressed. Greater autonomy does not necessarily mean that the IIMs will run amok without a care for social responsibilities.