The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) must be commended for releasing “India Rankings” (2016), the first-ever effort by the government to rank higher education institutions (HEIs) in the country. These rankings will become an annual feature, and it is expected that both public and private institutions, and certainly students and parents, will find them useful. For now, however, the participation of HEIs in the initiative is still voluntary and needs to improve further. Also, as the report itself acknowledges, there are
question marks over the quality of data submitted by the participating institutions. In fact, rankings under two categories — architecture and general degree colleges — could not be released due to lack of reliable data and/or low levels of participation. Questions have also been raised about the methodology used to prepare the rankings for the other four categories.

In recent years, it has become quite impossible to ignore university rankings of various kinds, which include those that are global, regional and subject-wide in scope, especially by Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). The MHRD’s decision to launch its India-wide university rankings was, in fact, partly in reaction to the poor performance of Indian institutions — including the IITs and the central universities — in world university rankings prepared by THE and QS. The stated intent of the government was to prepare India-centric ranking parameters that were sensitive to metrics such as access to higher education and social inclusion. Interestingly, if one goes through the details of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), the weightage given to India-specific parameters is not pronounced.

The decision to prepare India-centric rankings was initially criticised by many higher education commentators. However, since these rankings are here to stay, it makes more sense to focus on improving the NIRH framework even while acknowledging that any rankings exercise will suffer from some limitations. For example, there have been very credible criticisms of the ranking methodologies used by the THE and QS rankings over the years; some have been corrected but newer problem issues have cropped up.

More specifically about the MHRD rankings, apart from the problems already identified, there have been other kinds of criticisms about the report. Without naming names, Maheshwar Peri expressed surprise at the inclusion of some not-so-good
business schools among the top 50 institutions in the “management” category and the exclusion of others, which deserve to be there. He has also expressed concern that the rankings will (mis)lead prospective students to those business schools whose record on placement and average salaries is unimpressive. It is also a matter of concern and surprise that the IITs have chosen to participate in the rankings under the “engineering” category. Though they are recognised as engineering schools first, they compete under the category of “universities” in THE and QS world and regional university rankings. To the extent that they aspire to compete globally as universities, it is strange they should compete as engineering institutions in “India Rankings”.

It is also worth speculating whether “India Rankings” will be used for other purposes, especially in the context of recent announcements by the government. In his budget speech, the finance minister stated the plan to help 10 public and 10 private universities to become world-class institutions. More recently, the PM noted that these universities would have “complete autonomy in academic, administrative and financial matters”. The question is: How will the government go about selecting these elite institutions? It is possible that “India Rankings” (2016), and its later editions, will be used to identify and select a group of universities which will be granted complete autonomy.

Source: xaam.in
The government of India launched the National Agricultural Market Scheme in July 2015 in 585 markets and has, since April 14, started e-trading on the platform. This is in line with the Union Budget’s target to double farmers’ incomes in six years. To be sure, a doubling of incomes by 2022 would require them to grow at an annual average rate of just over 12 per cent. Achieving such a high rate of growth would require multi-faceted reforms in the agriculture sector.

Agricultural and allied sector in India grew at an annual average rate of 1.7 per cent per annum between 2012-13 and 2015-16 (at 2011-12 prices). The gross value added at factor cost in the agricultural and allied sector, which is a first approximation to the income generated in the sector, has shown a growth rate in excess of 10 per cent only in four years between 1950-51 and 2011-12 (measured in constant 2004-05 prices). All these supra-10 per cent growth rates came on the back of negative growth rates ranging from minus 1.1 per cent (1987-88) to minus 11.1 per cent (1979-80).

It is important to note that growth rate of agriculture and allied sectors in India has historically tracked the movement of the overall income growth in the country quite closely. The task of improving growth rates in the agricultural sector in a growing economy is easier than in a stagnant one. As such, this imperative for an unprecedented growth rate will require reforms covering all facets of the agricultural sector, such as irrigation, soil health, traditional farming, fertilisers, and extension services among others.

In this context, the e-trading initiative attempts to improve
the marketing aspect of the agriculture sector. Reforming agricultural markets in the country is a project that requires serious effort and concerted action. As the Economic Survey 2014-15 pointed out, India has 2,477 principal regulated primary agricultural markets in the country. These markets governed by APMC Acts create segmentation and lead to inefficiencies in price discovery. There are often complaints of vested interests of commission agents (arhatiyas) and other middle-men driving a wedge between the farmers and the traders (who are the buyers of the crops).

A similar experiment, called the Rashtriya electronic Market Scheme (ReMS), was launched in Karnataka in February 2014. By December 2015, 100 principal markets were unified by this e-platform. The reforms in the state have succeeded to the extent that an autonomous body — the ReMS Private Limited — is in charge of the entire process of unification and is proceeding according to a definite plan.

But the gains to farmers have remained muted. The software that is used for trading has a provision for including quality parameters of the traded commodities. To actualise this, plans are afoot to start assaying facilities in mandis. Since marketing of agricultural produce affects farmers, commission agents, traders, the APMCs and the government, introduction of these facilities without allaying the concerns of all these stakeholders may not have its impact.

For example, the commission agents in these markets fear that unification will affect them adversely. The farmers can directly enter the details of their commodities in the e-platform and sell to the highest bid-der without any mediation from the commission agents. This creates a very potent impediment against the forward movement of reforms and a standalone e-product may not have the full desired impact. In some mandis though the assaying facilities were present, they remained in disuse because of apprehensions of loss of income felt by farmers.
Commission agents are the pet whipping boys for agricultural economists searching for efficiency and unified prices. However, these “middle-men” provide real and substantive services such as credit facilities and crop loans to farmers in a timely manner. The farmers’ dependence on arhatiyas is mutually beneficial to a degree but may not be without elements of rent extraction. Like all things in life, we hit a grey area even in agricultural marketing.

The experience of Karnataka has a few pointers. It succeeded to the extent that an independent body outside the government (ReMSL) tasked with unification generated sufficient revenues and created a positive momentum. However, in the absence of an involvement of all stakeholders the gains are slow and minimal.

Reforms that rely only on technical solutions may not give the desired effect. If implementing unification within a state is a slow affair with frequent stoppages, one can only imagine the difficulties that unification can cause for an inter-state reform measure.

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Source: xaam.in