

Higher Education & Emerging Challenges in India

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Abstract

Education is the most effective tool for the progress and prosperity of the nation. It can enable its country men to overcome poverty and other evils. But today higher education in India is facing many challenges. The persons with ulterior motives have entered this arena and their first and foremost consideration is to mint money anyhow. Such people do not have any academicians' temperament and they do not view teaching as a sacred profession. Besides, burdensome curriculum, mindless growth of educational institutions, lack of job oriented courses and quality education, corruption etc. have put a question mark against the quality of higher education in India. If India has to counter the international challenges, then it has to strive for value addition and out of box ideas.

The higher education is facing many challenges such as poor quality of teachers and infrastructure, high fees, lack of values, low rates of enrolment, unequal access, and lack of relevance. The sky high charges of private education have hit the poor most. The higher education system of India also has to be brought at par with the developed countries. Besides, education has to cater to the needs of the society. Over a long period of time no sincere effort has been made to know the real condition of Indian higher education. The last concerted and comprehensive effort was the constitution of D.S. Kothari Commission in 1965. Today higher education has to fulfil the specific needs of globalized economy while being responsive to local needs. There has to be continuous quality improvement despite having the limitations of financial and human resources. Innovative and creative activities have to be undertaken to improve versatile functions of university operation. New practices such as e-administration, e-delivery, e-learning, including virtual mobility and virtual internship programmes have to be introduced as much as possible.

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India: Past and Present

India had a golden period of time when the country had the best of the world universities. "The earliest universities which attained great fame as early as in the seventh century BC, were Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila and Kashi. They were great centres of learning. These institutes were not only autonomous but also accountable and were known for quality, relevance and excellence and excellence of their programme"¹. Now the higher education in India has lost that stature and it is not in sound shape. The commissions after commissions have expressed disappointment and dismay over its state of affairs. "According to the University Education Commission Report, the present system of education is one of the worst features of Indian education."² There is concern among the educationists about the higher education about various aspects.

The following are the areas of concern

International Education

India is still lagging behind from leading countries of the world in terms of quality education. "For instance, the QS World University Rankings, an annual listing of the world's top universities, had no Indian institutes in the top 200 for

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2013.³ Some are of the opinion that global universities set up campuses in India. But then a section of the society does not support this notion and they argue that the presence of a few quality institutions cannot solve the problem because the majority of students are rural and poor. Then some suggest that it is far better to allow foreign educational institutions to enter into collaborations with Indian institutions on a large scale. According to them this will enhance capabilities as far as curricular and pedagogical practices, and student-faculty exchanges are exchanged. "There has been a steep decline in the number of foreign students in India after 1993-94. At present, Delhi University, with 1191 students, is the most sought after university".⁴ Just imagine a country that was the seat of learning and the students from other countries would come to study is witnessing the phase when it has to send its children abroad. India is a developing country and it cannot afford to send its students abroad. But still it has to allow its students to pursue studies abroad. "Nearly 47000 Indian students and trainees are deemed to have gone abroad during 1965- 75" ⁵

Administration

The political interference has become a routine matter. Educationists find it very difficult to please everybody. The subordinate staff members, administrators, unions, politicians, academicians, fraternity etc. have high expectation from the vice chancellors but it is like expectation of very high quality dance from a person whose hands and legs are tied tightly with the ropes. "The Vice chancellors are appointed with the great hope and expectations of managing the academic affairs but are invariably occupied in firefighting and managing the day to day crisis, thus leaving no time for campus development or introduction of innovations or attending any quality improvement programmes."⁶ Bureaucrats don't understand the genuine problems and they try to extract their own pound of flesh. "Of late, bureaucracies have come in for considerable criticism in developing countries like India. It is felt that while it might have provided the steel frame in the earlier years of India's emergence as an independent nation, bureaucracy has now become dysfunctional for developmental tasks, modernization a drag on speedier implementation of much needed economic and social reforms."⁷

Regulatory Bodies

India has regulatory bodies such as UGC, NACC, NCTE but they are not working to the satisfaction of all concerned. It may sound outrageous to say that the regulatory bodies have been reduced to money eating bodies. There are some genuine educationists who are doing their job very sincerely but some black sheep are undoing everything done by them. Multiplicities of authorities, red tapism,

procrastination, nepotism are the words associated with regulatory bodies and such words do not befit the highest decision making bodies of higher education.

Autonomy

There is a lot of hollow talk about the autonomy granted to university. Such people also state that then autonomy percolates to colleges. But practically speaking, Indian institutions hardly have the autonomy in practice. For example, the appointment of heads of institutional and executive bodies must be the domain of educationists. But practically the leaders and the power-that-be poke their nose into the university affairs. The higher education does not enjoy autonomy even in the matter of curriculum designing, evaluation system, to speak the least. A UGC committee had once supported the idea of the independence of institutions from the government. This speaks volume of the sordid state of affairs. "The Programme of Action, 1986 specified in detail the development of autonomous colleges. It stated: The system of affiliated colleges does not provide autonomy to deserving colleges to frame curricula, design courses of study and own system of evaluation."⁸

The bureaucrats and the leaders have their own prejudices. "Misgivings about the word autonomous; based on ignorance, prejudice, bias, lack of understanding and even lack of sincerity to understand.....fear that autonomy to the institutions may grant unlimited power to the principal and license to managements"⁹ As regards higher education, all universities in India have been autonomous. "However, dependence on funding agencies has an impact on the exercise of given autonomy. All colleges are affiliated to universities and hence all decision pertaining to syllabus, curriculum, admission and examinations are decided upon by universities".¹⁰

No Innovative Practices

The higher education system in India hardly puts stress on innovation and creation of new things. Although they have everything that a child needs yet they lack something in them.

Normally the higher education in India is aping western culture and not being able to do something new. On the one hand children do not go to colleges/ universities and on the other hand, if they go then they do not get an opportunity to innovate or solve the problems that the country is facing. India is hardly contributing anything to the world in terms of innovations. Rather, India has turned out to be a dumping ground of the western countries.

Teachers & Quality

What matters is the quality of higher education, not merely quantity. Teachers are the hub of all academic activities.

They can prepare excellent students only when they themselves are excellent. Higher education is suffering from the crunch of excellent teachers. "But we are convinced that the most important factor in the contemplated educational reconstruction is the teacher, his personal qualities, his educational qualifications, his professional training and the place that he occupies in the school as well as in the community."¹¹

The 11th Plan identified three areas for interventions: physical infrastructure, academic reform and ensuring adequate faculty. Infrastructure is a must for quality education and it can be improved with an increase in financial allocation. Academic reform such as introduction of semester and credit systems, courses by choice, and examination reform is such a process which is possible only after the pre-requisites are met. Availability of competent faculty is an issue that has assumed serious proportions. However, it still persists. Among various measures is to enforce the University Grant Commission's (UGC) teacher-student ratio for each State, and ensure that the financial requirement of additional faculty is shared by the Centre and States. "Dissent and presentation of contrary point of view are frowned upon and might well cost an innovative and creative junior his/ her job."¹²

Medium of Instruction

India is facing a big problem that needs to be addressed. Still the issue of medium of instruction is not settled on merit. The students opting for English medium dominate over the students of regional and Hindi languages. Undue emphasis is given to English where majority of children cannot understand the language. Consequently the majority of higher education students cannot understand adequately what teachers teach them. Moreover, some subjects like mathematics, physics and arts have hardly anything to do with the medium of instruction. Hence, over-emphasis on English is not fair. It affects all the four skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Even a post graduate is not able to express himself properly, to say the least. "Mother tongue was acclaimed as the first language to be taught and as the medium of instruction at the primary, secondary and at the university level by stages."¹³

Availability of Text Books

This fact should not be ignored that the medium of instruction in most undergraduate and State universities is in the regional languages. It is very challenging to prepare good textbooks and quality translations from the original English books. The three-language formula needs to be implemented. Teaching in the regional languages would make understanding comparatively easy while reasonable language competence in English should facilitate student access to English books. For example, Japan makes use of translations to enable greater educational access for the

student and this method can be tried out in India as well.

Untrained & Inefficient Teachers

To make things worse, higher education teachers themselves are not sufficiently trained to teach their students. They do not have proper training as to how to impart education to their students that are going to change the future of the country. The government and private institutions do not have enough salary to pay them. In order to improve the education system of India teachers should be better trained and equally and more importantly better paid. A country cannot progress without respecting teachers. There are a number of problems related to teachers and higher education and the NCTE has also taken note of the following problems. "Disparities in in-take capacity of teachers' Training colleges, teachers' requirements, accommodation and other facilities, infrastructure and equipment, number of teacher educators, their cadre, qualification and pay scales, courses and evaluation pattern, admission process, inadequate supporting administrative staff are quite well known."¹⁴

Vocational and professional education

Perhaps one of the most apparent failures of our education system is that even after completing graduation or post-graduation in any discipline students cannot get jobs. The country is facing the huge problem of unemployment. The development of human resources for the economy has to be translated into action through vocational and professional education. Earlier the government set up a National Skill Development Corporation in which it brought the government and corporate sector together to frame a demand based curriculum. The present government has created a Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship. But the Macaulay system of higher education has not been able to cater to the needs of the youth. Youths have fat degrees to decorate their house but they do not have the job or the skills to support their life. "The present system of education which was designed to meet the needs of an imperial administration will need radical changes if it is to meet the requirement of national development. The new educational system needs to be related intimately to productivity."¹⁵

It is simply because skills that are required in a job market are simply not cultivated in a fresh graduate and post graduate student. All that a student is taught in his college life is almost redundant for job markets. Skill that is required by them is not taught in colleges and to students. Hence our education system needs to be revamped and designed according to our market requirement as well.

Social Evils

The NPE 1986 underlined that: "In our culturally plural

society, education should foster universal and eternal values, oriented towards the unity and integration of our people. Such value education should eliminate obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition and fatalism.” This calls for the youth and children to be sensitized about the problem of inequities, poverty, undemocratic practices and reiterating commitment to upholding equality, justice, freedom and fraternity. Professor James A. Banks has said: “the role of education in the 21st Century is to prepare students to know, to care and to act in ways that will develop and foster knowledge and skill needed to participate in effective action.”

Enrolment and disparities

“Right now the private sector accounts for 59 percent of enrolment in higher education.”¹⁶ The present rate of enrolment stands at around 20 per cent. During the 11th Plan, a two-fold strategy was evolved to increase the enrolment. Consequently there was an increase in the number of new educational institutions. This led to the increased intake capacity of existing institutions. But still this problem is persisting as our institutional capacity is still low. India has around 722 universities which cannot meet the requirement of students. Even the National Knowledge Commission has recommended that there should be at least 1,500 universities. The government should assess the genuine requirement of universities and plan a roadmap for the next 25 years or so.

In terms of economic condition, gender, caste and ethnic and religion, Indian students have to face a lot of disparities to get education. For example, an all-India enrolment rate of students was 17 per cent in 2008, but the enrolment rate of students belonging to different categories were as follows: Scheduled Tribes (ST) 7 per cent, Scheduled Castes (SC) 11 per cent, Other Backward Classes (OBC) 28 per cent and higher castes 47 per cent. In terms of community, it was 9 per cent for Muslims, 18 per cent for Hindus while 30 per cent for Christians. Further in terms of the poor and the affluent having income levels, it was 6 per cent for the bottom 20 per cent of society as against 37 per cent for the top 20 per cent. The private, self-financing education sector has further widened the gap between the haves and have-nots.

Private institutions have witnessed the expansion every year at the rate of 10 per cent between 1996 and 2008 while the government and private-aided institutions have registered a decline in the corresponding period by 1.65 per cent yearly. This led to the increase in the share of students joining the private, self-financing sector from about 7 per cent in 1996 to about 25 per cent in 2008. According to the data for the year 2013 available from the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the share of private undergraduate colleges and government

students was at 59 per cent and 37 per cent respectively.

As regards universities, out of the 712 universities, about 360 enjoy the status of being private, state and deemed universities. On the analysis of the total share of students in private institutions in the year 2012, the top 20 per cent of students having purchasing power managed to get more than half the number of seats. “The bottom 20 per cent could secure only 4 per cent while the ST and SC students could garner only 4 and 10 per cent respectively as against 45 per cent by OBCs and 41 by others.”¹⁷

Unfortunately, in India, unequal opportunities have given rise to unequal human capabilities and changed education into an instrument to increase economic inequalities. The public and private aided institutions must be encouraged for expansion but then the regulatory bodies should see to it they impart quality education while observing norms in letter and spirit. The ‘poor-friendly’ financial assistance cell should be put in place in self-financing institutions to some extent based on the models being practiced in Australia and Canada. The present system of lending educational loans from banks with interest subsidy by the MHRD does not help the poor to the desired extent. The Indian education system has not been able to eliminate social disparity in the country. In certain spheres, social disparity has gone up. It is such a shame that education itself has become a tool for creating divisions. An affluent parent’s child would get excellent education and a poor parent’s one cannot afford even a basic education.

Unscientific Evaluation System

Indian education system basically promotes rat race among our children. They have to read and mug-up entire text book without any understanding of it. So a student who obtains 90 out of 100 and stands first in the class or school actually remains a rat. Practically he does not have any analytical skills that a child must have. Such students can hardly be expected to be innovative and intelligent for the nation.

Personality & All Round Development

Unfortunately the higher system is not helping to develop persona of a child. It is sound personality that is more important than merely academic qualification. The higher education system demands good marks from the student in an examination but does not bother about his personality. Hence a child is not well exposed to outer world and as such he cannot develop a sound personality. This is another major problem before the Indian educationists.

Critical Analysis & Research

The Indian students of higher education are hardly trained to cultivate their critical analysis of anything. For example our history, language, traditions, culture, religion are taught

through the books and they take the line of establishment or the views of predominant majority. They hardly can look things from their own perspective. If the society has to become a lot better, a culture of looking at things critically has to be developed. Higher education students are simply failing at this because of our education system. Children must learn to criticize our obsolete culture and traditions. "While the quantitative growth is phenomenal in the field of educational research in India, the quality and relevance of the field is suspect all along."¹⁸

Defective Outlook of Students

Even students of higher education lack a global outlook. It means they are confined to a place or a country only and they do not see themselves as a global citizen. At least the students of higher education should feel themselves as a cosmopolitan rather a jingoistic. They should be patriot but not in the sense of being a narrow minded

Lack of Entrepreneurship

Now, in higher education campuses it has become a common thing that every young student is interested in getting a job that pays him handsomely. However, he would hardly like to become an entrepreneur. This lack of ambition does not enable our country to excel in any field. This attitude of our children is making them slaves to a few multinational companies. Therefore our education system should be designed and executed in such a way so as to make the students successful entrepreneurs rather than going for a salaried job. The British structure was created in such a way that the Independent India has still not been able to overcome the psychological barrier. Even the higher education centers are in the grip of the slavish mentality. "Several systems of grants-in-aid were evolved during the British period to suit the requirements, which have been in operation even in the post British period."¹⁹

The higher education is confronting a large number of problems but "then Central Advisory Board should continue to function as a coordinating agency to consider All India problems concerning education. As at present, it should constitute representatives of all educational interests as well as states."²⁰ The sincere educationists, policy makers and other stake holders should make a sincere effort to sort out the problems being faced in the field of higher education. One thing must be clear to all that the status of India being a developing country can change to a developed country only when the higher education of India becomes at par with the developed countries.

Conclusion

In the past the Indian higher education achieved a very high standard of excellence and as a result enjoyed an excellent reputation throughout the region and the entire world.

The system at one point produced the highest achievers in the world. However, the Indian higher education system was not well prepared to meet the challenges that were emerging after the arrival of English men. Then the system was rigid and unresponsive to the demands of new changes taking place across the globe. The system was inefficient to absorb the changes. Perhaps the last government policy statements on higher education which have guided actions since the mid-1980s were the National Policy on Education (NPE) that was adopted by Parliament in May 1986 and Programme of Action (POA), 1986, as revised in 1992.

At present India's immense pool of youths is the biggest strength. But unfortunately India is far from having its act together when it comes to figuring out how to educate these youths. Government data indicates that only one out of every seven children born in India goes to college. What is very unfortunate is that the nation suffers from both a crippling quality as well as a quantity. People from business background who do not know education but can manage to get large pieces of land allotted or have surplus cash, have started to create private colleges and universities. Such a trend has quantified higher education but then in its wake new problems have arisen.

In nutshell, higher education is very important for the advancement of any country but spending on education as a share has been falling for the past three years. Compared to 2013-14, the last year of UPA, when education got a 4.57% of the total expenditure, there has been a steady decline -3.65% in 2016-17. According to this Budget's revised estimate with the estimated outlay for the coming year shows a minor uptick at 3.71% and at that the higher education is getting very low budget. Against such a scenario India will have to definitely overhaul the education system. The government and the private sector should accord education their first priority and try to address the problems that the country is confronting. Only then India can become a developed country.

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