A Critical Appraisal Of Higher Education In India

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Abstract

Higher Education, opening new vistas in research and extension activities, apart from teaching, makes multi-dimensional contributions to the society in its holistic growth. It has a prominent place in the developmental discourse of the country. Education and more particularly Higher Education is one of the key drivers of overall progress of a nation. Though University system has been an age-old concept in India, with Universities like Taxila and Nalanda flourishing in ancient times, it was the British administration, which laid foundation for modernization of education or Western Education (Singh: 2007). The Western framework of education which continues its influence till today has broadened the horizons of thinking and has been instrumental in extending the frontiers of knowledge. It played a major role in social reforms in India, and the concept of modern law infused the spirit of free thinking and began to break the traditional barriers which restricted social mobility in the Indian society. Education is a crucial instrument of social mobility and social change (Hasan: 1976). The adoption of Indian Constitution ushered in an era of democracy and nation building. With the establishment of University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1956, an institutional framework was provided for formulation and maintenance of standards in Higher Education across the country. The University education in India began to blend oriental learning with Western Education.

Introduction

The heterogeneous and complex Indian society presents an enormous challenge to create equal opportunities for all the sections of the society in the process of nation building. The traditional social structure continues to cast its influence even on the modern democratic institutions. Nevertheless 'education' emerged as a game changer in constructing a level playing field for the people of all social strata. Affirmative action and other welfare measures act as complementarities in the process. While Higher Education offers a window of opportunity for employment, it has a diverse roles in catering to the varied needs of society.

Rapid advances in Information and Communication technology enabled sharing of technology globally, and especially Indian Medical Sciences, Engineering and other Physical Sciences are advancing towards global standards. Social Sciences have a vital role to play in studying the swift changes triggered by Globalization, and to work out the adaptability measures for maintenance of social equilibrium. In order to keep up the momentum of Higher Education, various institutional measures are adopted from time to time to promote 'equity', 'access' and 'quality' in Higher Education (UGC: 2003).

Preserving Cultural Heritage:

Despite Higher Education adopting Global changes of varied dimensions, the symbols of Indian cultural heritage such as Music, Dance, Fine Arts, Ayurveda, Unani, etc., have not been relegated to oblivion. They continue to receive sustained institutional support. The indigenous system of Ayurvedic Medicine has a prominent place in the Indian Medical Sciences. The herbal prescriptions attracted global attention and several developed countries have adopted these prescriptions. Moreover, developed countries like US attempted to acquire patent on Turmeric for medicinal purposes. India challenged in the International Court and the proposal was nullified. The Indian Art and Architecture promoted by our Higher Education continues its influence in refined forms. Yoga which was a part of Indian traditional system of Education, became a part of Higher Education and in-depth research is being conducted on Yogic sciences. This has spread to other countries and attained global importance.

Gross Enrolment Ratio:

The present scenario of Higher Education needs examination in order to study its representativeness. The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) states that for the academic year 2019-20, the Gross enrolment ratio in Higher Education in India is 27.1 per cent. This is much lower than the average of the developed world which is above 75 per cent. This ratio would improve if more youngsters are to be included into the Higher Education stream. Owing to the institutional policy to establish more Universities and Colleges, doors would be opened for more students to enter the portals of Higher Education. As per a UN report, India has the World's largest youth population of 356 million or 28 per cent. These developments would step up demand for Higher Education. While private Colleges and Universities are coming up to meet the growing needs, the profit motive would undermine the quality of education. Strong regulatory mechanisms should be formulated to uphold and upgrade the standards. Most of the private institutes concentrate on profit motive often at the expense of the quality of education. This would diminish the employment opportunities of the students. As welfare schemes to the targeted sections are applicable in private institutes also, the private managements should feel the responsibility to safeguard the interests of the students. Higher Education has become a commercial enterprise. Often those who are not acquainted with Higher Education, invest in Colleges aiming for high profits. The Universities aiming to mobilise funds for the College Development Councils which monitor the functioning of private colleges, often compromise on maintenance of standards by private college managements. An inbuilt mechanism is needed to inculcate a sense of accountability in the private managements. The author's visit to certain B.Ed. colleges in Visakhapatnam and Vizianagaram districts in Andhra Pradesh revealed that colleges are run without students. The enrolment was shown as full. But there were no students. The managements on being questioned stated that they would enrol students from the State of Odisha where there is demand for B.Ed. Degree, but the students reach an understanding with them to directly appear for examinations rather than attending classes. Such state of affairs in higher education should be checked.

Higher Education and Inclusivity:

Religion, Caste, Gender, Region, and Poverty have been the main bases of Exclusion in India (Tilak: 2015). As per the Constitutional mandate, affirmative action is implemented in all the

State run universities and colleges. Welfare measures as formulated by the State or Union Governments are applied to the targeted groups.

While it is open for all eligible candidates to compete for admission in all the State run Universities and Colleges, the rural masses however, suffer the disadvantage of the medium of education. Those who pursue their schooling in vernacular medium are unable to compete with their urban counterparts in seeking admission for Higher Education. This has resulted in a major imbalance in creation of equal opportunities in competing for higher learning. This factor hinders creation of level playing field in Higher Education. The proposal to introduce English medium at primary school level was met with resistance from unexpected quarter.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh opened Skill Development Centres where English is accorded a key role in the training programmes. English instils confidence in the students of excluded groups, for they can read and interpret law of the land and can also apply it.

Vernacular medium helps construct vote banks. The politicians given the gullibility of the masses construct assured vote banks at various levels. They perceive this as a fertile ground to mobilize the masses. Such political parties wish the continuation of their clients as beneficiaries of their social welfare programmes which are used to build the vote banks. M.N. Srinivas in the context of social mobility observes that the upper strata resist the attempts of upward social mobility by the lower strata. This kind of attitude is applicable to the present context in Andhra Pradesh. The upper strata have conveniently shifted the burden to carry forward the cultural legacy to the people of lower strata.

A Channel of migration:
The Higher Education system in India facilitates emigration to other countries either for further education or for employment. The courses offered, and the research carried out in topical areas has attracted developing countries to admit their students in Indian Universities. This helps in not only boosting the resources of Universities but in dissemination of knowledge globally to serve the humanity. India made significant progress in the field of Information Technology and the courses thus designed and offered facilitated career abroad especially for the Engineering students. Apart from being employed in Indian companies, the Indian students continue to be employed by multi-national giants the world over. Thus Higher Education forms a two way channel for Indian and foreign students.

Challenges of Globalization:
India in 1991 adopted New Economic Policy which liberalised Indian economy. The concepts of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization have gathered momentum ever since, on the economic landscape of India. The country began to experience rapid socio-cultural changes driven by the changes introduced in economy which forms the sub-structure of every society. The challenges thrown up by Globalization are enormous. Private investment and liberalised mechanisms to invest the capital would further widen the gap between the rich and poor classes. Premier Institutes of Higher Education emerge, which are beyond the access of commoners. The specific courses designed and offered result in assured and highly profitable employment. Such institutes mount a massive academic challenge to the state run Universities. This calls for

modernization of teaching methods, updation and restructuring of syllabi, recruitment of high calibre faculty, and training the existing faculty to enhance their skills.

Efficacy of Conventional Courses:

Large scale unemployment in India is rooted in a multiple complex factors. Social inequities apart, certain existing courses have become obsolete, thereby losing their employment potential. In the face of stiff competition from several quarters, upgradation of knowledge and skills on the part of students has become a dire necessity. Higher Education is evolving into various branches of specialization calling for deeper engagement and in-depth research.

With the advent of Globalization and liberal transfer of Science and Technology, new areas of employment are emerging. The Universities must grapple with the dynamics of technology to either design new courses or restructure the syllabi of the existing course from time to time to accommodate such dynamics. The method to adopt the revised syllabi should be liberalised within the University.

Reorientation:

Education is a dynamic concept. It should change in tune with the changing needs of the society. The teachers should adopt themselves to new developments in the subject and reorient themselves to innovative methods of teaching. The Universities should facilitate foreign trips for teachers to visit premier educational institutes and gain academic exposure. The trained teachers are in turn expected to train the other teachers of the University. The Universities should endeavour to tap funds from various sources to train the teachers to enable them to keep pace with dynamics of teaching and research. If teachers remain embedded in the conventional moulds of teaching, it not only reflects inertia but would tell on the progress of the students, the ultimate beneficiaries of education.

Fieldwork and Inter-disciplinary Studies:

Outreach programmes must be introduced in all plausible courses to encourage and incentivise innovation. New findings with potential to expand the syllabi and create new employment opportunities must be rewarded to inculcate a drive in the students towards innovation. If materialization of the innovation calls for involvement of more than one discipline, the Universities must facilitate such inter-disciplinary studies. If necessary, the combination could involve Social Sciences and Physical Sciences. To illustrate this phenomenon, a student of Social Sciences could identify the localities afflicted by industrial pollution and extend the study by seeking the intervention of the students of Environmental Sciences and Medical Sciences. While the former could delve into institutional policy formulation and implementation, the latter could study the hazardous consequences in terms of health and environment. Formulation of specific laws with multi-disciplinary inputs could go a long way in resolving endless litigations in Courts of Law. This could be a major contribution of Higher Education to the realm of Law. Otherwise, as certain laws remain archaic, it is for the Supreme Court to revise the laws by delivering landmark judgements after prolonged litigations, which denies timely dispensation of justice to the aggrieved parties. Thus, inter-disciplinary research must be encouraged to meet the challenges of Globalization. The concept of Unnath Bharat Abhiyan helps villagers to receive assistance from the students and faculty of the Universities.

The New Educational Policy 2020 also calls for multi-disciplinary studies which are the need of the hour to grapple with the global dynamics.

Choice of research area:

Practically there are two ways to determine the area of research. One way is to identify a topic with a potential to break new grounds in research and the other is to opt for a topic of convenience to cobble a thesis with an aim to launch an early career. The latter seems to be a predominant approach particularly in State Universities. Research in Universities is viewed more as a qualification to embark up on a career rather than a pursuit for innovation. While career remains an impeccable goal, the student's deep engagement in research should be encouraged and incentivised. The potential researchers should be exposed to diverse areas of research which contribute to innovation or policy formulation, before they make a choice of the area. The topic of research should never be arbitrarily thrust on the candidate. Often the choice is left to the Research Supervisor rather than the student exercising the choice. Guidelines in this area must be drawn up to serve the said purpose. Moreover, defence of thesis for the doctoral degree is turning into a ritual. The introduction of Pre-Talk by the UGC as a pre-condition to the submission of thesis, has allowed the fair assessment of the standard of the thesis. This enables the students to fill up the identified gaps before the final submission. Periodic review of the progress of research by the departmental research committees also alerts the research student and the research supervisor. Any modicum of liberty on this count would develop a lackadaisical attitude on the part of students. The Universities should thus seek not only strict adherence to the guidelines, but also evolve new guidelines to inculcate a sense of seriousness in the students.

Higher Education and Employment:

Higher Education not only facilitates employment in various avenues, but its own existence and expansion needs personnel to maintain it. Though this field does not directly cater to all the employment needs of the Indian populace, it is a key facilitator of employment across the globe. Placement officers have an important role to play in contacting potential employers to secure employment for the University and College students. The Placement Cells should explore emerging areas of employment by keenly studying the dynamics of market and economy. Introduction of new courses or changes in the existing courses must be suggested to the administration accordingly, to boost the employment potential of the courses and the employability of the students.

Publications:

Though publications over the years have been substantial, their quality needs serious attention. Students and teachers especially of the Universities should be mandated to publish in refereed journals with impact factor. Publications in journals represent updation of research, and such writings carry the potential to engender further research or new areas of research. But, it is observed that there is proliferation of journals at local level seeking payment for publication of articles. There are glaring instances of teachers resorting to publications in such journals in the run up to Career Advancement Scheme exercise. Devising stringent norms in this area would inculcate a sense of responsibility among the teachers/ researchers.

Inbreeding:

The role of a teacher is crucial in sculpting the careers of generations of students, and the quality of teaching determines the progress of Universities and Colleges. While a suitable selection enriches the knowledge base of the institute and helps the students launch their cherished career, a wrong selection places at stake the future of students for generations to come and results in decline of standards. Hence, mere livelihood of the applicant should not be the guiding principle of selection. Competence to raise the standards of the institute and to usher the students into promising careers should govern the selection of teachers. There has been an unrestrainable tendency to prefer in-house candidates often at the expense of merit. The "sons of soil" concept exerts moral pressure on key figures of the selection committee to prefer local candidates despite more meritorious outsiders competing for teaching positions. This practice of inbreeding, more often than not hinders the progress of departments. Selection of suitable teachers being the crux of the Higher Education system, the key functionaries of selection should always act with a vision.

Project Reports confined to stacks:

The funding agencies have been releasing crores of rupees towards major and minor academic projects. A standard procedure has been prescribed right from the stage of submission of proposal in prescribed format, to the stage of submission of report, to strictly uphold the academic standards. But, ironically the reports do not always contribute to policy making but are confined to the stacks of funding agencies. Though in-depth research is carried out in India in vital fields, it is hardly put to use in policy formulation. Policy formulation in India is the monopoly of bureaucrats who resort to armchair exercise without the aid of empirical knowledge. Hence, a suitable mechanism must be evolved to utilize the inputs of the project reports in the institutional policy making. Experts in various fields of higher education should be brought into relevant areas of administration to reap the benefits of their exercise. De-bureaucratization of administration in certain areas is desperately needed to accommodate specialists and experts who would make significant contribution for the progress of the society.

Moral Values and Higher Education:

Lord Buddha's observation is pertinent in the context of moral education(Tivari:1987). He observed that an individual must acquire knowledge, analytical abilities and morality to contribute to the stability and progress of the society. He also cautioned that lack of morality would jeopardize the safety of the society. However lofty the goals and achievements of Higher Education could be, without moral values, it could pose an existential threat to the society. Profit motive overpowering ethical consideration poses a grave threat to cause disaster to the environment. Rapid industrialization at the expense of safe environment; Indiscriminate deforestation to invite foreign investment in mining and allied activities, where economic considerations set aside safety of humanity and so on, are the results of lack of moral values as a part of education. Moral values inculcated at formative stage make an impact on human personality. They should continue to be a part of the curriculum even during the Higher Education stage before the individual launches the career. Education without morality would spell disaster for the society. Progress in civilization should be inclusive. Advancement in Science and Technology should not be to the detriment of any individual or a section of society.

Conclusion:

Higher Education evolves with the changing times. But given the forces of Globalization operating in the country, it should be regulated to serve the needs of the society. If neo-liberal forces are allowed to take the lead in this realm, social stability and social order would be disturbed leading to an anomic situation. To keep pace with the global shifts, innovative courses are to be designed. Due importance must be accorded to 'equity', 'access' and 'quality'. Higher Education should bridge the gap between the masses and the affluent. It should serve as an instrument of social mobility to enable the deprived to join the ranks of the advanced sections of the society. Academia-industry synergies should be established to undertake result oriented and cutting edge research in the Universities. Social Science research should evolve coping mechanisms to withstand cultural changes sweeping through the society due to the effects of the neoliberal policies. Post-modernism introduced a paradigm shift in Social Science research by redefining some of the concepts and revising some theoretical formulations. Application of theoretical formulations in policy making addresses several challenges encountered by the society. Malthus, adduced that overpopulation concentrated in an area leads to social or political movements which redistribute the population in other areas consequently. Densely populated Hyderabad is a case in point where the Telangana Movement culminated in bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh. Social Sciences have a significant role to play to keep the equilibrium of the society. Emerging social problems need to be subjected to research to evolve suitable and enduring solutions. In India, placements for Social Sciences are very few and thus subjects suffer from negligence. Necessary institutional mechanisms must be worked out to reap the benefits of Social Science research. The developed world has such mechanisms and India should emulate the developed world in utilizing the research of Social Sciences. Thus, Higher Education contributes to overall benefits of the society if regulated judiciously.

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