

INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION-ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Introduction:

Education has always been recognised as a major instrument for national development and socio-economic change. It is one of the most significant indicators of a country's progress. In today's world, education particularly higher education has a crucial role in facilitating a country to become successful in the emerging knowledge society. India has at present a fairly large and diversified system of higher education. The quantitative growth of the higher education sector since Independence in 1947 has been impressive. Today, India's higher education system has become the third largest in the world, after the USA and China.

The twenty-first century marked by growing internationalization of higher education pose new challenges to the higher education sector of every country in the world including India. The higher education system has to prepare the nation to meet the emerging challenges.

The Indian higher education system over the years has contributed significantly in enabling the country to become today the second fastest growing economy in the world by providing trained and skilled human power. It has also acted as a powerful mechanism for the upward social mobility of the economically and socially backward sections. However, the country needs to advance much further in the path of socio- economic growth and development. For that a qualitative expansion in the higher education system is imperative.

Evaluation of higher education in India:

The system of education in India evolved from the early Gurukul system of the Vedic and Upanishad period to the huge university at Takshashila in the sixth century and then two universities, namely, Nalanda and Vikramshila were established in the fourth and fifth century respectively.

The first three universities established in India in 1857 which is Calcutta university at Calcutta, Bombay university at Bombay and Madras university at Madras which were affiliating university following the model of London University. Allahabad university, which has completed 100 years, was a later formation and was established as a unitary university. It was only during the period 1904 and 1913, that imparting instruction within the universities began in India. Even so, the general pattern of affiliation of colleges continues with most of the universities in the country. At the time of independence, there were only 20 universities and 500 affiliated college in India. Since then, a major transformation has taken place in the higher education sector of the country. During the past six decades after independence, the growth in the number of universities and college has been phenomenal.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) was established by the government of India in 1953 for the planned development of higher education in the country. The UGC became a statutory organisation by an Act of parliament in 1956. It has been entrusted with the task of coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of higher education. The UGC also provides financial assistance under various schemes to eligible colleges and universities which are included under section 2(f) and declared fit to receive central assistance under section 12(B) of the UGC Act, 1956.

As education is included as a concurrent list in India's constitution, both the central and state governments have a crucial role in the country's higher education system. After independence, the central and state governments have taken the initiative to establish various types of higher education institutions. While universities have mostly been set up in the public sector, majority of colleges were established in the private sector. Most of the universities established by the state governments have been affiliating in nature and each one of them has a number of colleges affiliated to it. The affiliated colleges offer courses as per the curriculum approved by the parent university.

A few central universities were also set up by the Government of India by the acts of parliament. All the central and state universities depend heavily on central government or the state government for

funds. The period since 1990 has witnessed the emergence of private universities and colleges in large numbers. Private universities were established under the acts of state legislatures or through the deemed university mode.

Present state of the Higher Education System:

The institutional framework of the higher education sector in India at present mainly consists of 43 central universities, 265 state universities, 80 state private universities, 130 deemed universities, 33 institutions of national importance and over 33023 colleges. In some states, colleges offer only undergraduate programmes while postgraduate and research programmes are offered in the university departments only. At the same time, in certain other states, colleges are allowed to provide undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes.

As mentioned earlier, there were only 20 universities and 500 colleges in the country at the time of independence. Altogether they had just 2.1 lakh students enrolled with them. The number of universities and university-level institutions increased to 556 and that of colleges to 33023 by 2011, and the total student enrolment went up to 169.75 lakhs. Out of which 99.26 lakhs were men and 70.49 lakhs were women. Out of the total 169.75 lakhs students 36.39% were enrolled in the faculty of Arts, 18.42% in science faculty and 17.11% in commerce/ management faculty. While engineering and technology had over 16.86% of the total enrolment, it was 3.85% for medical courses, 1.93% for law, 0.55% for agriculture and 0.16% for veterinary science.

Out of the total number of students in Indian higher education sector, around 86% are enrolled for courses at undergraduate level whereas 12% have enrolled for postgraduate courses and 0.8% for research. The proportion of students enrolled for diploma/ certificates courses from just 1% of the total.

In spite of the substantial increase of the student enrolment in the higher education system since independence, the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education in India is abysmally low when compared to many other countries. While GER was around 12% for India in 2010, the corresponding average GER was 58% for developed countries and 18 for developing countries. The average GER of 24% itself was almost two times higher than the India in 2010.

At present, there are 15 open universities in the country including IGNOU which is the larger of its kind, offering a wide range of distance education programmes. In addition, more than 110 universities in the country also provide distance education along with their regular programmes.

Major Issues and Challenges:

Considering the crucial role the higher education system plays in the development process of the country, various commissions and committees have appointed from time to time to review the status of education/ higher education in the country and to make suggestions for the improvement of the system. These commissions and committees have made several valuable observations and recommendations. The report of the university education commission (1948-49) chaired by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and the National Education Commission (1964-66) headed by Dr. D.S. Kothari and popularly known as Kothari commission were the most prominent and pioneering among them. Almost all the policy documents and reports related to education which comes up subsequently have used these reports as a basic framework. The National Policy on Education-1986 (NPE) and the Programme of Action (POA) of 1986 and 1992 have greatly influenced the education policy formulation in the country during the last two decades. In recent times, the report of National Knowledge Commission (2006-2009) under the chairmanship of Dr. Sam Pitroda and the report of National Committee for Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education (2009) under the chairmanship of Prof. Yashpal have made significant observations and suggestions to rectify and strengthen the existing education system of the country.

In spite of the various steps initiated during the past several decades on the basis of the recommendations of different commissions and committees, the performance of the Indian higher education sector leaves much to be desired. The relative performance and ranking of the Indian higher education institutions at the global level are also far from satisfactory. The system suffers from several inherent weaknesses. The major issues and challenges encountered by the Indian higher

education system in today's context of globalization and technological advancement have been delineated below.

A. Inclusive Growth with quality and Relevance:

- 1. Quantitative Expansion:** The higher education system in India, as we have discussed already, has achieved remarkable expansion in its institutional capacity during the post-independence era. There has been a sizeable growth in the higher education sector with regards to the number of universities and colleges, the number of disciplines and courses, the number of teaching faculty and the enrolment of the students over the years. However, the quantitative growth achieved hitherto has been still inadequate when we take into account the huge size of population belonging to the relevant age group of 18-23 years eligible to receive higher education. As the nation is gearing up to become a global economic power house, such an effort will not be achievable with the current GER in higher education of around 12%. Even to attain the present world average GER of 24%, India needs considerable number of additional higher education institutions and resources, both human and financial. The quantitative expansion of higher education requires the expansion of intake capacity of the existing universities and colleges as well as establishment of new institutions. Government had set target to increase the GER from the present level of about 12% to 15% by the end of the 11th Five-Year Plan and to 30% by the year 2020. According to the estimates of the Government of India, the country needs 800 more universities and 35000 more colleges to achieve such an ambitious target. In addition to the expansion in the physical infrastructure and other facilities, the number of qualified faculty will also have to be increased several folds to bring about any tangible improvement in the higher education GER of the country.
- 2. Growth with Access and Equity:** At the time of independence, access to higher education was limited to only a small proportion of the population belonging to the relevant age group. During the post-independence period, the expansion of the higher education institutions has led to increased access to higher education, though at a slow pace. This quantitative growth however has not been equitable. Vast disparities are found at different levels, be it inter-state, rural-urban, poor-non-poor, caste-wise. Such disparities appear to be too glaring and call for remedial measures from the part of both central and state government. Indian higher education system is faced with considerable regional imbalance in the matter of GER. Broadly speaking, students belonging to relatively more progressive states and regions and those who live in urban areas have better opportunities for higher education. As a result, the GER varies drastically among various states and districts in the country. The socially and economically backward sections of the society have all along been experiencing relatively low access to higher education. Thus, the much-needed increase in the GER has to be brought about without neglecting the equity aspect. For making the quantitative expansion more inclusive and equitable, care should be taken to give better access to the marginalized sections. Most importantly, higher education would be inclusive only if it is affordable to all sections of the population.
- 3. Quality and Excellence:** The quantitative expansion of higher education in India has not been matched by qualitative improvement. In fact, deterioration in the quality has always been an issue of serious concern. Although a few sporadic attempts have been made to improve the quality of education in certain areas, the country's higher education system has yet to initiate an integrated and holistic approach towards quality enhancement. The University Education Commission (1948-49) as well as National Education Commission (1964-66) had also expressed concern about the inadequacy of quality and standards in the higher education system. With the rapid expansion of higher education institutions in recent times, the issue of declining quality of higher education has become all the more significant. The general decline in the quality of education is clearly reflected in the growing army of educated unemployed in every part of the country. Outdated curriculums, irrelevant courses, poor quality of teaching and research, inadequate infrastructural facilities, etc have resulted in the churning out of a huge number of unemployable graduates every year. Quality could be ensured and sustained only through academic, administrative and institutional reforms.

Quality assurance in higher education is absolutely essential for equipping our graduates to compete successfully in an increasingly integrating world.

4. **Relevance and Employability:** With the advent of globalization and information revolution, unprecedented changes have been taking place in the job markets all over the world. The needs of the economy as well as society have undergone drastic changes during the past couple of decades. The higher education system of our country, however has failed to respond effectively to these changes. The rigid and obsolete higher education system with dwindling quality and standard of the education imparted has adversely affected the employability of the graduate coming out of our colleges and universities. The higher education should be relevant to the contemporary needs of the economy and society. As the existing system has remained incapable to adapt the change according to the changing times, the education imparted has become largely irrelevant. The skills acquired by a graduate hardly measure up to the expectations of the job market. There is a serious mismatch between what is taught in the class rooms and what is required in the job market. Therefore, the courses and curricula offered by the universities and colleges need to have relevance to the current trends in the national and international job market.

B. Academic Issues and Challenges:

1. **Academic Restructuring:** Academic reforms from time to time are inevitable for quality assurance and enhancement in higher education. They mainly include revamping the course curricula, teaching-learning process and the evaluation methods. Since independence, different educational commissions and committees as well as educational planners and policy makers have suggested various academic reforms at different points of time for improving the quality and relevance of Indian higher education. Although many such recommendations have been accepted by the academic committee, they have not been implemented effectively or uniformly across the country. As a result, there exist wide variations in the admission procedures, curricula and syllabi, evaluation methods, etc among various states and universities.
2. **Faculty Development:** Teachers form the central component of any system of formal education. In fact, the quality of education imparted depends largely on the quality of the teachers. Hence, the higher education system of the country has to ensure the availability of the qualified teachers in adequate numbers. At present one of the important challenges faced by the higher education sector in India is the dearth of good teachers. Scarcity of qualified teachers is felt all over the country in almost every discipline in both general education as well as professional education.
3. **Poor quality Research:** Research is an integral part of higher education. It helps in the generation of new knowledge and promotes academic excellence. The future course of development of a nation is largely dependent upon the strength of the indigenous research. However, this is an area in which Indian universities are performing poorly in comparison with their counterparts in the developed world and some of the Asian country like China, South Korea or Singapore. According to the UGC, out of the total enrolment of students in universities and colleges in India approximately one percent of the student had registered for research. The number of research scholars, particularly in the field of scientific and technological research is considered to be far less than the requirement of the country. The UGC giving crore of rupees to various universities for the research purpose. However, there are very few research works of international standard having done by universities. Most of the students and teachers in universities are not very enthusiastic for high order of research. Their main aim is to help getting the doctorate degree anyhow.
4. **Neglect of Social Sciences, Humanities and Basic Sciences:** The globalisation process powered by technological revolution in the information and communication sector has opened up new avenues which offer tremendous employment opportunities to the younger generation. Consequently, during recent times, the demand has been shifting away from humanities; basic science and general education to job-oriented programmes, higher education institutions, especially those in the unaided private sector are unwilling

to offer courses in humanities, social sciences or even basic sciences. Due to unbridled privatization and commercialization, most of the newly established institutions offer only courses of commercial value or those courses for which high fees could be charged.

C. Administrative Issues and Challenges:

- 1. Governance:** It is often said that the Indian higher education is over regulated and under governed. Rigidity of the system and the bureaucratic controls over it have made the system more or less dysfunctional. The archaic rules and regulations have failed to ensure any accountability either. The static and rigid nature of the system has left very little scope for innovations or improvement. In the emerging international scenario, the higher education institutions require more flexibility and autonomy to perform effectively. Administrative and governance reforms are imperative for quality enhancement in the higher education sector of the country. Granting ore autonomy for the universities and colleges is a prerequisite for overcoming the rigidity of the system. The National Knowledge Commission has also suggested for granting more academic autonomy.
- 2. Burden of Affiliation:**The affiliating system of colleges was originally designed when their number in university was less. The university could then effectively oversee the working of its affiliated colleges, act as an examining body and award degrees. However, with the rapidly increase the number of colleges the system become unmanageable and started losing its governance. Now it is becoming difficult for any university even to effectively attend to the varied needs of the affiliated/ constituent individual colleges in a regular way and that too within the reasonable time. It is adversely affected the academic development if the individual colleges. Moreover, in the present scenario, the college are required to follow the syllabus and academic calendar of the university. They do not have any freedom to modernize their curricula to make it relevant to the local specific needs, resources and aspirations. The college having capacity and capability for offering programmes of higher standards do not have the freedom to do so within the prevailing routine and rigid bureaucratic style of functioning of the university system.
- 3. Financing Higher Education:** One of the important problems plaguing Indian higher education is the shortage of funds. Universities and degree colleges have many items demanding heavy expenditures, though their source of income is quite poor. Student's fees and donations, the chief source of income, do not meet even half of the expenses. If government would not provide adequate funding, the country would neither be able to achieve any substantial increase in the GER nor make any remarkable quality enhancement in the system.

D. Internationalization of Higher Education:

The spectacular progress in the field of information and communication technology has paved way for a knowledge revolution which together with the globalization process has transformed the entire concept of higher education all over the world. The emergence of a knowledge-based society and economy in recent times has placed fresh challenges to the higher education system of every country including India. The internationalization of higher education and sharing of experiences by institutions belonging to different nations has the potential to enrich the higher education system in all the countries concerned. It can pave way for more homogeneity and equity in the quality of higher education globally and provide greater opportunities for the students. Since internationalization of higher education and cross-border movement of students have become an accepted reality, Indian higher education sector alone cannot remain unaffected. In order to facilitate cross-border mobility of students, India's higher education system needs to be compatible with the higher education systems of other prominent countries of the world in the matter of quality and relevance. Internationalization has also opened up the possibility for leading Indian universities to established overseas campuses or to offer courses through collaborations with foreign counterparts.

Conclusion:

The globalisation process which brought about sweeping changes in almost all walks of life has profound impact on Indian higher education sector too. There are innumerable challenges before the higher education system in the new millennium. Opportunities are also aplenty. Although India has made considerable progress in the field of higher education since independence, it is still struggling with poor quality and very low GER in its higher education sector. India needs to do much more to ensure expansion of the sector with better access, equity, quality and relevance. The authorities and policy makers should devise new strategies and programmes to rejuvenate and revamp the system to make it internationally competitive through quality enhancement and effective use of the information and communication technology. To reap the benefits from the emerging knowledge-based world economy, India has to introduce the much needed academic and administrative reforms. India would be able to rise as a global economic power only by nurturing its huge human resource potential through providing access to quality higher education for the millions of young Indians.

While providing need-based education to train highly skilled human power for national development, Indian higher education needs to give due importance to humanities, basic sciences and research also. It is primary responsibility of the government to ensure sufficient funds for the overall development of the higher education sector. The efforts of the central and state governments need to be supplemented by private investments in this field and also through private- public partnership. The government also should have the political will to effectively implement new strategies and provide support to strengthen the academic and physical infrastructure of the existing higher education institution and also to establish new universities and colleges to make the system more inclusive. The central and state government make access, affordability, quality and relevance as the basic tenets of their policy for restructuring the system as a part of long-term manpower planning for the country.

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