

Higher Education in India: Roads ahead

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ABSTRACT

The system of higher education in India, in terms of the number of universities, number of affiliated colleges, student enrolment, faculty strength, resources allocated etc. has been expanding and diversifying almost exponentially since independence and today. It is one of the largest educational systems in the world. Recently, India has become the most populous country in the world, surpassing China. These one and a half billion Indian people are the nation's asset for the new millennium. It is pertinent to mention that many economic development theories have emphasized the role of human capital as a key to economic growth and development. The Human Development Report published in 2020 began with these words; "The real wealth of a nation is its people". In this context, the experience of different countries in the last four decades is very relevant for us. It has been observed that physical and capital resources alone are not sufficient inputs to make a country developed (Rao Sudha-2012). Serious doubts have also been raised in some circles about the efficacy of material and capital resources, arguing that the acquisition of material gain and affluence, a goal of economic development, is likely to lead to glaring inequalities and distortions in the distribution of wealth (John Marie E. -2012). Therefore, a nation dreaming to grow must use its human resource judiciously and convert it into a national asset. For this, the biggest challenge will be to keep higher education in line with the aspirations and demands of the changing society.

Keywords: Higher Education, Human Resources, Societal Change,

The system of higher education in India, in terms of the number of universities, number of affiliated colleges, student enrolment, faculty strength, resources allocated etc. has been expanding and diversifying almost exponentially since independence and today, it is one of the largest educational systems in the world. The number of universities which were 33 in 1956-57 rose to 156 in 1986-87 and today we have about 1078 universities. Likewise, there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of affiliated colleges and the present enrolment in higher education exceeds 50 million.

Although there has been a phenomenal growth in higher education in recent years, this growth has been uneven, haphazard and un-planned without allocation of commensurate resources. The facilities provided in the universities and colleges vary widely. There are many colleges which do not have adequate number of qualified teachers, infrastructure in terms of library, laboratories, play fields, hostels etc.

Several colleges and indeed many universities have been opened without consultation or against the advice of the University Grants Commission, without adequate facilities and needs. All the same, the system of higher education has continued to evolve, diversify and extend its reach and coverage over the last seventy-five years.

There is no doubt that education is one of the most essential tools for any modern nation to achieve social, economic and political objectives for meaningful national development. The intrinsic intellectual dynamism, resourcefulness, and the moral strength of a nation is reflected in the quality of higher education which provides political, intellectual, scientific and professional leadership. Scientific and technological basis of modern world, more than anything else, has made higher education, as never before the most important element in the life and progress of a nation.

Economic and social development, welfare and security are closely dependent on the extent and quality of higher education. It is no mere rhetoric when one says that the destiny of India is being shaped in our colleges and universities. It is on the quality and the nature of the persons coming out of our colleges and universities that will shape the success of our efforts in national reconstruction and social transformation.

It is essentially the universities in India which promoted, nourished and nurtured critical and uninhibited dialogue between bright and inquisitive students and the experienced teachers that enabled us to reach lofty heights in philosophical thoughts. Glaring examples are our universities of the past, Nalanda and Takshila which attracted students from far and wide.

Sir Charles Wood's famous dispatch in 1854 set out, in a sense sealed, the British educational policy in India. We have still not got out of the dismal limitations and orthodoxy of that imposed system. Its keynote was diffusion of western knowledge and culture and training of people for subordinate administration and secretarial services in a government controlled and directed by the British rulers. Oriental studies were ignored. Shakespeare was more important than Ramayana and Shakuntala. Greek and Latin were more prestigious than Sanskrit and Arabic. The great cultural and spiritual thought of India, confluence of many cultural streams and strands found no place in the universities first established in the country in 1857. With the passage of time, ignorance of our own heritage led people to believe that it was not worthy of serious study and attention. The centre of India's intellectual life whatever it was, moved away from India and has not been recaptured. The system churned out educated Indians but without roots in their soil and culture. It discouraged identification with the community. It provided English education but smothered the souls. There were of course great exceptions but the educational system could hardly take the credit for exceptional individuals who came out of it or in spite of it. The system lacked and even rejected Indianness and the country is still paying dearly for this neglect and aberration.

Ramendra Sunder Trivedi, (Basant, Rakesh & Sen, 2010) distinguished scholar said in his memorandum to Sadler Commission, "Western education has given us much but there has been a cost, a cost as regards culture, a cost as regards respect for the self and reverence for others, a cost as regards the mobility and dignity of life." Fortunately, the members seeking higher education then were so small that the great majority of the people did not suffer this aberration. In fact, in 1886 there were only 11,500 students (10 women) in 114 colleges in the entire country which constituted barely 0.01% of the population, with the result that the great majority of the people did not suffer this aberration.

After independence the system of higher education grew quantitatively without any qualitative and basic changes in its objects, functions and role. Indeed, this growth was merely an extension of the system imposed by the British to the detriment of dignity, culture and oneness. Pandit Nehru in his convocation address to Allahabad University (Mohan Surendra, 2015) said, "A University stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for adventure of ideas, and for search of truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards even higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duties adequately then it is well with the people, and the nation."

Radhakrishnan and Kothari Commissions also brought into a sharp focus what universities of independent in India are expected to do. They said universities have to produce leadership in politics and administration, the profession, industry and commerce. They have to meet increasing demand for every type of higher education, literary, scientific, technical and professional education. They must enable the country through scientific knowledge and trained minds to attain in as short a time as possible freedom from wants, disease and ignorance and bring together material resources and human energies. The system of higher education must produce young men and women of character, ability, committed to national service and development, only then will education be able to play its vital role in promoting national reconstruction, creating a sense of common citizenship and culture and strengthening of national integration

They have to serve as fountainheads of attitudes, values, skills, techniques etc. This re-echoes the sentiments expressed by Sir Ceryl Jones in his presidential address to the International Association of Universities. Sir Ceryl said, 'Universities are not ivory towers or cloistered bases of peace in which to escape from the problems and frustrations of the contemporary world. They are the centres of struggle. They are battlefields on which the victories will largely determine the future pattern of our society.' The National Policy on Education 1986 highlighted the importance of higher education. It said, "higher education provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the critical, social, economic and cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. It contributes to national development through dissemination of specialized knowledge and skills. It is, therefore, a crucial factor for survival". It went on to add, "in the context of the unprecedented explosion of knowledge, higher education has to become as dynamic as never before, constantly entering uncharted areas". Being conscious of the deterioration of the system of higher education, it said, "urgent steps will be taken to protect the system from degradation" The National Education Policy 2020 says 'higher education plays an extremely important role in promoting human as well as societal wellbeing and in developing India as envisioned in its Constitution - a democratic, just, socially conscious, cultured, and humane nation upholding liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice for all. Higher education significantly contributes towards sustainable livelihoods and economic development of the nation. As India moves towards becoming a knowledge economy and society, and more young Indians are likely to aspire for higher education.' In spite of the varying emphasis on one or another aspect of higher education, there seems to be near unanimity in the perception of the policy makers as well as in policy formulation that universities should and must provide leadership to the society and participate fully in the process of economic development and social transformation. These onerous responsibilities are to be discharged by the universities.

1. Undertaking research with a view to broaden the horizons of human knowledge, develop

technologies for speedier agricultural and industrial development,

2. Initiating and pursuing educational and training programmes with a view to impart knowledge and information, imbibe right kind of attitudes and outlooks, inculcate proper values, develop skills and techniques, and
3. Mounting extension programmes to overcome the problems faced by the society such as population explosion, growing illiteracy, mounting poverty, degrading environment etc. In a sense, universities should articulate socio-economic objectives, make efforts to pursue them and contribute to national development and social transformation,

Importance of human resource and the role of education in developing it has been well recognized. Further, the economies of advanced industrial countries/societies were found to depend, to an unprecedented extent, on the result of scientific research, on the supply of skilled and responsible manpower and consequently on the efficiency of education system (Halsey et. al.-1961). Therefore, education is considered as critical input for economic development more so for human resource development. Moreover, the present society is being evolved into knowledge society. Certainly, without education, such evolution is impossible. The Task Force on Higher Education and Society appointed by the World Bank and UNESCO in year 2020 suggested that without more and better education, developing countries would find it difficult to benefit from the global-knowledge-based economy. By the end of April 2023, China was no longer the most populous country in the world as India's population was expected to reach 142,57,75,850 by that time, surpassing the population of China, according to the latest United Nations estimates and projections of the global population. While the population of India is on the rise, the size of China's population is expected to drop below 100 crore before the end of this century. Can India be proud of its status as the most populous country in the world? In contrast, India almost hosts population of the same size in 3287 million square kilometers with its GDP estimated around \$3.7 trillion.

In effect, our population size which is similar to China today is hosted in almost one-third the geographical area and is sustained on one-sixth of China's GDP. Fortunately, however, while the working-age population is shrinking in the advanced economies/ developed countries, the working-age population in India is on the rise. Now the question is: can India take advantage and harvest the demographic dividend promised by an expanding working-age population? Indubitably, today India is the fastest growing large economy in the world, with its working-age population estimated at about 95 crore. But is this huge working-age population part of the country's workforce? Sadly enough, the answer is a 'no' as nearly four out of ten working-age men and three of four working-age women are not part of the workforce. Obviously, in the prevailing situation, India may not be able to fully take advantage of its demographics as China did as China invested heavily in education enabling it to achieve a literacy rate of 95 percent. As India is still at 77 percent literacy rate, there is a great need to lay greater emphasis on higher education if India is to realize its true potential and take advantage of its demographic dividend. More than increasing the literacy rate, India should initiate measures to promote higher education if our workforce is to become the best in the world and lay the path to become a developed country in the next few decades.

Conclusion:

Higher education is an instrument to impart knowledge and training to people leading to their empowerment. Among various levels of education, higher education has pervasive and influential impact on development of nation. Higher education empowers the individual with necessary skills and competence for achieving personal and social goals, which in turn contribute to the development of nation. Such an approach to higher education that promotes out-of-the box thinking will enable India to become a leading supplier of skilled workforce to the developed countries where the working-age population is diminishing day by day leading to shortage of skilled workforce that can keep the economies of the developed countries growing at the desired rate.

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