

Higher Education and Equality in India

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ABSTRACT: *The present paper seeks to explain the issues plaguing higher education in India against the backdrop of globalization and resultant demand for higher standard of quality education. While the demand for higher education has been growing, system has rendered itself as ill-equipped to meet the needs of different strata of society. To government, higher education receives a low priority. Short term measures such as hikes in course fee, appointing part time teachers, introducing paid and market oriented courses are being adopted by the government that in the long run defeat the very social objectives of higher education. In the era of globalization, states are more competitive and even more interdependent. Even the future of state is more dependent on the creation of new knowledge to suit its people in the discharge of their duties in administration, business and in all other areas. This possible if right to higher education is recognized as one of the individual and higher embraces the principle of equality*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is now universally acknowledged that there is symmetrical relation between the progress of a nation and human resources. In 21st century, nations are more competitive, more interdependent and even their future is more dependent on the creation of knowledge, skills and resourcefulness of its people. This is no doubt a great challenge that higher education today is likely to face. The creation of these new opportunities is only possible if education is considered as basic human right and to resist any move to reduce education to a mere commodity sold in market. If we fall, a fear is likely to hunt us that the world will become unequal, competitive, polarized, conflicted and dangerous. Globalization is rendering our societies as more multicultural and even more intercultural, thereby shifting our educational and developmental priorities as we assume the issues of multiple cultural identities. The milestone of 20th century achieved has focused on the right to education for everyone as enshrined in Article 26.1 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 21st century will be struggle for declaring the purpose of education for all. Whereas education contributes to the productive life of every society, its fundamental purpose is clearly set out in Article 26.2 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respects human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups⁽¹⁻⁴⁾.

II. HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Higher education in India in the 21st century is in dilemmas. Demand for higher education is growing, while leaving the system itself ill- equipped to meet the needs of different strata of the society⁵. Debate on higher education has been continuing. While debating on implications of higher education, diametrically opposite views are propping up. Both pessimism and optimism dominate the scenario. To the optimists, higher should be privatized to make it a profitable, productive sector, while to the pessimists, the closer of non-profitable colleges and universities is imminent. People are less bothered to know the objectives of higher education, its social implications and academic standard thereof. What concerns all is the finance. Those who are incapable of procuring funds for higher education, but sincerely wish to reach the doors of it place their attention on the budget speech of Finance minister. But, ultimately, for the government, higher education receives a low priority.

The system of higher education has witnessed a considerable increase since independence. However, still, the access to higher education still remains limited around 6.9 % in 2006 and government is committed to increase the combined access formal and non-formal higher education to 10% in Tenth Plan⁶. According to a recent report published in India Today (online version), January 5, 2014, only 10% of the university-age population between the age of 22 years and 35 years, is invariably less compared to the extent of access of higher education in developed countries with 59% in USA, Canada having 54%, Israel 30%, and UK 22%.

In the age of knowledge the place of higher education is highly acclaimed but in its reality it is being 'sidelined, if not starved'. Increased economic growth has produced 'have' and 'have-nots', but knowledge today produces 'knows' and 'know-not'. This has necessitated the greater access to higher education.

III. A PARADIGM SHIFT IN APPROACH AND HIEGHER EDUCATION

According to A. S. Desai, the previous Chairman of UGC, higher education to government is neither a public good nor merit good. Day to day public administration, defence administration etc. are meant for public good, therefore, wastage, stagnation, inefficiency, even corruptions are tolerated or bypassed in these areas. Primary education, public health, social welfare schemes are considered as merit good services, because benefits of these services do not end to its immediate recipients, rather it is believed that these benefits are accrued for the welfare of the society at large. In the recent held conference organized by the Department of Economic Affairs, Government of India, in May, 1997, it was argued that subsidization of higher is untenable at least for two reasons. First, it was argued that higher education is like electricity, LPG, diesel which are generally used by higher and middle class having a capacity to pay for it. Secondly, it was argued that subsidized higher education is against the spirit of equity, because its benefit does not percolate to the strata of the society.

But such a view about higher education is not tenable in the changing prospective of the present day world. World Bank in its report in 1994 stated that higher education benefited the state and society in various ways. The main purpose of higher education to equip individual with advance knowledge and skill that are essential for the discharge of responsibilities in government, professions and in business. Moreover in a knowledge economy, these institutions were expected to introduce people with latest knowledge produced elsewhere in the world⁷. In another venture, a task force was constituted by the World Bank in 2000 to study higher education and society in developing countries. The report of this task force said that higher education not only improves the lives of the individuals but enriches the whole society in several ways. First from the economic point of view higher education helps increase productivity that directly enriches individual and society. Secondly, by allowing people to enjoy a life of free mind creates a wider society both for cultural and political benefits. Thirdly, higher education is believed to promote independence and initiative both of which are valuable intellectual resources for the creation and dissemination of knowledge in society.

IV. ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The expansion of educational facility in terms of number of institutes of higher learning and teachers has facilitated greater access to higher education. The access to higher education is measured in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), which is a ratio of persons enrolled in higher education institutions to total population of the persons in the age group of 18 to 23 years. The estimate of the GER is generally based on the data collected by MHRD/UGC from the educational institutions. Other methods of estimating GER are based on National Sample Survey (NSS) data Population Census data. Sometimes GER is ascertained on the basis of Selected Education Statistics (SES). If we looked at the finding of all methods, Higher education is alienated from inclusiveness. Regional disparities in GER are very much prominent. Against 11% of all India average GER, Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tripura, Jharkhand have lower GER. Inter group disparity in access higher education is a prominent feature Indian higher education.

There exists a large variation in enrolment ratio between male-female, between SC, ST, OBC and other, between religious groups, economic groups such as self-employed and wage labour, between income groups and poor and non-poor. Another significant variation is rural urban disparity in the access of higher education⁸. Most importantly, a significant trend in higher education in the 21st century has been the progressive commercialization of higher education through the world. With the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SEP) under the auspices of International Monetary Fund (IMF) state subsidies are being curtailed in many developing countries. Students are labeled as mere clients and higher education institutions as manufatures⁹. This emerging phenomenon has been affecting higher education negatively at least in two ways- hike in programme fees and consequent reduction of government expenditure in education and , second in denial of principle of social justice.

V. CONCLUSION

The benefits of higher education particularly in developing countries have far reaching implications as it enables government to equip its citizen to emerging knowledge and skills and remains strategically competitive in a an aggressive global environment. It has also been argued that higher education in developing countries contributes to the deepening of democracy by producing good citizens who actively participate in the socio-economic and political process of their nations. It is only through education people can understand the plural multicultural dynamics of the society. This is possible if education addresses the issues of social equity. Higher education, like basic education must be considered as 'public good'. Benefits of higher education are far beyond of private interest as it unlocks the potentiality at all levels of society, its 'nation-building' role is in many ways a public good nonetheless. Public goods like higher education may not be satisfactorily provided by the markets with the a view of profit motive.

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