

Indian Higher Education – Milch Cow for the Nation- the Role of Quality

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Abstract:

Higher Education in India has enjoyed a status of great respect and was worthy of emulation in the whole world. Indian education system was based on gurukul system which always aimed at holistic development of the taught. India as an emerging economy needs an empowered human capital which would contribute to the growth of the nation. Knowledge and skills which constitute competence is the need of the hour when the country has to progress and compete with the global entities. Higher education in India which forms the pinnacle of the education pyramid is pretty well poised to give the necessary lead to India. Higher education, is undoubtedly the milch cow that the country needs to exploit... exploit the demographic dividend and produce highly evolved human capital which will contribute not only to the growth and development of the country, but also in terms of culture, fine arts, literature and the ability to provide the ease of life.

Key words: Higher education, Empowered Human Capital, Indian Education System, Quality, Emerging Economy, Growth and Development.

There can be no denying the fact that India has always been a pioneer in education reforms right from the times of Nalanda and Takshila. India was a seat of great learning and the whole world was surprised at the descriptions given by the historians who visited India during the times. The Centres of higher learning in India like Nalanda and Takshila have dotted the history with enough evidence to show that our system of higher education was a result of careful research, practice and needs of the nation. All was well till the British played spoil sport with our education system. Even before the times of Nalanda and Takshila, Indian scientists, astronomers, surgeons, literary giants have shown wisdom to the world that was unparalleled. India offered a model of education that was worthy of emulation. Gandhi's Tolstoy Farm and Tagore's Shantiniketan were the modern examples of the modified models of Indian education system which served the purpose of not only educating the young, but also build character and the grit that would be necessary to face the reality of life. The gurukul system of education was not just meant to dispense with knowledge but aimed at preparing the 'shishyas' or disciples

for life. Holistic development of the taught was the primary aim of education. Knowledge and skills, which constitute competence- was the ultimate aim of education. Specialisation was offered to the students based on the domains that they would choose in life in addition to the knowledge for life. Training was given in agriculture, warfare, political acumen and what not.

It is indisputably true that knowledge is the driving force of nation's growth and development. 21st century in perspective, the knowledge of a country is the sum total of the knowledge of its most efficient human resource. It forms the capital on which the whole country's growth has to be chartered. Higher education is the one milch cow which the country has to put to best use to evolve as a competent global player. The highly 'enriched' and 'critical' human resource that the higher education would lead to is the sheer opportunity that India needs the most at this hour. As an emerging knowledge economy, India has witnessed spectacular growth in the service sector and has given jitters to the countries which once boasted of supremacy in terms of the service sector. Efforts of the country in the IT and BT sectors have given the necessary edge to compete with other nations.

With more than 50% population in less than 22 years of age group in India, the sheer demographic dividend that India enjoys is a matter of concern for other developing nations. This huge number of the young population which is the 'milch cow' for the nation can cater to the needs of the nation only when empowered and it goes without saying that empowerment is possible only through quality education that encompasses knowledge and skills. India which has recorded an impressive growth rate which is pegged at more than 8% in 2010¹, has not been able to develop the necessary human capital required to further push the growth rate. There is an imminent need to take higher education to the masses and achieve higher GER. The present GER which is slightly above 20% needs to be pushed by leaps and bounds to fully exploit the demographic dividend.

India working with greater focus on access to higher education could see the number of institutions going up by leaps and bounds. The higher education institutions mushroomed all across India and the Indian government's single most agenda was to provide access to higher education and increase the GER. From 23 University level institutions in 2050 to 431 in the year 2008 was a manifold growth. Similarly from 700 colleges in 2050 to 20000+ institutions

¹World Bank Report: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=IN>

in 2008 was phenomenal growth². Though access and equity were the magic words to start with, quality became a casualty in the Indian context. Thanks to Dr. Kothari, who laid great emphasis on quality in education that the country became serious on the quality aspect also in addition to access and equity. It is worth noting the famous lines from **Kothari Report**:

The destiny of India is now being shaped in her classrooms. This, we believe, is no mere rhetoric. In a world based on science and technology it is education that determinesthe level of prosperity, welfare and security of the people. On the quality and number of persons coming out of our schools and colleges will depend our success in the great enterprise of national reconstruction the principal objective of which is to raise the standard of living of our people. in this context, it has become urgent³

According to Dr. Kothari, it was not important just to provide education to a large spectrum of the population, but provide quality education was the urgent requirement that demanded the attention of the nation.

NPE-1986 (National Policy on New Education-1986) and the follow up of it, the Program of Action (PoA) on NPE- 1992 further gave thrust to the quality aspect of higher education. It was PoA on NPE that for the first time laid a solid framework and gave a policy direction to the quality assurance. PoA on NPE "... spelt out strategic plans for the policies, advocated the establishment of an independent National accreditation agency"⁴. As a result of concrete recommendation, the country witnessed the establishment of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in the year 1994 as an autonomous institution of the University Grants Commission (UGC).

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has the mandate to assess and accredit institutions offering higher education by an amendment to the UGC Act of 1956. NAAC has been continuously upgrading its tools and methodology of assessment in tune with the demands of the sector and the aspirations of the stakeholders. Besides, NAAC also tries to keep pace with the international practices by ushering in reforms from time to time to match the quality parameters of its counterparts elsewhere in the world.

² UGC Report- Higher Education in India: Issues related to expansion, Inclusiveness, Quality and Finance (New Delhi-2008. P.2

³ Report of the Education Commission, 1964-66, Vol.1. page.2

⁴NAAC Website. www.naac.gov.in

NAAC conducts the assessment of institutions based on a self-study report submitted by the higher education institutions. The validation of the report is done by a committee appointed by NAAC which is called the Peer Team. Though the methodology involves subjectivity, continuous efforts are being made by NAAC to bring in objectivity in its tools and methodology. The qualification prescribed by NAAC for assessment of quality in an institution is that it must have rolled out two batches of students or must have completed five years after its establishment. Further, NAAC mandates that every institution must submit itself for subsequent cycles of accreditation after the completion of five years. Interestingly, NAAC has also introduced the concept of internal quality assurance through the mandatory establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) in every accredited institution.

However, the crux of the matter is that many of the institutions are hesitant to go in for assessment by NAAC or by any other external agency. The so called Academic and Administrative Audit that is conducted at the institutional level- internally – is full of gaps and the people involved in the team, more often than not, lack professional training or are not certified professionals for evaluation of quality.

Assessment and Accreditation must be made mandatory to fulfil the purpose of establishment of NAAC by the country. The founding fathers and the policy makers had the vision to achieve quality assurance in all the tertiary level academic institutions and that it would be renewed once in five years. But the hesitation on the part of the academic institutions to go for assessment for the purpose of accreditation either in the first cycle or subsequent cycles is a matter of concern.

Accreditation by NAAC must be linked to incentives to institutions and certain statutory provisions must be created so as to motivate institutions to seek accreditation status without fail. In the light of impending challenges offered by globalisation and universalisation of education, India has to face stiff competition from the world outside. Highly evolved academic institutions when they enter the Indian terrain, the institutions which are not competitively prepared or accredited and take steps for continuous improvement adopting Kaizen, it would be imperative that they would cease to exist.

Quality is not a luxury in the higher education system that the country could wait for it to arrive, but it is the dire necessity and without which the services offered by the so-called tertiary education institutions become futile. It is utterly useless to offer higher education without quality and quality is necessary for nation building as the same human capital is what the country is trying to build for its progress and development.

There is an imminent need to build consensus among the stakeholders of higher education that education without quality or education with poor quality is not in favour of the nation and its prosperity. Besides building policy provisions, quality culture must be imbibed among the stakeholders to seek accreditation which to some extent, is a certification for the quality that is being offered by an institution.

There is an imminent need for the country to earmark a considerable portion of its GDP/GNP towards education per se in general and higher education in particular. Mere emphasis on primary education is gross injustice to the pyramid of education that the country needs to focus on. It is unfortunate that the mushrooming colleges have failed to provide the basic necessary infrastructure required for quality education. Though infrastructure alone cannot assure quality, there is no denying the fact that the changing times demand certain infrastructure that is in sync with the times. Classrooms without good quality blackboards, without OHPs, without LCD Projectors and the computing equipment has denied the teacher and the taught to move beyond the traditional chalk-and-talk method. Basic requirements like toilets, laboratories, seminar halls, computing equipment, paraphernalia necessary for physical training are still not available in many institutions across the country. The most pressing demand is for qualified teachers. Even Central Universities suffer from shortage of qualified faculty to the tune of 40% as per the recent reports. Usually, the problems are addressed by straight jacket reports which make sweeping recommendations for all types of institutions across the country. In fact, the need of the hour to encourage individual institutions to come up with requirement mapping and Institutional Development Plans and funding should be provided to them for their development.

Yashpal Committee Report (2009), categorically states that the reforms in higher education should start from 'self-reforms' at unitary level. Every institution should start its journey in the path of reforms that their convergence at one point paves the way for quality assurance. "...we propose is that institutional self-reform. An institution's awareness of its own problems, its will and capacity to study these problems and to draw roadmaps for resolving them are indicators of its overall institutional quality. Capacity for such an intrinsically inspired reform is also a sign of true autonomy"⁵(sic).

⁵ Report of 'The Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education, 2009. (Yashpal Committee Report) P. 28

Conclusion

Adequate granting, policy support, governance structures, training the teachers to be academic leaders and building outcome based curriculum is the need of the hour. Customising the curriculum on a regular basis to suit the requirements of the human resource requirements is the urgent need. Undoubtedly, quality cannot wait. The milch cow is waiting. India needs to respond to its concerns.

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