

Higher Education and Globalisation in Indian Society: Implications for the Weaker Sections

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Abstract

The nature of higher education in India has been undergoing lot of transformation in terms of its spread and quality. Obviously, its significance has also been enhanced in the times of globalization. Thus there is a substantial demand for higher education among various sections of the Indian social hierarchy. More so is the case with the weaker sections. However, its very access, leave alone qualitative dimension, to these weaker sections has been restricted very much in the recent times. Alternatively, very few of them have been able to approach private and commercial institutions at a price higher than their expectations. Yet, their inability to compete with the elitist sections had led to their disappointment in the field of higher education. This paper is an attempt to analyze the factors that contributed for such predicament of weaker sections in this direction. Also, the paper argues that the prevailing trend of privatization in the backdrop of globalization process would impact the weaker sections in different ways. Ultimately, the confidence level among these sections will descend and thereby their employment opportunities become very miserable.

Key words: Higher Education, Globalization, Privatization, Governmental Initiatives, Implications for the Weaker Sections

Introduction

Many factors have contributed to the prevailing degradation of higher education system in India. Often, lack of financial allocations has been attributed for the educational problem. Several other factors are also responsible for the multi-dimensional problem of education in India. Incidentally, the consistent growth rate of India in recent times has been attributed to the higher education system which had generated skilled manpower for promoting

the rapid industrialization and knowledge based economy. India has become the hub of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and its enabled services industry and manufacturing industry. Although the Indian education system has been able to support service industry, the Research & Development (R &D) in several universities and industries had not kept pace with developed countries, which has created huge divide within the

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society. Thus the progress in the last two decades had not reached all sections of the society.

Weaker Sections

As part of the Indian social hierarchy, several communities had become marginalized for over centuries. Most of these weaker sections had been deprived of many basic facilities and became vulnerable. While the hierarchical social structure is one such factor that had its implications on other dimensions of the educational problem, developmental paradigm in the last few decades had also some bearing on the problem. The weaker sections have had no access to elementary education, leave alone higher one, even decades after the Indian Independence. Thus, these sections find it difficult to engage their wards in this higher education system. While education can empower such deprived sections, its inaccessibility is considered a bane today. Less said the better about fewer higher educational institutions in the country.

Hence, the weaker sections have been compelled to enroll their children in the public-funded educational institutions that hardly offer qualitative education. Obviously, the weaker sections had raised the demands like public education, reservations in employment and social empowerment. Most of these backward communities were showing keen interest in enrolling their wards into the institutions of higher education, which were established in big way in the last few decades. Thus, one finds a rationale for

the 12th Plan documents that had specifically referred to the issue of 'inclusive character' of developmental models in the country. And thus, specific provisions had been made in the annual budgets, about the special component plans, or sub-plans for the weaker sections like the *dalits* and *adivasis*.

Nowadays, the need of inclusive education has largely been stressed in both government and non-government circles. Recognizing the miserable state of educational progress, even some International agencies¹ have also come forward to provide the educational opportunities for the weaker sections like the *dalits* and *adivasis* in the society. Yet, the state and governments had not been effective in achieving these set Millennium Development Goals by 2015, or thereafter. Interestingly, some global agencies had also played harmful role in this regard, as the corporate and private institutions were engaged in commercialization of education in the developing countries like India. Over the years, universities and colleges had become training centers for the service-based industry with short term economic development, rather than focusing on long term development of a society, which is reliable, stable and prosperous. Thus, there emerged a crisis-ridden educational system that affected these institutions in the country. Its obvious implications on the weaker sections of Indian society are very detrimental.

Globalization Apprehensions

There is an emerging threat from the process of globalization in recent decades. Moreover, it is a challenging task to assess not only the nature and dimensions of globalization, but also what it signifies in the field of education. Apparently, not many educational researchers have attempted to make connections between dimensions of globalization and the policies of education. For, the globalization process meant differing effects in the context of higher education. As part of globalization process, education had been included as a service industry under the umbrella of General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). And, the GATS had obligated the countries with quite different academic needs and resources to conform to such systems that were inevitably designed to service the interests of corporate educational sector, and thereby breeding inequality and dependence.

In the words of an eminent Indian educationist Arun Nigvekar², “Globalization can lead to unregulated and poor quality higher education, with the worldwide marketing of fraudulent degrees or other so-called higher education credentials”. It seems that the countries like India were to turn into “an increasingly attractive market for foreign universities and hence other nations are going to use GATS’ provisions to their advantage”. Thus, several teachers’ organizations³ were on record in disagreement with the inclusion of

education in the GATS, on the ground that education was not a commodity. Yet, the political regimes in different states were unwilling to revisit the scheme, rather they had facilitated three processes of globalization (liberalization, privatization and globalization-LPG), in a big way.

Since 1990s, the new economic reforms had resulted in freezing the public funds to many institutions and thereby decaying the expenditure on education in India. Because, the free market philosophy had already entered the educational sphere slowly and gradually. Commercialization of education became the order of the day. As part of the LPG, the constitutional and social obligations of the state had been diluted for the past two decades or more. As a result, misconceived policy of downsizing of higher education has been performed. It has also backed the privatization of higher education without realizing the danger of creating some commercial enterprises in the given social hierarchy. Following the process of globalization, many corporate universities, both foreign and Indian, had been encroaching upon the government institutions unrestrained. Since these institutions became ‘self-financing’, their course prices got benchmarked against their global counterparts. Expectedly such institutions were unaffordable to the lower layer of the social hierarchy in the country. For now, various kinds of price barriers were imposed to check the entry of students belonging to the non-elite and the weaker sections.

Educational Initiatives

Although the entry of higher education was associated with British colonialism, the Indian State promoted this sector as an important instrument of social development. Over the years, both the governments, at the Centre and in states, had initiated some measures so as to impart education to millions of youth in the country. Particularly, the quantitative dimension was given a top priority in the initial stages of its educational development. More than 800 Universities and Institutions of excellence are there at present. The quantitative growth has certainly democratized the higher education by increasing access to about twenty million students in around 40,000 colleges across the country. Yet, there are complaints of producing unemployable graduates and post graduates in science and non-science categories in several states in the country. For, most of these products have been attributed with indifferent attitude of governments towards higher education.

At the beginning of the implementation of the Indian Constitution, all ranks of education, including higher education, were the responsibility of state governments. But, the educational sector was placed in the Concurrent List⁴ after 1976. While the union government became indifferent towards higher education, the state governments enjoyed more powers to control, regulate and promote higher education. Squeezed in between two the governments, the

education sector were to guard itself. Neither the union nor the state governments had shown any interest in boosting higher education. Thus, monetary and non-monetary support to the higher education was far from satisfactory. And particularly, whatever meager funds for education were allocated that was cornered by the elementary sector, whereas the higher education was at the mercy of some bureaucrats in the government departments.

The Union Government was mostly concerned with the coordinating functions, besides laying broad policy guidelines. Thus, the University Grants Commission (UGC) originally aimed at serving as a regulating and monitoring authority was established in 1953. Over the years, the UGC was converted into a mere coordinating and recommending body. Obviously, the prevalent educational predicament was responsible for expanding the quantitative growth of higher education in the country. Yet, the issue of quality did not draw the attention of many, 'within or without' the government. Lately, both the governments had realized the damage that affected the qualitative dimension of higher education. The declining standards of higher education had in turn caused to debase the elementary sector. For instance, ill-equipped educational graduates could not perform well in the elementary classes.

Accordingly, the Eleventh Five Year Plan⁵ document on higher education had rightly observed: "Nobody would be

deprived of higher education opportunities due to lack of financial resources...” Viewed in this backdrop, the Plan statement was to be conceived as a national commitment that had outlined the educational priorities, at a time when certain structural changes were effected in the Indian Planning Process. Further, this Plan outlined a three-fold strategy of expansion, equity and excellence of higher education in the country. Interestingly, the expedient remedy contemplated then was to start some central universities, as part of combining these three objectives in one go! Ironically, a substantial proportion of the increased budget allocation was planned for the new Central universities in each of the states where there existed none during the course of Eleventh Plan.

Unquestionably, expansion of the higher education is long overdue. Opening out of the central universities could have been undertaken along with those of the states. But that was not done. Incidentally, the state universities and their colleges account for over 80% of the total enrolment in Higher education in the country. Later on, similar efforts were made to establish state level universities, for instance, as part of the *Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan* (RUSA)⁶. But, due to paucity of funds these state-level establishments did not create requisite infrastructural facilities and also recruitment of staff, both teaching and non-teaching. When shortage of teachers in the State universities became a serious problem, the problem was attempted with recruitment of a few contract teachers.

As part of the globalization process and to cope up with the changing priorities of the elites, the policy makers had revised their strategies in the education sector. For instance, the accreditation of universities and colleges has been made compulsory some time ago. This sort of strategy by the NAAC framework has currently been made radically different by making it almost dependent on third party data validation and opinion from the students. And of course, there emerged a new institutional ranking (NIRF) that presently determines the quality of educational institutions in the country. Of late, the Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) has been added to the list of existing institutions that would support the universities financially. In any case, the universities will have to sign tripartite agreements (MoUs) with both the MHRD and the UGC so as to receive the allocated grants.

Alternatively, the topmost central universities that attracted just a fraction of students from among the large mass of them had been provided with full funds, of course at the cost of the state-level universities. Meanwhile, these became central ‘show pieces’ that could be demonstrated as ‘centers of excellence’. Whereas, the state universities that enrolled vast mass of marginalized students were expected to realize the objectives like expansion and equity, as was conceived in the 11th Plan. Later on, the 12th Plan⁷ Approach paper had rightly identified and acknowledged the prevalent problems in the state universities, yet it

hardly offered any viable solutions. According to the same Plan paper, 'Faculty shortages need to be tackled through innovative ways such as technology-enabled learning, and collaborative information and Communication technologies (ICT).' In a way, this is an attempt at addressing the educational problem that got sidetracked thereafter.

Privatization Challenges

The private sector, with the sole criterion of profit motto, would seldom retain, leave alone elevate, the existing academic standards. For, the private sector cannot be relied upon on an assurance that safeguards the interests of either teacher or taught. And, the private sector is less concerned with the Constitutional and statutory obligations. Less said the better about its social and public commitments. In other words, with the entry of private sector into the educational arena, market forces became crucial in deciding the fate of both quantity and quality dimensions of higher education. That had certainly created a chaotic situation, in the human resource development field. Once a pro-market system like the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) was implemented, the obvious harmful consequences followed, as none of the three objectives viz., expansion, equity and excellence could be fulfilled. Thus, not only that the state abdicated its constitutional obligations and became a mute spectator, but it was dependent on the private sector in the execution of strategic higher education projects.

Besides, on the issue of containing private sector into educational compass, the government had presented some flimsy grounds. While the government has recognized the problem that stemmed from the private institutions, for want of resources or otherwise, private sector has been favored in education. In consequence, the state had to make a compromise on the issue of 'profit' of the private sector. In other words, the state had abstracted its approaches towards the private sector in education as was the case with other fields of life. Suffice it to quote a relevant paragraph from the same 12th Plan paper, which is self-explanatory indeed, in the following way:

'Resource constraints will make it difficult to meet the need of expanding higher education entirely through the public sector. Not all private educational institutions are of good quality and some are quite inferior. Minimum standards will have to be ensured. But free entry will, in the end, automatically weed out the poor quality institutions. Private initiatives in higher education including viable and innovative public-private partnership models, consequently are actively upheld. The current "not-for-profit" prescription in the education sector should be re-examined in a pragmatic manner so as to ensure quality, but without losing focus on equity.'

In any case, due to long neglect of educational standards, several universities have been managed on the support of adhoc and contract/temporary

appointments. Besides, the age-old patterns of curriculum, teaching and evaluation that caused concern among these students also warranted a serious look. That would certainly facilitate a revisit of correlation between education and employment requirements. Besides, given the present sorry state of educational setting, teaching and research output of any state university seems to be on decline. Moreover, decades of under-investment in education have created appalling dearth of buildings, laboratories, libraries, sanitary facilities and even drinking water in the nation's crumbling education sector. Although our finance ministers very often cited the shortage of investible resources for implementing the six percentage proposal⁸, it is common knowledge that due to the lack of political will, additional resources were deployed into education only by trimming non-merit subsidies to the middle class, and reducing defense expenditure.

At last, a national consensus has been built on the premise that higher education outlays were important investments in the nation's future. Yet, in financing higher education, the introduction of 'cost recovery' principles⁹ that resulted in a fees-hike contributed to some reduction in the government liability. But, critical questions were raised about those public obligations that the state was supposed to fulfill. For instance, the prevailing disposition led to change the composition of student population in favor of the elitist and higher income groups. For, privatization of higher

education makes it quite expensive such that it could be beyond the reach of lower strata of the social hierarchy. In the ultimate analysis, it is the condensed public funding, an enlarged cost recovery, a favorable playing field for private institutions in the higher education that are bound to redefine its setting in the country, with access, equity and social justice being the notable casualty. In other words, these private parties are challenging the stated policy of treating higher education as a public good as different from private consumption, whereby the obvious implications are discernible for the weaker sections.

To conclude, the Government of India has been caught up with market-oriented policies that envisage a process of withdrawal of state from its social obligations once for all. It seems to be in tune with the global trend that says each country should decide about the nature and extent of globalization that could be productively presented in the socio-economic developmental system. This is more so in the field of education, which is intimately connected with the development of human resources. Thus higher education scenario is faced with numerous challenges that invariably needed state attention. For instance, uneven distribution of financial resources between the central and state universities could have been put an end to, whereby allocation of adequate funds for state universities would help the redressal of problem like the educational quality. Then, the problems of infrastructure and

shortage of staff, more particularly about the size of faculty, leave alone its quality, could be attended at once.

Consequent upon these major changes in the realm of economy, detrimental implications were discernible at the social and educational spheres. Being the source of funding, the state is expected to set up new institutions and mechanisms that would regulate higher education. A high level committee can be set up so as to suggest a

specific reform measures in the changing socio-economic and political settings in the country. The power of market forces is tremendous and once entered, they can sabotage the public sector and thereby establish their control in higher education. Ultimately, any hasty involvement in this sort of globalized educational market would result in destroying the vital interests of Indian students, and particularly of the poor and weaker sections for the generations to come.

Notes

- ¹ As part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) certain objectives of educational dimension were identified and enforced.
- ² World Bank's Task Force, 2000
- ³ In Andhra Pradesh, couple of dominant associations like the PRTU, STU, APTS, UTF and DTF were contacted on the issue and elicited their opinion as part of a field study in the recent past.
- ⁴ As per this List, both the governments can legislate upon the items in this List. Yet, the central government will have final say, invariably.
- ⁵ See XI Plan Document, Vol. II, P. 31
- ⁶ Launched in 2012, the RUSA scheme ended in 2017 and it has been extended till 2019.
- ⁷ Government of India, Planning Commission published the 12th Plan approach Paper in October 2011.
- ⁸ The India's Education Commission (1964-66) laid the foundation of post-Independent national education policy. Thus, the Commission had recommended that 6%, as against 3%, of the national income could be allotted as government expenditure on education. The Commission also hoped that "all the areas of the country should be able to provide five years of good effective education to all the children by 1975-76 and seven years of such education by 1985-86".
- ⁹ Capitalist-based market economy. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-blueprint-for-higher-education/article7522994.ece>