CONCERNS & CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CURRENT SCENARIO

Dr. Subhash Chandra Pandey[*]

Abstract

To begin with for a good and purposeful higher education we need an proper school education followed by an sensible higher education in University. Sadly, our universities are lacking basic facilities of laboratories, informatics, skill development courses and workshops, meaningful interactions with leading subject experts etc. Our current infrastructure with dated libraries, lack of digital recourses, recent publications have created islands of excellence amidst an ocean of mediocrity. What we need is to reorganise our higher education system and include the cutting edge technologies to be updated with present time.

Key words: Higher education, primary and basic education, challenges and achievements amidst deficiencies

[*] **Head-Department of Commerce,Kalicharan P.G. College, Lucknow**

Introduction

The role of education in the process of development is wide and critically important. The genesis of a well formed higher education system has its roots delved in primary and basic education. The differences that basic education can make life easy to see. It is also readily appreciated by the poorest of families. The connection between development and education, including the crucial and important role of public services in bringing about an educational transformation, was clearly seen more than two hundred years ago by Adam Smith, who provided the classic analysis of how the market mechanism can work successfully. He wanted much greater use of state recourses for public education and argued:

"For the very small expense the public can facilitate, can encourage and can even impose upon the whole body of the people, the necessity of acquiring those most essential parts of education" [1]

State of Education in India

Oddly enough, despite the strong pro-education rhetoric in the Indian national movement, the expansion of education has been remarkable slow in India, much slower than in East Asia. Indeed, India has lagged behind East Asia by a long margin, as table 1.1 indicates. The deficit is particularly striking for Indian women, including young women, large portion of whom are illiterate even today, in sharp contrast with East Asia, including for instance, Indonesia, which was earlier on (even in 1960s) not performing much better than India, but where literacy is much better in this respect than India, but where literacy is more or less universal in the younger age groups today. [2]

About 20% of Indian children between the ages 6 and 14 years were not attending school even in 2005-06 and about 10% of children of that age group have never been enrolled in any school at all. [3] The neglect is particularly strong for Indian girls; nearly half of them were out of school in large parts of India (example Bihar in the same year). In this respect, South Asia (including India) has remained very much closer to sub-Saharan Africa than to the rest of Asia. Even within South Asia, India is not doing particularly well. Bangladesh, despite being much poorer than India, has cought up with and in some ways overtaken India in the education of girls. Nepal even

poorer (than India with respect to GDP) and has less than half of India's literacy rates as recently as 1980s but has almost caught up with India too, in the younger age groups (as illustrated in the table 1.1) [4]

Challenges with Higher Education

The quality of higher education is hard to judge but if we go by the list of 200 top ranking universities prepared by the Times Higher Education Supplement in October 2011; an overwhelming proportion of leading institutions of higher education are based in the United States. Indeed, the top five are all in America: Harvard, Caltech, MIT, Stanford and Princeton, in that order. The British follow just behind and in the top 10 we also find Oxford and Cambridge and Imperial College, London.

What is, however, really arresting in the list is the preponderance of Western establishments in the entire list of 200 top universities [5]. There are no Asian university in top 20, while some elite universities in Asia do get in below that, including Hong Kong, Tokyo, Pohang, Singapore, Peking, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Kyoto, Tsinghai, and a few others, together they form only a small minority of the top universities of the globe. It is particularly sticking that there is not a single university in India in the list of the top 200 in the world. [6]

The problems of Indian universities, including academic arrangements and facilities, recruitments and emoluments, can be critically assessed and should be. The limitation of intake is, however, a major drag on the reach and performance of higher education, and to improve this it is crucially important to reform, indeed to remake, the entire system of school education in this country.

School education in India suffers from two principal deficiencies: firstly, limitation of coverage and secondly, poor standard of education that is offered and received. While there has been some progress in the former, the quality of education in the Indian schools seems to be exceptionally low over a wide range on institutions. Teaching lessons are often dominated by mindless rote learning, including repetition – typically without comprehension – of what has been read. [7]

Achievement amidst deficiencies

India's official statistics show a steady increase of school enrolment – for both girls and boys and in the facilities available in schools. Government decisions as well as the orders of the Hon. Supreme Court have contributed to these developments and the enactment to the Right to Education Act in 2010 is certainly an attempt to move things forward.

The All India *Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan* (campaign for universal education), implemented by the state governments with the central government support, has been great help in expanding and improving school facilities across the country.

One of the findings of the *Public Report on Basic Education* (known as the PROBE report), published in 1999, states – the official number of school days per year is around 200 days. But teacher absenteeism rate is around 20% and pupil absenteeism rate is about 33% and the combined probability of a child and his or her teacher being present on an average day is only just above 50%. This brings down the number of teaching days effectively to 100 days or so. But this is not the end of the story, because the surveys also suggest that in those 100 days about half of the time is bereft of any teaching activity. The actual teaching time is more like fifty days – about one fourth of what would happen in a well functioning school system. [8]

The Path Ahead: What Can Be Done

The nature and content of the test, of course, need considerable thought. For instance, it is possible to design standard tests that evaluate the competency of the child (say, the ability to comprehend – not just read – a simple text), rather than his/her ability to memorise. Similarly, 'open book' tests can help to shift the focus of tests from memorization to comprehension or competency. But the first step is to recognise the need for reform. [9]

While the centrality of education to development is better recognised in India today than it used to be and even though some progress has been made in extending the coverage and infrastructure of education system, there is an urgent need to go beyond these elementary steps and in particular, to give much greater attention to the quality of education.

An active system of school inspection (not necessarily of a punitive kind) is clearly an essential component of any schooling system and there is indeed some evidence that regular inspections make a difference to teaching standards. [10] And yet, the very term inspection seems to be treated as a dirty word in Indian education policy. It is not mentioned in the National Policy of Education, except once, to say that it is expected to be gradually replaced with 'a developed system of school complexes', without much explanation of what this system would be (that was in 1992) [11] Nor it is mentioned in the Right to Education Act of 2010. [12]

A better system of pupil evaluation and school evaluation would also be of great help in enabling parents and others to hold the system accountable. A related issue of some importance is the need to seek the cooperation of teachers' unions to assist in improving the work culture in higher education system.

Conclusion

These are just some among the long list of issues that need much greater discussion and wider attention if questions of school accountability and of the quality of education are to receive the consideration they truly need. India does need a radical change in the force and cogency of public debates on higher education with much focus on quality of education.

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