Higher Education: Recent Reform Initiatives In India

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ABSTRACT

Education is of critical importance for development. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and considered a human right in modern parlance with potential of empowering the underprivileged. India with its ancient heritage of imparting education through Gurukul system (students staying at Guru’s or teacher’s home to complete education) created institutions of higher learning which were of international repute. In recent times, Indian Supreme Court raised the bar high when in a landmark judgment in 1993 it construed the right to education being inherent in right to life enshrined in Indian Constitution. There is, however, a serious and deep crisis that afflicts education sector in India today. India which is emerging as an important member of 21st century global order, has realized the magnitude and seriousness of this crisis. It has taken first steps in articulating the issues and problems in education, including higher education, by setting up a National Knowledge Commission to initiate reforms for expansion in higher education consistent with standards of excellence and inclusive of vast deprived sections of its population. This paper is an attempt to evaluate India’s efforts at reforming higher education sector including the controversy on the future shape of regulatory authority for higher education.
Ancient Indian Initiatives

Education is the fulcrum of life, for peace, progress and development. It provides seedlings for culture and civilisation. It is a passport for freedom and liberty and a higher calling in life. The South Asian sub-continent is inheritor of an ancient, rich civilisation and also a victim of western imperialism which ravaged the sub-continent in not so distant past. South Asian or more specifically Indian perspective on education is, therefore, rife with the possibility of complete human development.

The achievements of Indian education in ancient times were fascinating – the sages and scholars orally imparting education in the Gurukul system (students staying at Guru’s or teacher’s home to complete education). While the original Vedic education was confined to upper strata of society in a complicated stratified social order, later spread of Buddhism and Jainism enriched education and was available to everyone in society. The problems of lack of inclusiveness though, in some measure, persist till present day.

The famous institutions at Nalanda, Vikramshila and Takshashila were celebrated symbols of educational and cultural achievements of India. Nalanda University, during fifth to thirteenth century AD was known for its educational excellence. The university was a convergence point for international scholars. The contribution of India in the field of education during ancient and medieval times was thus very significant.

Critical Importance of Education

In post-colonial era, development economists, focussing on the individual, perceived the independent value of education which develops faculties, enlarges opportunities to participate in the life and culture of the nation and the world. They also attributed instrumental value to results of education which produces knowledge, skills and changed attitudes. The practical, utilitarian view was also underlined since education provides chance to individuals to increase their incomes and raise level of living. Education along with health, which are central to the contemporary debate on human development indicators, were thus recognised as a ‘human right’.

The South Asian countries must strive for a much speedier dissemination of the attitudes, knowledge, and skills favourable to development, inasmuch as they have vast handicaps to overcome in their planning for development, including an unprecedentedly high rate of population increase.

Further, the modern day economists who are imbued with the spirit of liberal democracy and sensitive to deprived millions in an iniquitous social order expanded
the scope to emphasise the empowerment and redistributive role of education. They collected evidence to prove that greater literacy and educational achievements of disadvantaged groups can increase their ability to resist oppression. They can also politically organise themselves for a fairer deal. Underlining the great strategic importance of health and education in the process of economic development, they wondered at India’s lack of policy in matters of health and education:

India’s failure to have an adequate public policy in educational and health matters can be, thus, of profound significance in assessing the limited success of Indian development efforts over the last half a century.³

Indian Supreme Court made a historic construction of the right to life enshrined in the Indian constitution (Article 21) to include right to education to take this debate at a higher pedestal.

The citizens of this country have a fundamental right to education. The said right flows from Article 21.⁴

Policy Initiatives in India: National Knowledge Commission

As if taking a cue from the on-going debate on education, the Indian policy establishment formulated a suitable legislation and after prolonged debate, the Constitution of India has been amended by an Act of Parliament to insert an Article 21-A in the Constitution to provide for Free and Compulsory Education to children up to the age of 14 years. The policy establishment also did not lose sight of building the edifice of knowledge society on a strong foundation of primary and secondary education. A National Knowledge Commission (NKC) was accordingly set up to prepare a blue print to tap in to the enormous reservoir of knowledge base to confidently face the challenges of 21st century. The terms of reference of NKC were wide ranging incorporating issues like access to knowledge, knowledge concepts, creation of knowledge, knowledge applications and delivery of services etc. The Commission addressed these wide range of issues including a comprehensive reform of higher education.

National Knowledge Commission on Higher Education

The recommendations of the Knowledge Commission on higher education focussed on expansion, excellence and inclusion. While acknowledging the islands of excellence like Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and higher education in general making significant contribution to economic development, social progress and political democracy in India, the
Commission nevertheless underlined the deep crisis in higher education in India in following words:

*There is, in fact, a quiet crisis in higher education in India that runs deep. It is not yet discernible simply because there are pockets of excellence, an enormous reservoir of talented young people and an intense competition in the admissions process. And, in some important spheres, we continue to reap the benefits of what was sown in higher education 50 years ago by the founding fathers of the Republic. The reality is that we have miles to go. The proportion of our population, in the age group 18-24, that enters the world of higher education is around 7 per cent, which is only one-half the average for Asia. The opportunities for higher education, in terms of the number of places in universities, are simply not enough in relation to our needs. What is more, the quality of higher education in most of our universities requires substantial improvement.*

The crisis is not merely in terms of restricted access but also of quality and equality of educational opportunities. The statistics are revealing in comparison to advanced industrialised countries. In OECD countries one-quarter (26%) of population have achieved tertiary level of education. In the age group of 20-25 the enrolment in higher education is only 9% to 11% in India as compared to 45% to 85% in developed countries. Further, only a small proportion of Indian population graduate from upper secondary level, drop out rates between the secondary and upper secondary is extremely large and expenditure on higher education in India is extremely inadequate. According to Government of India’s National Sample Survey Organisation (61st Round on Employment and Unemployment, 2004-05) only 5.9 per cent of population in the age group of 15-60 years attain educational levels of Graduate and above. The average for OECD countries in respect of attaining tertiary education among population between 25 to 64 years, on the other hand, is 26 per cent. National Knowledge Commission in India recognised the imperative need for a meaningful reform of higher education and noted following about Universities in India:

*There is, however, a serious cause for concern about universities in India. The number of places for students at universities is simply inadequate. The quality of education at most universities leaves much to be desired. The gap between our universities and those in the outside world has widened. And none of our universities rank among the best, say top fifty, in the world.*
Reform Measures

Expansion of Higher Education

The National Knowledge Commission underlining the imperative need for a long term perspective while undertaking meaningful reforms in higher education made very specific recommendations on expansion of the system, maintaining excellence and at the same time making it inclusive for every segment of population in the country.

NKC has recommended a very massive expansion by suggesting creation of 1500 universities nationwide with an objective to achieve gross enrolment ratio of 15 per cent by the year 2015. This target has to be evaluated in the light of the fact that the country at present has approximately 378 universities. The Commission perhaps realising the ambitious nature of its recommendation on creation of large number of universities also advised that clusters of colleges selected on the basis of similar standards or geographical proximity could be considered for granting autonomy and groomed for later upgrading as universities.

Some other important recommendations of NKC on expansion include change in the system of regulation for higher education, increase in public spending and diversifying sources of financing and establishment of 50 national universities. The Commission envisaged an important leadership role for proposed national universities:

...National Universities ... can provide education of the highest standard. As examplars for the rest of the nation, these universities would train students in a variety of disciplines, including humanities, social sciences, basic sciences, commerce and professional subjects, at both the undergraduate and post graduate levels. The number 50 is a long term objective. In the short run, it is important to begin with at least 10 such universities in the next three years.

One serious impediment in realising the goals of much needed expansion of educational facilities is scarcity of resources. It is indeed a tragic irony that South Asian countries spend huge resources on defence rather than on education. Human Development Report on South Asia in 1998 with its focus on Education noted that only $12 billion were spent during 1990-96 on education as compared to $70 billion on defence by South Asian countries. India has been making and reiterating its national pledge of investing at least 6 per cent of its GDP on education for quite some time now but the target seems difficult to be achieved in view of adverse security
situation in South Asia and lack of will power among a corrupt political elite. India Vision 2020 document published by India’s national Planning Commission in December 2002 notes following on resource allocation:

*Full development of India’s enormous human potential will require a shift in national priorities, to commit a greater portion of the country’s financial resources to the education sector. India currently invests 3.2 -4.4 per cent of GNP on education. This compares unfavourably with the UMI reference level of 4.9 per cent, especially with countries such as South Africa, which invests 7.9 per cent of GNP on education. A near doubling of investments in education is the soundest policy for quadrupling the country’s GDP per capita.*

[UMI: Upper Middle Income countries]

The NKC while recommending diversifying sources of financing, maintained that the enhanced level of funding must come from both public and private sources but Government financing should remain the cornerstone of resource allocation and, therefore, expected that at least 1.5 per cent of GDP out of total 6 per cent GDP bench mark for education, would be spent on higher education.

**Excellence in Higher Education**

The ambition and necessity of expansion of the system obviously raises the issues of excellence. The Knowledge Commission advocates an intense reforms of existing universities by revising or restructuring curricula at least once in three years, supplementing the annual examinations with continuous internal assessment, transition to a course credit system where degrees are granted on the basis of completing a requisite number of credits, monitoring and upgrading the infrastructure like libraries, laboratories and connectivity on a regular basis, preservation of autonomy and promotion of accountability in governance of universities etc. The Commission makes a fervent plea to make universities the hub of research and to attract and retain talented faculty members through better working conditions.

**Inclusion, the Core of Reforms**

While the expansion and excellence have rightly been emphasised in the discourse on higher education in India, it is perhaps the third pillar of the NKC’s report, i.e., inclusion which would be the sine-qua-non of any reforms process in India. The critical need for inclusive model of reforms in education is not only a necessity to fulfill the aspiration of deprived population but also an imperative need if India is to achieve its future potential and live up to its ancient heritage. The divide between haves and have-nots in education in India has been succinctly captured in the country’s Eleventh Plan (2007-2012) document in following words:
Our GER (gross Enrolment Ratio) of around 11% is very low compared to the world average of 23.2%, 36.5% for countries in transition, 54.6% for developed countries, and 22% for Asian countries. Further, with high disparities (Table 1.3.2), inclusive education has been an elusive target. 370 districts with GER less than the national average need enrolment drives and rapid expansion of higher education institutions.

Table 1.3.2
Disparities in GER, 2004-05

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disparities</th>
<th>GER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>6.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>19.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCs</td>
<td>6.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STs</td>
<td>6.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBCs</td>
<td>8.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>17.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALL</strong></td>
<td><strong>11.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SCs: Schedule Castes, STs: Scheduled Tribes, OBCs: Other Backward Castes

A just and fair knowledge society can not be established without adequately addressing the serious issues raised by the disparity indicated above. The delivery of expansion and equity has to be married with excellence as well. The task for Indian policy establishment is, therefore, very daunting and challenging. The Government of India has declared a policy of reservation of seats in institutions of higher learning for SCs, STs and OBCs to promote this objective. The Chairman of the Oversight Committee on Implementation of this reservation policy in higher education and an important member of ruling establishment in India, Sh. Veerappa Moily in his final report provides the philosophical justification to this policy in following words:

*A society is just when all its components are in a state of harmony. A society which keeps a large section of its people in a state of denial or deprivation or where all its citizens do not enjoy equality of opportunity to develop themselves can never be in a state of stable equilibrium. Pythagoras has said “Justice as a square number is in perfect harmony since it was composed of equal parts and the number of its parts is equal to the value of each part. A number is square, so long as the equality of its parts remains. When this equality is breached the State must intervene...”.*

*Providing assured access to higher education is the best way to empower the excluded sections of society and is the most painless way to redress their historic wrongs. In the words of Plato, Education enables us to “prepare a citizen, by the light of knowledge and not by rule of custom, to perform the duties of his station,” and further that*
Education “seeks to tune in the feelings and imagination of youth, as one would tune a lyre with many vibrating strings.” Education enables us to bring the individual “to resonate in unison with society.”

The National Knowledge Commission put forth a very specific and significant concept of a needs-blind admissions policy meaning thereby that it should be made unlawful for educational institutions to take into account any financial factor while deciding on admission of students. This is proposed to be backed up by a well funded and extensive National Scholarship Scheme targeting economically underprivileged and historically/socially disadvantaged student. While the pitfalls of transferring the burden of financial provision to the students need to be avoided in India, the international experience in this regard is noteworthy as summarised in OECD Report of 2007:

So far, the Nordic countries have achieved expansion by viewing massive public spending on higher education, including both support of institutions and support of students and households, as an investment that pays high dividends to individuals and society. Australia, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have expanded participation in tertiary education by shifting some of the burden of financial provision to students. In Australia, for example, a risk-free loan programme that suppressed liquidity constraints for poorer students was introduced; this has not, however, had a negative effect on the equity of access for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In contrast, many European countries are not increasing public investment in their universities nor are universities allowed to charge tuition fees, with the result that the European average for spending per tertiary student is now well below half the level of spending in the United States.

The affirmative action in India in respect of deprived sections of society has universal support and an article of faith for the political class. Public funding of higher education and on its expansion, therefore, would continue to be an important policy measure in India.

**Regulatory Mechanism and Governance: Area of Conflict**

While ‘inclusion’ is the core of affirmative action in India, it is the regulatory mechanism and governance of higher education which is the most conflict prone issue area. The regulatory regime obviously needs an overhaul in the context of expansion and emerging paradigm of an evolving knowledge society. At the heart of this matter are the vested interests who control the higher education in an archaic fashion, crass commercialisation by private investment and system of political patronage which
bedevils the higher education in India today. National Knowledge Commission has underlined the over-regulation but under-governed nature of regulatory regime at present in India. The present system is presided over by a University Grants Commission-UGC (which is very tightly controlled by the Government) and a plethora of distinct segregated bodies like All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE), Medical Council of India (MCI) etc. NKC perceiving confusion and overlap in mandates of multiplicity of regulatory agencies has recommended establishment of an Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE) which should be at an arm’s length from all stake holders including Government of India. IRAHE conceptualised by NKC is to be set up by an Act of Parliament and would be the only agency authorised to accord degree granting powers. NKC explaining the rationale and philosophy of regulation of higher education suggests segregation of functions and a very limited role for existing University Grants Commission:

In higher education, regulators perform five functions: (1) Entry: licence to grant degree. (2) Accreditation: quality benchmarking. (3) Disbursement of public funds. (4) Access: fees or affirmative action. (5) Licence: to practice profession.

India is perhaps the only country in the world where regulation in 4 out of 5 functions is carried out by one entity, that is, the UGC. The purpose of creating an IRAHE is to separate these functions. The proposed IRAHE shall be responsible for setting the criteria and deciding on entry. It would, in addition, licence agencies to take care of accreditation. The role of the UGC will be limited to disbursing public funds. Issues of access will be governed by state legislation on reservations and other forms of affirmative action. And, professional associations may, in some institutions set requirements to determine eligibility for conducting a profession.  

The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India set up another Committee, post- NKC, under the chairmanship of eminent physicist and a former Chairman of UGC, Prof. Yashpal, to guide the efforts at reforms process. This Committee known as the Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education submitted its report very recently (June 2009) and advised a different structure and role for the regulatory authority than the one suggested by NKC. Prof Yashpal Committee maintained that a holistic view of knowledge requires a regulatory system which treats the entire range of educational institutions in a holistic manner. The Committee recommended a single, all encompassing higher education authority since it considered all higher education including engineering, medicine, agriculture, law and distant education as an integrated whole. This
Committee noted that there were 13 professional Councils created under various Acts of Parliament to promote and regulate specialised areas of education and underlined the need to bring them under a national apex body for bringing greater coordination and integration in the planning and development of higher education system including research as already envisaged in the National Policy of Education (1986) and the Plan of Action (1992). The Committee accordingly proposed to create an apex body to subsume academic functions of all professional bodies to be called The National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER).

The differing perceptions and prescriptions of National Knowledge Commission and Yashpal Committee on regulation and governance of higher education in India should not provide an opportunity to the status quo vested interests who would like to perpetuate their power on higher education. The need and necessity of urgent and wide ranging reforms has been well established. The protagonists who articulated the road map for reforms in National Knowledge Commission Report and Yashpal Committee Report are very eminent, well meaning experts. There is an apprehension that the clever segments in bureaucracy and society at large may use these differing perceptions of the two Reports to defeat the higher goal of recovering the idea of a university which has been eloquently captured by Yashpal Committee in following words:

A university is a place where new ideas germinate, strike roots and grow tall and sturdy. It is a place where creative minds converge, interact with each other and construct visions of new realities. Established notions of truth are challenged in the pursuit of knowledge.19

IRAHE of National Knowledge Commission or NCHER of Yashpal Committee must be decided through a healthy and democratic debate among all stakeholders including society at large. The idea of university must be recovered and the larger picture of creation of a just and equitable knowledge society must not be made captive to the power games of lobbies canvassing for capturing the regulatory governance mechanism of higher education in the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be appropriate to remind all stakeholders that India is moving and in ferment. It has the grain of a rich ancient heritage to achieve the highest standards in education and research and to contribute to onward march of mankind to peace and progress. The reforms in higher education in India would be propelled not only by the compulsions of a fast growing national economy and the national priority for inclusive growth but also due to a critical awareness among
policy planners of the value of education and necessity of reforms to survive in a competing global environment. There could be some pockets of resistance since a small segment of elite and middle class, perceiving threat to their established status, is not reconciled to the necessity of ‘inclusion’ by affirmative action citing the meritocracy and dilution of excellence in its support. But the consensus on affirmative action and the ‘mantra of inclusion’ would provide the necessary political will since it would, as a by product, ensure popularity of the ruling dispensation and perhaps better chance of perpetuation in power.

References:

2. Ibid, Chapter 31, Volume III, p1621.
4. Unnikrishnan, J.P. and Ors. Vs. State of Andhra Pradesh and Ors., Date of Judgment 04/02/1993, Citation: 1993 AIR 2178 1993; SCR (1) 594 1993; SCC (1) 645 JT 1993 (1)474 1993 SCALE (1)290
8. Source: India Labour Report 2007 – The Youth Unemployability Crisis By Team Lease Services, Table A8, p.95
AUTHOR’S INTRODUCTION

Dr. Suman Sharma is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Motilal Nehru College, University of Delhi and an active member of NAPSIPAG. She pursued her research on SAARC for Ph.D. degree in the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has travelled extensively in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. An activist research scholar she is an executive member of NGOs -Women In Peace in South Asia(WIPSA) and Guild of Service. She is a keen scholar on South Asian affairs and has carved an extensive network of academic relationship with research institutions and South Asian scholars in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan.