

Developments in Higher Education in India – A critique

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Introduction

The strategy of economic development followed by India from 1951 onwards started undergoing changes from the middle of the eighties. The Soviet model of central planning of the economy started yielding to market forces. Public sector, which once occupied the commanding heights of the economy, has been brought down in importance. Correspondingly, the importance of private sector started increasing. The closed economy, has gradually started opening up to the outside world. This trend of Liberalization, Privatisation and Globalisation(LPG) accelerated from the middle of 1991, when the country was forced to borrow heavily from the IMF and the World Bank following a massive balance of payment crisis. Ever since, the country is implementing a programme of economic reforms - Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP).

Almost corresponding to the timing of macroeconomic policy directions, a new

education policy referred to as the National Policy of Education was put in place in 1986. In 1992, a Review Committee covered the whole ground again. Their report also led to some policy changes. The latest in the series is the Report on a Policy Framework for Reforms in Education authored by two leading industrialists and submitted to the Prime Minister's Council of Trade and Industry in April 2000.

In addition to these major reports covering the whole education sector, there was a plethora of other Committee reports on individual aspects of education reforms.

The different committee reports covered almost all aspects of education. The differences in their recommendations were mostly on nuances and emphasis. The resultant policy changes too were only marginal. They reflected largely the changes in emphasis of successive governments led by different political parties and formations. The New Education Policy(1986) reflected the priorities of the Congress Party

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led by Rajiv Gandhi. It gave much attention to science and technology in tune with the then government's agenda of modernization. The policy change in 1992 came in the wake of a new coalition government coming to power. The report of the Review Committee, which led to the change in policy was titled "Towards a Humane and Enlightened Society" reflecting the change in emphasis of the new coalition government in power. The emphasis of the new government was on carrying out what was referred to as the 'social tasks'. The country's educational system suffers today not due to the lack of policy recommendations or programmes of action but due to the failure in their implementation. As an educationist puts it, "our education is a clear case of a Niagara of reports on educational/policy reports and a Sahara of action." The Review Committee Report 1992, itself confessed "much of what is contained in this report has already been dealt with by Commissions and Committees which were called upon to go into the educational policy from time to time from the 19th century onwards. Implementation was the only problem." Part of the reason for this failure in implementation lies in the failure of the committees and successive government to appreciate the trade offs involved in following multiple objectives. They did not take into account the strength of resistance to institutional changes from well entrenched interest groups. They also did not suggest concrete methods for mobilizing resources. The lack of political will is clearly evident from the present status of education in the country.

State of Higher Education

The edifice of higher and technical education system in the country is on a very weak foundation. Even after 53 years of independence and after 50 years of economic and social planning, the country's literacy rate is only 52 percent. The net enrolment ratio in primary education is only 77 percent and that in secondary education only 60 percent. The drop-out rates from schools continue to remain high. Prof. J.K. Galbraith, the economist turned US Ambassador to India once described India as a functioning anarchy. Nowhere does this description fit better than in the case of the Indian educational especially its higher education system. The system expanded considerably but in unplanned ways. Resources were never committed to match the good intentions and well meaning policy pronouncements. As a result, a vast majority of the campuses across the country today 'present a picture of breakdown – run down and ill maintained buildings, libraries without books and journals, laboratories without equipment'. The list can be extended to cover ill trained teachers without motivation, students without direction, creaking institutional structures and archaic systems, rules and procedures. The pattern of educational development in the country has been a dualistic, reflecting the dualism in the Indian economic development. There are pockets of excellence within the system, which are comparable to the best institutions in the world. But they are only the few islands in the vast ocean of mediocrity. The present educational system is characterized by considerable disparities among regions (the rural urban divide), states (the developed

and the backward states), disciplines (science and humanities Vs professional courses) etc. In research, applied research, evaluative studies, monitoring and feasibility surveys have gained over pure academic studies and basic research.

Financial Crisis

Under-funding of education remains the major constraint of educational development in the country despite all the national education commissions from 1964 onwards recommending and all political parties readily agreeing to the need for setting apart six per cent of the GNP for education. But the actual ratio has never reached anywhere near the target despite massive increases in enrolment at all stages. As a result, the butter is spread too thin. During the Structural Adjustment Regime in the nineties, the ratio came down from 4.1 percent in 1991 to 3.2 per cent in 1997. The cause of higher and technical education suffered further as its share in the educational budgets of the federal and state governments came down from 18.1 per cent in 1991 to 16.7 per cent in 1995-96. Almost all this expenditure is on revenue account. Even within the revenue budget, salaries account for more than 90 per cent, leaving very little for other educational inputs. The already low share of capital expenditure in the total educational expenditure came down from 1.3 per cent in 1990-91 to 0.8 percent in 1995-96. The per student expenditure in higher education came down steeply from Rs. 551 to Rs. 429 (US\$1=Rs.46.50) during this period. The per pupil expenditure, remained static in technical education despite rise in input and capital costs. The decline in the relative share of expenditure on education is partly the

result of the decline in total public expenditure consequent to the fiscal compression effected under SAP. The ratio of public expenditure to GDP came down from 30.6 per cent in 1991 to 27.1 per cent in 1998-99. The relative share of social sectors as a whole came down. The share of these sectors in public expenditure came down from 15.0 per cent to 14.0 per cent during the period.

It is not that all sectors were affected by budgetary squeeze. The relative share of defense and police in federal government expenditure shot up during the period of SAP. Expenditure on police by the federal government exceeds its expenditure on education by a wide margin. Thus under-funding of education in the nineties is not entirely due to SAP. It is also due to lower priority assigned to this and other social sectors under the new policy environment. The cause of higher and technical education suffered partly because of the cuts in the share of educational expenditure in GDP. Additionally, these sub sectors suffered because they were pitted against primary and secondary school sectors, disregarding their inter linkages. Partly following the earlier thinking of the World Bank, the merit good characteristic of higher and technical education was underplayed. It was highlighted that the social rate of return from higher and technical education was much less than those from primary and secondary education. Subsequent thinking of the World Bank on "knowledge for development" has not yet percolated down to the Indian policy makers. The reduced state funding to education was partly based on the vague hope that the private sector including industrial houses will compensate for the lower allocation by the

government. But this hope did not materialize except to a very limited extent and in a distorted manner. The gradual withdrawal of the state from education and other social sectors under Economic Liberalisation in the country stems from an inadequate understanding of the role of the state by its advocates. Even the neo-liberal thinking suggests a large role for the state in social sectors while it withdraws from economic sectors. The votaries of liberalization in India have also not taken into cognizance the large role actually being played by governments in social sectors in the most market driven societies.

New Mode of Privatisation and Financing

In the absence of increased flow of endowment funds or industry support, higher education institutions including technical institutions (HEIs) are increasingly called upon to raise resources from students by hiking the fees in the name of higher cost recovery. Here also, the government does not have a concrete plan to rationalize the fee structure. Nor does it have the political will to raise fees, either in proportion to the increase in per capita income of the country or unit cost of education as such a measure is sure to be resisted by the organised students unions. Instead, the government continues to keep the facade of highly subsidised fees in the government owned and aided educational institutions, but permits the establishment of “Self Financing” HEIs (an euphemism for entirely student financed) unaided by the government but affiliated to the universities. These institutions are allowed to recover not only the entire

recurring costs but also the capital costs. Many of them make profit out of education. No doubt, the present trend to start ‘self-financing institutions’ by private entrepreneurs or caste and religious bodies was started in the eighties in a few states in South India. But the trend got stronger during the ‘market friendly’ nineties. These institutions run largely on commercial basis got respectability from the Review Committee Report 1992, which paradoxically was titled ‘Towards a Humane and Enlightened Society’. While official policy was veering around by 1992, towards sanctioning more such commercial HEIs, the Supreme Court of the country had to intervene in the same year itself to prevent wide spread abuses including charging of hefty capitation fees for admission by these academic entrepreneurs. The Court stopped the practice of capitation fees. Instead, it suggested a system of charging the regular subsidized fees on 50 per cent of the students and cost /market determined fees on the rest. The rationale of the scheme suggested by the Court is that “a candidate who is stealing a march over his compatriot on account of his economic power should be made to pay not only for himself, but also other meritorious students”. It requires to be emphasized that it was the Supreme Court of the country, and not any educational policy makers which recommended this innovative, though second best, solution of cross subsidization to meet the financial crisis of HEIs. This practice of cross subsidization has now received respectability and acceptance and is spreading to the government owned institutions including Universities. Most of the new professional colleges and new ‘job oriented courses’ started

in the existing institutions, are running on self-financing basis. But this pattern of financing can solve the problems of higher and technical education sector only to a limited extent as they have necessarily to confine to courses with high current market demand. The increasing market demand for certain categories of skilled man-power and the rigidity of the formal academic system to respond to these market demands have led to the springing up of a large number of institutions which do not seek recognition or affiliation by the Universities. Some of these institutions are organized as joint stock companies whose shares are quoted in the stock exchanges. Few of them have become multinational ventures. They provide training for new job oriented courses in information technology, travel and tourism, hotel management etc. The quality of training varies widely. Some of them are started by fly by night operators. There is no accrediting agency to rate their quality and to protect the interests of the students. Though there is favourable thinking for starting private universities, legislation to effect this has not yet been put in place. But this legal lacunae is met indirectly by conferring on HEIs in the private sector the status of deemed universities by the University Grants Commission (UGC), the apex federal government body set up in 1956. At present, there are 42 such deemed universities.

Globalisation and its Impact

The process of globalisation of the Indian economy has set in motion a gradual process of globalisation of education. Taking advantage of the liberalization in foreign exchange control, a large number of rich students

are migrating to universities in USA, UK, Australia, Russia, Ukraine etc. Few of the Indian HEIs, mostly in the private sector, have turned to become franchisees of foreign universities. Though these institutions are not the top class institutions abroad, their degrees have a premium in some segments of the job market and have an appeal to a segment of the rising middle class who cannot afford to send their children abroad. Many of the foreign institutions have entered into collaborations with HEIs, mostly in the private sector, under which some years of study can be undergone in India and the remaining in their own institutions. Many foreign governments and aid agencies are facilitating student exchanges, faculty exchanges, research collaboration etc. under their bilateral aid programmes.

Market Segments for Education

The existing dualism in the educational sector where a few institutions (like the federally funded Indian Institutes of Technologies, Indian Institutes of Management, Central Universities) of world standards coexist with the vast majority of mediocre HEIs is a reflection of the dualistic development of Indian economy and society as noted earlier. There is a large growth of middle class in the country. Their aspirations are rising. So also is their influence in administration and political decision making. This rising middle class forms a very important market segment not only for luxury goods but also for high quality education and other services. The elite and the super-elite higher education institutions meet the twin demands - of the upper middle class students for high-quality education and the demand for high-quality graduates by the multinational corporations and the top business

houses in the country. They also cater to the 'export' demand for high quality educated man power from abroad. The demands of the less affluent middle class segments (who cannot afford to send their children abroad or who cannot get admissions in the few prestigious institutions in the country) and the first generation students including those from the rural rich class are met by the increasing number of 'self financing' institutions and franchisees of foreign institutions. The demand for man power from those segments of Indian industry which cannot afford to pay very high salaries and perquisites are met by the graduates of these institutions. But those who fail to get admission for the professional courses run by the government or cannot afford to buy admission in the self financing institutions have to contend with a place in the general arts & science courses to cure their 'diploma diseases'. Despite the low quality of their education and despite the rising unemployment among these ill trained graduates from these ill-equipped institutions, the status giving role of degrees and diplomas prevent the slowing down of these demands from the educationally and economically deprived sections of the society. It appears that the Indian education system today offers passports to unemployment to everybody while it restricts passports to employment to the elite and the richer class.

Reasons for Poor Quality

One of the major reasons for the poor quality of education can be traced to its under funding despite the growing enrolment, as noted earlier. The lack of training given to the teachers at the entry point and inadequate training during their service have also led to

deterioration in quality. Though most of the universities have Academic Staff Colleges for imparting periodic training to existing teachers, they are not organised effectively to update their skills and knowledge. They have been hijacked to meet some of the eligibility requirements for promotion of teachers. The lack of motivation of the teachers in the absence of incentives and disincentives is another reason. The teachers are well organised and their unions are affiliated to political parties. This, together with the fact that university administration itself is highly politicised at all levels makes it difficult to enforce accountability. Salaries of teachers are being raised periodically, but with long time-lags. But these salary revisions are across the board revisions. They are not attractive enough to entice the best to teaching profession, especially in emerging areas like information technology, business management etc. where the gulf between the industry remuneration and the salary of the teachers is very wide. The Indian academic system does not provide for paying differential salary to different disciplines taking into account the market demand for professionals. Nor can it reward performance. A vast majority of the students who face uncertainties with regard to employment are also not a motivated lot. The poor quality of education imparted and the outmoded pedagogic practices do not place much demands on the students. The present system of the largely external examinations conducted at the end of the semester or in most cases, at the end of the year does not add rigour to the learning process. Nor does it pose many challenges to the students.

The lack of academic motivation has partly

contributed to the politicization of students, on party lines resulting in student unrest. Divesting research from teaching has been another reason for the poor quality of education especially at the post graduate level. Most of the universities and colleges do not have any funds of their own to spare for research. The funds starved state governments also do not give any research funding support. The only source of financial support for research is the federal government and its different departments. Universities and colleges however are not in their priority list while disbursing research funds as they themselves running a very large number of research institutions under apex bodies like the Indian Council of Agriculture Research, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Indian Council of Social Science Research etc.. The poor quality of academic, administrative and political leadership is one of the major reasons for the system's stagnation. On the political and administrative fronts, ministry of education (and other social sectors) is not prestigious enough for the top political leaders and administrators, despite changing the nomenclature of the education ministry to Ministry of Human Resource Development in the eighties. In coalition governments at the Centre and some of the states, ministership of education is assigned to a junior partner. The academic leadership in the universities suffers as key posts like Vice Chancellors, Pro-vice Chancellors, Registrars etc. are decided not on academic and administrative considerations but on political, religious and caste grounds.

Equity

All the national policy statements on

education had been very eloquent on the issue of equity. But the present school system with its vastly different layers of quality does not provide for equal access to quality higher education. Though the tuition fees are highly subsidized, the non-fee academic costs as also the private maintenance costs are not covered by government subsidy except in the case of a few caste groups and tribals which are in the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy (these caste and tribal groups are given preferential treatment under the Indian constitution). The academic costs on private tuition, books, access to sources of information etc. are increasing due to the poor infrastructure in the institutions and low quality of teaching. In the competition for admission to professional courses and good quality colleges, the poor students lag behind as they are not playing on a level playing field. The first generation students as well as the students from the rural areas also find that they are fighting an unequal battle. The present system of providing less subsidy to every body irrespective of their economic status and confining subsidy mainly to fees has developed barriers to entry to the economically and socially disadvantaged sections. These barriers are getting strengthened after the spread of 'self financing' colleges and courses.

Multiplicity of Agencies for Planning, Control & Financing

Education, which was originally in the State List in India's federal constitution is now in the Concurrent List after the constitutional amendment in 1976. Both the federal government and the state governments have legislative and administrative jurisdiction with

the proviso that when there is a conflict between the two layers of government, it is the action of the federal government, which prevails. Partly using this constitutional provision and partly using its financial clout, the federal government has established its dominant position in higher and technical education. The federal government has established a number of apex bodies like the University Grants Commission, All India Council of Technical Education, The Medical Council of India, Dental Council of India, National Council of Teachers Education etc. to coordinate, determine and maintain standards of higher education. Though the federal government spends only above 11 per cent of the country's total budget on education, its share in the expenditure on higher and technical education has been much higher. UGC and other federal level apex bodies fund a larger proportion of the new investment expenditure on new courses and colleges while the state government finances the recurring maintenance expenditure besides a portion of investment expenditure. Almost all research funding comes from the different federal government departments. The influence of federal government is much more than is indicated by its financial involvement as the federal bodies have a number of other instruments of control.

Starting of all new courses, colleges and universities require their prior sanction.

Despite wide powers, both administrative and financial, the federal bodies in education have failed miserably to maintain standards in diverse types of institutions spread across such a vast country like India. It may be noted that the number of HEIs exceeds 11300 with an

enrolment of more than 74 lakhs students. The faculty itself number about 3.4 lakhs. Given their highly centralized structures, bureaucratic systems and styles of functioning, these bodies find it difficult to coordinate the activities of HEIs spread in twenty-nine states and six federally administered Union Territories. They have also failed to coordinate their activities with those of the state governments which spend a larger proportion of the total educational budgets even on higher and technical education. The efforts to restructure the system to make it more responsive have proved to be non-starters. The tasks ahead are enormous and daunting. If the relevance of the system is to improve, many of the courses in the general arts and science streams have to be restructured as there is a mismatch between the historically determined supply and the demand, determined by the market. Many of the courses and institutions will have to be merged or abolished. There is an urgent need for reforming the archaic examination system. The curriculum will have to be modernized and have to be adapted to meet the varying requirements of different regions. There is scope for increasing the student-teacher ratio especially in post-graduate courses. There is also scope for increasing the workload of teachers and to make them more accountable. All these are tasks much beyond the capacity of federal government bureaucracies. They have not yet been able to devise objective criteria for evaluating the performance of the HEIs and to link grants to their performance. Though they are assigned a crucial monitoring role, they have not been quite successful in that. The federal level apex bodies are the principal

agencies for planning higher education in the country. But India is too large country to plan and administer centrally as is indicated by the reduced importance to central planning from the nineties. But the process of decentralisation taking place in other sectors has not yet reached the education sector. The planning role of state governments in education has not been very effectively performed. The National Policies of Education had recommended the constitution of State Councils of Education to better plan this sector. But only seven out of the twenty nine states have constituted these Councils.

Loss of Autonomy

The management structure of the educational system is pretty archaic and is an inheritance from the country's colonial past. Most of the universities are affiliating universities. All colleges have to be affiliated to a university. At present, a college affiliated to the university comes under the control of at least three agencies - its parent university, state government and one (or more) of the federal bodies like the UGC. Universities are under the twin control of state governments and one or more federal bodies, depending on the courses offered. The controls by these numerous bodies on every aspect of the functioning of HEIs have not served to maintain high standards. But they have certainly contributed to the stifling of initiative and creativity. One of the main reasons for the poor management is the absence of professional management of HEIs. Educational management as a subject of study and research has received very little attention from management profession or educational administrators in India. The management

structure of HEIs is quite rigid and their functioning is affected by all the evils of a rigid, bureaucratic systems borrowed from the government departments as a condition for receiving government funds. Almost all HEIs today lack autonomy- academic, administrative and financial. The UGC has been operating a scheme for granting larger academic autonomy to affiliated colleges from the eighties onwards. But so far, only 123 colleges out of the 11000 colleges in the country have opted for autonomy despite financial incentives offered by the UGC. The scheme does not provide administrative and financial autonomy.

Institutional Innovations

Establishment of a national level Open University by the federal government is one of the institutional innovations introduced with a view to reaching out to the large number of students at reduced unit cost. Though the university was established in 1985, its operations spreading across the country have picked up momentum only in recent years. This University has on its roll about six lakhs students. The unit cost of this university is estimated to be only 35 per cent of the average unit cost of comparable HEIs. Constitution of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) in 1994 was another institutional innovation made during the nineties. The Council is an autonomous body established by the UGC and is an offshoot of the National Policy on Education-1986. But accreditation, which has not really caught up. So far, only 96 colleges affiliated to eleven universities in seven states have sought accreditation. Since accreditation is

not linked to funding by the government or the UGC, colleges do not subject themselves to national level assessment necessary for accreditation. The introduction of a system of national level testing for new entrants to the teaching profession by the University Grants Commission in order to improve the quality of teachers is another innovation introduced in recent years. National level are also conducted for junior research fellowships. UGC is establishing a VSAT network to connect all the universities in the country. Even remote areas are covered by the network. Applications of the network include data transfer, Internet access, video conferencing, distance learning and multimedia.

Change Drivers

In principle, students, parents, teachers, employers and governments are all potential supporters of restructuring and reforming educational system. All of them publicly argue for reforms. But the reality is far different from the rhetoric. The harsh reality is that restructuring and reforms upset the apple carts of all sectional interests which include highly politicized unions of students, teachers and administrative personnel. The political leadership which sees HEIs as yet another instrument of power, patronage and influence have a vested interest in not hanging the management structures and giving more autonomy to the institutions. The private colleges owned and managed by sectional minorities of castes and religious groups and of late by commercial interests have emerged as powerful interest groups with close connection with political leadership. The soft state in India,

is immobilized by the conflicting pulls and pressures. It does not have the driving force for any major structural change of the system. Rather than challenging the powerful vested interest groups frontally, the state has found the softer option of bypassing the existing system by facilitating the establishment of new breed of institutions to respond to the demands of the different market segments of economy and society. Recourse to this softer option is made possible partly because the need for changing the system as a whole has not been felt by the vocal and influential sections of the society viz., the rising middle class. Their requirements for quality education are being met by institutions of excellence, funded lavishly by the federal government, corporate interests and educational entrepreneurs of a new breed. The more affluent and influential sections of society are already voting with their feet against India's higher education system by opting for educational and career pastures abroad. What is happening in education is also happening in other social sectors like health services. With the affluent and influential middle class organizing their own health care systems, the public system of health care is allowed to languish. This trend raises larger issues regarding the country's modernization agenda which is non inclusive. It also prompts questions on the political process which despite all the trappings of democracy, is not able to articulate the aspirations of the voiceless majority and to respond to them.

