

Higher Education in India: An Assessment

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The paper examines the scenario of higher education in India since pre-Independence period. Thus the thrust in the paper has been on knowing the state of higher education in India from the time of British administration to the present time. Higher education system in India has gone through the critical phases of development, as it has been evaluated in terms of its cost-benefit calculation depending on being considered either as a merit or non-merit good from time to time. Increasing emphasis on elementary school education defined as the mass education in India has had tremendous impact on higher education particularly in reducing the public support for it and hence retarding its growth in terms of quality, access and equity. The paper has been entirely based on examination of the review of available literature from various texts.

[Key Words: Higher education, merit good, non-merit good, subsidization of higher education, neo-liberal policy, private sector in higher education]

Higher education becomes an imperative for its role for creating and disseminating knowledge in society for development and progress. It is with this intent that the system of higher education is gaining enormous importance, with societies across the world attaching a positive value to it. Higher education has proved to be doing stupendous job in giving a society a wider recognition in the global context. Some countries in the world, for example, USA and UK are being known for achieving tremendous development due to the unfailing emphasis on excellence in standard of their higher education system and research, they have been maintaining over the years. Even some countries in Asia like Japan and South Korea have received global recognition as vibrant economic powers for streamlining their higher education institutions. India is also emerging as a dynamic nation in terms of creating the opportunities for higher education and thus trying to achieve the status of a knowledge based society.

Higher education in British India

The tradition of modern formal system of education in India was initiated with the first three oldest modern universities coming up in 1857 in Mumbai, Madras and Calcutta under the British administration. The fourth university - the University of Allahabad - came into existence 30 years after the

onset of the first three universities. Then again after almost another 30 years came up the University of Mysore and Banaras Hindu University as fifth and sixth university, respectively (Tilak 2010). The growth in the higher education system in India was much slow as evidenced from the chronology of commencement of the institutions of higher education i.e. the universities in the country. The statistics show that only four engineering colleges having a total number of only 74 students admitted to them came up between the years 1916-17. The country had only four medical colleges till 1911-12. However, their number increased to 12 in 1939-40. All these institutions of higher education were situated in major cities and therefore they could not provide the benefits to the majority of the people leaving far away in the remote villages.

By the year India got independence, there were hardly twenty universities and 591 colleges having an enrolment of less than 200,000 students. Not only there was a slow progress in the system of higher education under the colonial rule, it was also unevenly distributed geographically across the country. Moreover, it replaced the original and traditional system by an altogether new system with a different objective. The higher education system in India was totally characterized by the needs and the prejudices of the colonial power. The policy on the system of higher education in India was made subservient to the imperial economic policy for the advantage of the British administration. This totally destroyed the nature, character and the ethos of the higher education system in India. The Indian universities could hardly use the quintessence of the original British educational system while emulating them in making their own system of education (Basu 1991). The most distressing picture was that the higher education in India under the colonial rule enjoyed very little or no freedom. There was much restraint exercised over the universities, thus preventing them autonomy for growth in terms of reaching out to the masses, regardless of their class and community status. Higher education was again limited to a large section of the undergraduate students. Education involving science and technology was utterly neglected by the colonial rulers as they were indifferent to industrialization of the country. Moreover, the system of higher education was open only to the upper class people and hence was selective in nature.

Higher education in post-Independence period

During the post-Independence period, the higher education system in India has undergone a spectacular change in terms of quantitative progress. The universities have grown from a meager number of only 20 in 1947 to an unbelievably impressive number of 733 at present, which include 46 central universities, 336 state universities, 127 deemed universities, and 224 private universities. All the Indian states now have the privilege of having universities proportionate to their population size and the need for higher education. The progress in the number of colleges has also been very remarkable, increasing from 591 in 1947 to 35, 539 at present, with 817, 000 teachers on roll. The total enrolment in higher education now is estimated to be 28.56 million with 15.87

million boys and 12.69 million girls. Girls report 44.4 per cent of the total enrolment. State wise a comprehensive list of various types of universities operating in India has been provided in table 1.

Table 1 State wise types of universities in India

State	Central universities	State universities	Deemed universities	Private universities	Total
Andhra Pradesh	0	20	5	0	25
Arunachal Pradesh	1	0	1	7	9
Assam	2	12	0	4	18
Bihar	3	15	2	0	20
Chandigarh	0	1	1	0	2
Chhattisgarh	1	12	0	8	21
Delhi	5	6	11	0	22
Goa	0	1	0	0	1
Gujarat	1	24	2	23	50
Haryana	1	14	6	17	38
Himachal Pradesh	1	4	0	17	22
Jammu and Kashmir	2	7	0	0	9
Jharkhand	1	7	2	3	13
Karnataka	1	23	14	11	49
Kerala	1	12	2	0	15
Madhya Pradesh	2	19	3	15	39
Maharashtra	1	20	21	4	46
Manipur	2	0	0	1	3
Meghalaya	1	0	0	8	9
Mizoram	1	0	0	1	2
Nagaland	1	0	0	2	3
Odisha	1	12	2	3	18
Puducherry	1	0	1	0	2
Punjab	1	9	2	112	24
Rajasthan	1	21	8	40	70

Sikkim	1	0	0	5	6
Tamil Nadu	2	22	28	0	52
Telangana	3	16	2	0	21
Tripura	1	0	0	1	2
Uttar Pradesh	5	24	10	24	63
Uttarakhand	1	10	3	11	25
West Bengal	1	25	1	7	34
Total	46	336	127	224	733

Source: Wikipedia.org, 3rd September, 2015

One of the striking features of higher education in post-Independence period is the growth of as many as 300 science and technology institutions, including more than 200 laboratories. Along with these institutions, there has been a huge growth in the proportions of polytechnics figuring 1914 and a substantial increase in industrial research and development laboratories operating both in public and private sectors. There has been also a remarkable growth in the numbers of professional educational institutions after independence. In all, the professional educational institutions now include 18 Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), 32 National Institutes of Technology (NITs), 13 Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), 24 Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs), and 18 state-funded technical institutes. Besides these institutes of national repute, the country also witnessed a substantial size of growth in many other higher educational institutions such as 3,000 engineering, technology and architecture colleges, 2,100 medical colleges, 3,400 teacher training colleges, and about 3,000 various other professional and technical institutions in the field of agriculture, law, management, computer application and information technology (Tilak 2013; Wikipedia.org 2015). From the above statistics it may be said that there has been considerable advancement in the field of both general and technological or professional education in India during the post-Independence period.

State-funding/subsidies on higher education

Higher education system in developed countries has acquired utmost importance since very long time. The people, there, have strongly argued for free education at all levels and to provide subsidies on higher education system so that the individual educational costs can be reduced to ensure equality of opportunity to all in the society (Blaug and Woodhall 1979). Education is held to be a key factor in promoting equity among people in society, while state-funding in the form of public subsidies is found promoting education, especially the higher education system among the poor, backward and the marginalized.

The global concern is growing for equal opportunity and hence stressing the need for subsidies on education.

The huge growth in higher education system in India is a post-Independent phenomenon. It is so because the government of free India implemented a policy of providing higher education to all those who were denied of their right to such privilege in the pre-Independence period. As the country became independent, peoples' hope and aspiration for higher education went on rising, thus making the democratically elected government fulfill it without wasting any time. The importance of expansion in higher education in post-Independence period was also greatly felt by the government of India, because it needed larger number of trained and skilled manpower than were available, for building a nation of their dream. This was one of the most conspicuous factors influencing the process of expansion of higher education system in the country. Moreover, as seen in several other countries in the world, the higher education system in India also got augmented as a matter of legitimacy of its government. The emphasis of the government on equal opportunity for education made it possible for the horizontal development of higher education system in the country, thus benefiting all equally regardless of their caste, class, creed, gender, etc. However, without providing subsidies on higher education for all including the weaker and the marginalized, expansion in such system of education in the country could not have been possible. It was firmly believed that subsidies alone can provide guarantee for higher education to all regardless of their socio-economic conditions, and state must fulfill its duty towards this end. Thus the state-funding started pouring into the higher education system in India and as a result the system progressed stupendously.

Role of state in higher education

There are several grounds which justify the role of state in higher education. It is argued that education is a public good, and higher education a quasi-public good, creating the wide spectrum of externalities like enhancement of health, decline in population growth, decrease in poverty, higher growth in income, decrease in crime rate, use of new technologies, building up democracy, guaranteeing civil liberties, etc., and even dynamic externalities (Lucas 1988; Romer 1986, 1990; Schultz 1988) and technological externalities (Behrman 1990). These externalities are positively associated with economic growth and hence form a valid ground for justifying the role of state in promoting higher education (Nerlove 1972). The recipients of higher education thus bring huge external benefits to all those who are unable to acquire it, as well as to the society as a whole. It is held that one cannot reduce the benefits of higher education it confers on people and society, to the self-interest of the individual acquiring it. Therefore, there arises the need for providing subsidies on higher education in society. It is also held that the subsidies can be generated from taxing all those availing the benefits of higher education without affecting the welfare of the society.

Many scholars look at education as a 'merit good' and hence it needs to be promoted in large scale (Musgrave 1959). It is argued that many people may lose sight of what could be the gain of education, uninformed about the value of education, may fail to anticipate and workout the investment returns of education, and therefore may be disinclined to invest in education. It may be presumed that the individual recipients benefit from education while they are not actually aware of such benefits. Therefore, the state or the government which are prudent enough to have complete knowledge and information about the implications of investment in education should take decisions in such matter. It is argued that unawareness of implications of investment in education by the individual recipient calls for the need of public subsidisation.

As state is expected to ensure equality of opportunity to all, it becomes mandatory for it to promote and provide higher education. Each modern state has an obligation towards guaranteeing equality of opportunity in terms of having the provision for providing education to all regardless of their social, economic, cultural and racial background. It has been argued that 'it is necessary to provide free education at all levels and also to subsidize students' living expenses in post-secondary schooling so as to guarantee "equality of educational opportunity"' (Blaug and Woodhall 1979: 352). Education emerges as an important mechanism of equity. Lack of subsidies by state would deprive all the backward and poor students of their right to education. It is the idea of equality of opportunity that has necessitated a provision by the state to subsidize education. All the countries in the world including the highly developed ones have subsidized their education by the state provision. The subsidies are found not to be restricted to the basic education only. The higher education, comprising the higher technical and professional education is also heavily subsidized by the state in all countries of the world.

Higher education policy in India

Higher education in India, which grew much impressively during the first four decades of Independence, was virtually neglected since 1980s after it was widely recognized that this system was flourishing and gaining ground at the cost of the elementary school education. Thus it was thought to shift the priority from higher and higher technical education to school education. In the meantime, with the commencement of the National Policy on Education in 1986, the lopsided nature of higher education was discussed and highly condemned, and the priority was again attached to the elementary education, thus putting the prospect of higher education into jeopardy. The elementary education was emphasized so much that it was thought to achieve it even by cutting down the cost of higher education. This practically led to the neglect of higher education by the state. World Bank's perception that excess spending on higher education by the developing countries like India did not resolve their long existing problem of poverty was something that also influenced the decision of the Indian government to reduce public support for higher education.

The policies of the government have drastically changed in respect of higher education system from the year 1991. The government has stopped providing public support to higher education for making it self-financing and self-sustaining. Higher education is being considered a non-merit good now. Apprehending increasing constraints on budgetary provision, and holding the view that the subsidies provided by the government on higher education are innately unproductive, several people firmly argued for drastic reduction in subsidies (Dandekar 1991; Rao 1992), and also for total withdrawal of the government from the higher education system for leaving it to the private providers (Prime Minister's Council 2000). Besides, it was also extensively argued that the persons seeking higher education are both capable and eager to pay for achieving it. Though many did not directly oppose cuts in government subsidies on higher education, they preferred to suggest for mobilization of private resources, which could indirectly imply withdrawal of subsidies in the long run (AICTE 1993; UGC 1993).

Several arguments have been made against the subsidies granted on higher education in India. The arguments against the subsidies on higher education are put forward mainly on the issues pertaining to the rate of return to education, distribution system of education and financial crisis. Firstly, the subsidies on higher education are seen to be opposed on the ground that the social rates of return becomes always lesser than the individual rates of return. Therefore, the state reduces subsidies and makes the individuals pay for the kind of education they seek to attain (Psacharopoulos 1994; World Bank 1994). Secondly, it is contended that subsidies on higher education leads to disparity on distribution. It is held that subsidisation of higher education by the government will cause regression as subsidies are believed to benefit more to the rich than to the poor, thus increasing income inequalities among them in society (Blaug 1982; Jimenez 1987, 1994; Mingat and Tan 1986a, 1986b; Psacharopoulos, 1977; World Bank 2000). Thirdly, it is argued that since the developing countries are already passing through a very difficult phase of time in terms of financial crisis, it is not prudent to go for subsidisation of higher education. Moreover, the structural adjustment policies demand more reductions in public expenditures. As higher education is considered no more a merit good, it is suggested to reduce public expenditures on it. Quite a good number of other arguments are put forward against subsidisation of higher education. It is argued that subsidization of higher education cannot prove effective in bringing about equity and ensuring democracy in society (Tooley 2000). It is rather apprehended that subsidisation of higher education by the state will subject the higher educational institutions to government domination, thus leaving no leeway for their autonomy, creativity and innovative development. It is felt to be unproductive to provide subsidies on higher education as it fails to allocate competent resources. The most common perception is that with the basic education and the health care needs of the masses remaining unfulfilled and utterly neglected, it is highly undesirable to subsidize the higher education

system (World Bank 1995). It is also increasingly believed that the withdrawal of state funding in higher education will not have any adverse effect on its growth, as the cost can be recovered from the beneficiaries. It is again believed that the recovery of cost from its beneficiaries will rather improve the quality of higher education by making the students more serious and assiduous about their studies.

The above arguments have led to minimize the public support to higher education for making it self-financing. Moreover, the fact that higher education is now treated as an individual good rather than a public good, there has been a strong opposition to its being subsidized. Thus being more of an individual good, it is held that the receivers of higher education must pay the cost. This cost recovery strategy has been one of the fundamental aspects of the neo-liberal policy on higher education adopted by the government of India. Due to the reductions in public support to higher education, and acceptance of the policy of neo-liberalism, the private institutions have been increasingly encouraged and given free hand to provide higher education without being subjected to the government regulation (Anandkrishnan 2004). Since the onset of the policy of neo-liberalism, there has been rapid privatization giving rise to unprecedented rate of growth in higher educational institutions in the fields of medicine, engineering, information technology, and other related disciplines.

While on the one hand the neo-liberal policies have helped in mushrooming of higher education in India, on the other hand they have also facilitated the process of outflow of the students to the foreign countries for such education in their specific area of choice. In addition, the process of globalization by facilitating the free flow of manpower, capital, and technologies, has created ample opportunities to encourage the private persons to invest on large scale in setting up institutions of higher education across the national boundaries, offering subjects best suiting to the interest of the students. Opening up of the institutions of higher education by the private sectors in foreign countries including the developing countries like India, is not a problem at all as they have huge resources and incentives to do so. However, only the resources and the likely incentives are not seen to be driving the private sectors for making investment in higher education in India. In addition to these aspects, what more makes them establish higher educational institutions in India and other developing countries is their recognition of the fact that these countries are unable to meet the demand for higher education. This is amply indicated from the gross enrolment ratio of higher education in these countries. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) of higher education in India is reported to be merely 10 per cent, whereas in developed countries it is more than 50 per cent. Compared to India, the other BRIC countries like Brazil, Russia and China are in much better position in terms of their gross enrolment ratio. Even Indonesia which once lagged behind India now achieves 16 per cent of gross enrolment ratio in higher education. This shows very poor access to higher education in India. Certain factors like the increasing trend of growth in population, improvements

in the level of income of the middle class and the growing awareness about the importance of education among the lower-income people have demanded higher education much more than the increasing supply in it. This makes many students move to the foreign countries every year at their own cost or pursue education from private institutions at home by making hefty payment (Agarwal 2006). Besides this, the failure of Indian government to invest in higher education to the extent required is a conspicuous factor that makes the private investors, both from within the country and abroad to invest in higher education in India. If one looks at the educational statistics one hardly finds any increase in public universities in India in the recent past. There has been a phenomenal growth in primary and secondary education instead.

Present scenario of higher education in India

Following the neo-liberal policy on education now many private educational institutions have come up to cater to the higher education needs of the aspirants on self-financing basis. The role of private sector in the expansion of higher education for nearly last two decades has been stupendous, with private technical education in India becoming the largest in the world (Anandkrishnan 2004). The private sectors have entered into the arena of education in order to fill the gap between the supply of and demand for higher education. Thus the private colleges have been set up solely keeping in view the growing demands of the students for undergraduate subjects in varied professional courses like engineering and technology, medicine, dentistry, ayurveda, pharmacy, management, computer and IT education, mass media and communication, etc. Most of these colleges in India are operating in the southern and south-western states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. With higher education, particularly the technical and professional education becoming a priority among the students as well as their parents, now these colleges are being increasingly established all over the country.

When there has been much encouragement for private sector investments including the foreign investments in higher education system in India, mainly in technical and professional education, and hence availability of supply of the desired education to the extent demanded by the students, there seems to be poor access to them due to the weak regulatory system of the government over them in respect of both quality maintained and the fees charged. No doubt there are some high-quality institutions, but the world of higher education system in India is predominantly influenced by the institutions of poor and sub-standard quality, because of their conspicuous presence. Due to the lack of state funding most of the institutions are found to be unable to fulfill the growing demand for higher education, especially of skill-oriented technical and professional education. For the same reason the academic achievements of the institutions of higher education are seen to be seriously affected. Despite government sanction to the private sector for establishing fee-paying and self-financing institutions to meet the rising demand for higher education and for the

specific courses, the system of higher education in India seems to be in great quandary. In view of the fact that the private or the unaided institutions have the only source of revenue through self-finance by the recipient, the higher education system in India has become more costly and inaccessible to the aspirants from the middle and lower middle classes (Bhoite 2009).

No doubt that the privately run institutions have made significant contributions to higher education in terms of quantitative progress and growth in overall access especially to higher technical and professional education, but they have in no way made any reckonable progress in the equity in access to such education. Even the overall access to higher education has been badly affected at present due to proliferation of sub-standard institutions. Right from their entry into the field of higher education, their aim has become only to strengthen their financial position and be self-sufficient, while imparting poor and sub-standard education. There seems to be no accountability to the students as no specific laws are in existence to safeguard the interest of the students (Nayyar 2013). Some students go abroad as they find the standard of higher education there to be better than India. The majority compromise with poor quality of education in India. Even seeking admission to the privately managed institutions of higher education in India becomes impracticable as the fees charged by them are much higher and hence beyond the reach of many. Driven by the neo-liberal policy these educational institutions adopt the idea of recovering the cost of education from its recipients. They fail to provide the financial help to the backward and needy students to the extent required by them to cover up their cost of education (Bhoite 2009). Despite the existence of the policy of positive discrimination, there has been very meagre representation of various backward class students such as the SCs, STs and the OBCs in higher education system. Even the proportion of women seeking access to higher education institutions is very negligible (Chanana 2013). One of the disquieting aspects of privatization of higher education is that it is emerging more as income generating enterprise rather than creating knowledge and skills of employability. Therefore, despite the increasing demand for higher technical and professional education, such institutions privately run in India have not been able to increase students' access to them to full intake, and maintain equity. As per the general perception even most of these institutions of higher education are unable to draw the attention of the standard companies for campus selection.

Conclusion

Higher education in India is a post-Independent phenomenon as it received much needed attention only after the country attained independence. In free and independent India, it was thought that higher education could be instrumental in bringing about economic growth, technological progress, equal opportunity, upward social mobility and progressive change. Thus with the state or public support higher education got expanded during the post-Independence period. But subsequently with the neo-liberal policy being accepted by the

government of India the whole scenario of higher education which was escalating with all enthusiasm underwent a dramatic change. The government started thinking in terms of reducing its support for higher education, as no more it was felt to be a merit good. In the mean time it was rather argued that the public support for higher education benefits only a small section of the elite groups in the society, who could otherwise easily achieve such education. It was also felt that the higher education was catching up the speed at the cost of elementary school education, which could provide a larger section of the population a support for better and sustainable living. Thus the elementary education which was waning, once again came to be increasingly emphasized, with government diverting all its attention to it, and leaving the state of higher education to the private sector, which is driven by the lust for money. Although the higher education system in India has been taken over by the private sector with government permission, and large numbers of private institutions have come up to meet the rising demand for higher education, it seems that the higher education in the country is in great quandary as overall access, equity in access and quality still remain to be a matter of great concern.

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