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HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA KEY TO INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH





Higher Education in India - Key to Inclusive Economic Growth

Indian universities have a long way to go when it comes to matching pace with the latest education scenario of the world. With highest number of young population in the world that is eager to build their careers, the responsibility lies with the institutions and the government to skill and re-skill nation's workforce to suit the current job market. An inclusive education targeted at opening up new employability avenues is the key to nation-building

- Gopal Krishna Agrawal

The large scale inequalities that we see in India today mostly result from inequality of opportunities and not on the basis of choices or abilities alone.

Education is the greatest leveler. It is a potential tool in empowerment of those sections of our society that suffer from various forms of exclusion even after seven decades of independence. It can also have strong equity enhancing and inequality reducing impact if it is easily accessible and affordable. Education also empowers individuals and society and promotes true public involvement in the development process - making it robust and participatory.

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world, after China and the United States.

This, however, is only in terms of numbers. So far as the quality of higher education is concerned, India compares very poorly. According to the World University Ranking for the year 2018 United States has 62 universities in the global top 200, China has 7 and India has none. It shows that while India has made great strides in terms of numbers, it has not paid adequate attention on the quality aspect of education. Another problem is that most students going for higher education from reputed institutions leave the country and go abroad for work, resulting in brain drain.

Ancient India had paid great attention to education and 'Gurus' commanded respect even from the mightiest kings. The system of 'Gurukulas' was accessible to everyone and a prince and a pauper

studied under the same roof. It was also free and at the completion of the education process, each student paid fee according to his capacity. During the later periods, India also had institutes of higher studies at Taxila and Nalanda, which attracted students from all over the world. The education system gradually withered away during the medieval era. The present education system in India is a legacy from Britishers, who developed the system to meet their own needs.

Education has been a focus area since independence because it was seen as a tool to promote rapid economic development of the country. Higher education was also supposed to remove social barriers and provide upward social mobility but India's patchy record in this field has ensured that our economic growth remains far from inclusive. It is thus an imperative that access to affordable education at all levels i.e. from elementary education to higher education is ensured to achieve the goals of inclusive growth.

Investment in human capital

Education empowers people with skills and knowledge and gives them access to productive employment in future. The productive capacity of an economy depends on three factors of production i.e. land, labour and capital. Quality of labour i.e. human capital is primarily based on the skill and knowledge embodied in its population. The development of a strong nation requires that the human resources of the country be endowed with higher level of education, skill and specialization, in addition to good health.

Literacy as a qualitative attribute of the population is one of the most important indicators of its preparedness to skill and specialise.



As per our decadal census our literacy rate has been going up which shows that a large part of our population is in a position to embody higher human capital. What is needed is a focused approach by the government to boost investment in education and health to build human capital.

The expansion in the number of institutions of higher education and their intake capacity has not been able to ensure simultaneous sustenance of quality. There is a severe shortage of well-qualified faculty, teaching facilities and proper infrastructure. As such, the quality parameters associated with teaching and research needs sustained attention and policy focus by the government. Kothari Commission had recommended that the expenditure on education should be 6 percent of GDP but the Government has consistently failed to achieve this target. The expenditure on education in India hovers around 2-3 percent of GDP.

Tapping the demographic dividend

Demographic dividend is superficially understood as the

increasing share of the working age population in the total population of a country. The positive effect of this youth bulge can be realized only if this population is healthy and educated and finds gainful employment. Failure to provide employment to youth having 'degrees' is a recipe for social disaster as their angst and frustration can lead to destructive outcomes.

According to the AISHE survey, 2015-16, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher education in India is 24.5%, which is calculated for 18-23 years of age group. GER for male population is 25.4% and for females, it is 23.5%. For scheduled castes, it is 19.9% and for scheduled tribes, it is 14.2% as compared to the national GER of 24.5%. Thus our GER is not only low but it also has a class character. It is lower for females and even lower for disadvantaged sections of the society like scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It must be borne in mind that if the our degree holders fail to get remunerative work, it is likely to deter others, especially those from the lower strata of the society, from pursuing education because it entails a huge opportunity cost.

The demographic dividend can be tapped by educating our youth (increasing the GER) but doing more of the same is not going to help matters. India faces a paradoxical situation in having a mass of educated unemployed while at the same time industries facing acute shortage of skilled workmen. The situation can be resolved by coming up with educational courses that will fill the skill gaps in the industrial sector.

Enhancing effectiveness of governance

Education is a crucial instrument to make humans aware of their rights and duties. This awareness leads to a more demanding populace and ensures better governance. An educated population leads to participatory governance and better & more informed policy-making. It is generally seen that countries, which have achieved higher educational levels for their population have better respect for the rule of law, constitutional norms and niceties.

Market-oriented and skill intensive

A chief problem of Indian education is its defective and unbalanced curriculum. The curriculum, which is prescribed for the study emphasizes only bookish knowledge and rote learning. It is, therefore, not surprising at all that Indian education system churns out millions of unemployable graduates year after year while the economy suffers from lack of manpower with requisite skill-set, while there is lack of research and development skill-set in higher education. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2015-16 only 10 programmes out of approximately 180 cover 83% of the total students enrolled in higher education. It further showed that maximum numbers of students

are enrolled in B.A. program followed by B.Sc. and B.Com. programs, only 1.7% colleges run Ph.D. courses.

It is evident from the above data that most of our students are taking traditional courses. These courses are not tailored to the needs of the economy. Even professional courses like Engineering lack the dynamism needed to respond to the changing needs of the job market. The present government has tried to address it by focusing on making education, market oriented and skill intensive, emphasizing on vocational studies. Under the 'Skill India' initiative of the Government of India, the goal is to empower the youth with skill sets, which make them employable and more productive in their work environment. Skill India offers courses across 40 sectors in the country and are aligned to the standards recognised by the industry and the government under the National Skill Qualification Framework. The courses help a person focus on practical delivery of work and help him enhance his technical expertise so that he is ready from day one of his job and companies don't have to invest into training him for his job profile. Under the Atal Innovation mission, government has set up Atal Tinkering Labs to encourage experimentations at the school level and Atal Incubation Centres provide hand holding to give industrial linkages to technological innovations.

Technological advancement

The spatial distribution of institutes of higher education also poses a challenge for inclusive economic growth. College density, i.e. the number of colleges per lakh eligible population (population in the age-group 18-23 years) varies from 7 in Bihar to 60 in Telangana as compared to all India average of 28. Except for a few top universities and

colleges, ensuring quality education in other institutions has also been one of the biggest challenges for the government.

Technological advancements provide us with an opportunity to overcome these challenges. With the increasing penetration of high-speed Internet connection in India, higher education in India need not be location or college specific. High quality videos on various regular and professional courses can be made and shared online for them to be freely accessible. Students can watch these videos and then take exams at their convenience. For this to materialize the government should provide conducive regulatory environment. Educational institutions should be well regulated with good infrastructure facilities and attracting requisite resources for development.

Conclusion

The state of higher education in India leaves much to be desired. Though governments' initiatives have created islands of excellence like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) etc., most of the other universities and colleges are not up to mark. Admission to such colleges is not always possible due to issues of accessibility and affordability. Students also lack proper guidance on the available educational facilities and career counseling. The central and the state governments need to focus on higher education to make it more inclusive, purposeful and skill oriented. It will go a long way in making India's economic growth more broad-based and inclusive.

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