A critical appraisal of higher education and economic development in India

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Today, the stark reality is that even after 62 years of independence, India still has not been able to ensure a minimum quality of life to its citizens. The million-dollar question confronting India is whether leading economic power with poor show of human development can present a model of sustainable, equitable and inclusive growth that the nation aspires for? Certainly not, there is a need for some turn around strategies, which primarily include a change in the education system. Education which is a pre-requisite for all type of development recipes is presently in a bad shape in India. Why is India still a developing country? What is stopping it from becoming a developed country? These questions strike the mind every time when one considers the state of India’s educational system. Therefore, this research paper throws light on the ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ of higher education in India.

Key words: Economic system, higher education, human development.

INTRODUCTION

Generally higher education including professional and technical education plays a vital role in the economic and social development of any country. It provides a wide range of increasing sophisticated and ever changing variety of trained manpower needed in the education, engineering, medicine, agriculture, management, communication, law, social work etc. It produces the researchers who through their activities deepen and extend the frontiers of scientific and technical knowledge leading to the innovations, which energize the engines of the economic growth and development. Apart from developing human resources, higher education turns thinkers who reflect on critical problems that afflict humanity and thereby ensure its survival and growth. Over the years, India’s higher education has gained importance in its changing policy landscape as the centre realized, albeit of late, that India’s strength lies in education, particularly in higher education in the emerging global knowledge economy. At the aggregate level, India has emerged as the fourth largest economy of the world in terms of the world purchasing power parity income, but it has poorly regained its 105th position among 128 countries in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization United (UNESCO)’s Education Development Index.

Statement of problem

62 years after independence, India still has not been able to ensure a minimum quality of life to majority of its citizens. One of the problems confronting India today is the poor development of the education sector, which has adversely affected other developments within the economy.

Research question

The afore-mentioned statement led to the following research question:

1) Why has India as a nation not been able to ensure minimum quality of life for majority it citizens?
2) What role can education sector play towards national
development and quality of life improvement, particularly in India?

3) What is the reason for the poor development of the education sector in India?

4) What is the impact of the above shortcomings on other developments within the economy?

**Research objectives**

The following are the objectives of the research:

1) To establish why India as a nation has not been able to ensure minimum quality of life for majority of its citizens,
2) To appraise the role education sectors play towards national development and quality of life improvement, particularly in India,
3) To establish the reason for the poor development of the education sector in India,
4) To evaluate the impact of the above shortcomings on other developments within the economy and to make recommendations.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The paper relied on meta-analysis through the use of secondary data. It is a qualitative study, which is based on conceptual analysis, theory building, literature reviews and emic perspectives (author viewpoint). The research also made use of exploratory methodology. Exploratory studies are typically conducted for the following reasons, namely to satisfy the researcher’s curiosity and desire for better understanding; to test the feasibility of undertaking on more extensive studies; to develop the method to be employed in any subsequent study; to explicate the central concepts and constructs of a study; to determine priority for future research; and to develop a new hypothesis about an existing phenomenon (Babbie et al., 2001).

There are three methods of conducting exploratory research namely, a review of the related works in social sciences and other pertinent literature; a survey of people who have particular experience of the intended research problem; and an analysis of ‘insight stimulating’ examples (Sellitz et al., 1965, cited in Babbie et al., 2001: 53-54).

Exploratory studies usually lead to insight and comprehension rather than the collection of detailed, accurate and replicable data, which made the exploratory method the option for the current study. It was necessary to follow open and flexible research strategies and to utilise methods such as detailed literature reviews, views of experts and authorities in the area of inquest, which has led to insight and comprehension. Exploratory methodology was adopted because the research was not an empirical study. Being a non-empirical study, the research placed more emphasis on conceptual analysis and the building of theory.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Contextual issues**

The revelation made by World Human Development Report released by United Nations Development Programme on 5th October, 2009 contradicts India’s claims of being a front-runner economic power. The report states that India has slipped 6 points down the human development ladder that is, it is now ranked 134 out of 183 countries of the world. This revelation forces India to review its chosen unbalanced growth strategy and questions its belief in “trickle-down theory”. As aforementioned, the stark reality is that even after 62 years of independence, India still has not been able to ensure a minimum quality of life to its citizens. The million-dollar question confronting India is whether leading economic power with poor show of human development can present a model of sustainable, equitable and inclusive growth that the nation aspires for? Certainly not, there must be some changes. These changes primarily include a change in the education system of India. Education which is a pre-requisite for all type of development recipes is presently in a bad shape in India. Besides, having a comparatively low literacy ratio which is an indication of quantitative-bottleneck, the Indian education system also suffers on account of quality. System’s failure on the education front is the reason why India has not been able to transform its huge human advantage into demographic dividend, which is indispensable for the great task of nation-building. India’s Honourable Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh addressing people on the eve of Independence Day (2007) stated: “For every one of our people to benefit from new employment opportunities being created across the economy, we must ensure that every Indian is educated and skilled. No nation can progress unless its people are educated”.

India was a British colony for more than two centuries, ending with independence in 1947, and this experience shaped higher education and continues to influence it. The British did not give much support to higher education in their colonies. Higher education first expanded mainly due to the initiative of the growing middle class in the mid-19th century and recognition by the British that an educated civil service was needed to administer India. In 1857, the first universities were founded in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The Indian colleges and universities were British in organization. These institutions, teaching exclusively in English, displaced the few traditional schools left, which simply withered and died. From the early 19th century, almost all higher education in India was entirely in English; no Indian language was used for instruction or examination. India’s higher education system at the time of independence was small, highly bureaucratized, and restrictive on academic freedom, provided in a language most Indians did not understand, and had a restricted curriculum. Higher education expanded between independence and the end of the 20th century although there were few structural changes.

At present, India has a total of more than 18,000 post-secondary institutions and more than 17,000 of these are colleges offering mainly undergraduate degrees. There is
no differentiation among the colleges, although a few have taken advantage of legislation that permits high-quality colleges to separate from their sponsoring universities and offer their own autonomous degrees. These colleges are recognized as more prestigious than the rest. India’s international efforts lag behind those of other countries, especially China. In 2008, approximately 200,000 Indians were studying abroad as against 892,000 Chinese students who were studying abroad. On the other hand, approximately 20,000 international students studied in India during the same year. India educates approximately 10% of its university-age population, while China enrolls about 22%. China is first in terms of enrollments with more than 27 million enrolled students and India ranks third with 13 million enrolled students (Altbach, 2009).

Undoubtedly, India possesses a highly developed higher education system which offers facility of education and training in almost all aspects of human creative and intellectual endeavors: arts and humanities; natural, mathematical and social sciences, engineering; medicine; dentistry; agriculture; education; law; commerce and management; music and performing arts; national and foreign languages; culture; communications etc., but it has been deteriorating on absolute as well as relative terms. Why is India still a developing country? What is stopping her from becoming a developed country? This particular question strikes the mind every time when one reads something about India’s education system. India’s education system at present seems to be a stumbling block towards its objectives of achieving inclusive growth. All round development of personality is the purpose of education, but the present day education in India is not imparting true knowledge of life and world to its citizens. It is neither helping people to stand on their own leg nor is it improving the talent of a student by which one can achieve laurels in the field one is interested in. The present system of higher education in the country does not serve the purpose for which it was created. In general, education itself has become so profitable a business that quality is lost in the increase of quantity of professional institutions with quota system and politicization adding fuel to the fire of spoil system, thereby increasing unemployment of graduates without quick relief to mitigate their sufferings in the job market of the country. So, the drawbacks of the Indian higher education system underscore the need for reforms to make it worthwhile and beneficial to all concerned.

**New challenges facing India**

The higher education system in India has grown in a remarkable way, particularly in the post-independence period, to become one of the largest systems of its kind in the world. However, the system has many issues of concern at present, like financing and management including access, equity and relevance, reorientation of programmes by laying emphasis on health consciousness, values and ethics and quality of higher education together with the assessment of institutions and their accreditation. These issues are important for the country, as it is now engaged in the use of higher education as a powerful tool to build a knowledge-based information society of the 21st century.

The new challenge before the country at the beginning of the 21st century is to become a developed society by the year 2020, which requires that not only a vibrant economy driven by knowledge has to be ushered in soon, but also a new society where justice and human values prevail, should be created. Moreover, challenges in higher education are no longer only nation centric. They have already attained global dimensions, particularly after trade in services has been brought under the purview of the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime. With the explosive growth of knowledge in the past century and with the development of handy tools of information and communication technologies, as well as of other scientific innovations, competition has become a hallmark of growth all over the world. As a result, knowledge is not only going to be the driver of Indian economy, but also, it is going to permeate into all the strata of Indian society for a better quality of life and living conditions. Therefore, India has to rise to the occasion urgently and reorient its higher education system to be vibrant, competitive, meaningful and purposeful; besides, there is absolutely no substitute to quality of higher education, although the country has been faced for a long time with the serious problem of meeting the quantity needs of the society. It is also essential that a careful balancing of the two is given priority to meet the twin requirements of the society in the foreseeable future.

Access to higher education and the broad range of services it can render to society is part and parcel of any sustainable development program in which human expertise and professional skills are required. It is the substrate on which research and development flourish, which is the ultimate guarantee of national self-reliance. It provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the political, social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. The modern growth theories have established beyond doubt that economic growth and development cannot attain an optimum and self-sustenance path without the development of human resources. Undoubtedly, education is the main factor of human development that can change the entire scenario of the development status of India. Tomorrow’s world will demand highly qualified specialists and increasingly flexible generalists. It is in this context that the real wealth of a nation, is in its people (Ghuman et al., 2009) and the quality of people should be good one which can only be achieved through good education.

Ensuring quality in the midst of quantitative expansion has always remained a challenge within the domain of
India's higher education policy. This is showcased nowhere better than in periodic attempts to encourage quality while at the same time facilitating a quantitative growth. One such area of tension and frustration has been the linking of quality of teaching and research in colleges and universities with salary benefits. This has not produced quality, but certainly produced distortions and tensions. In expanding higher education, Indian educational institutions did not care for quality and thus, produced graduates who are not competent enough.

In view of the shortage of quality teachers, creation of world class universities (as declared by Indian National Knowledge Commission, to establish 1500 universities) would remain arduous task, if not impossible, at least during the 11th Five Year Plan period (2007 to 2011). The state of governance in the existing set-up is poor. In view of the Indian government's stated commitment to realize the three objectives with respect to higher education, namely, expansion, inclusion and excellence, the uncontrollable growth of the private sector within higher education has made the scenario complex and confusing (Chattopadhyay, 2009). With the overall degradation of value system in the Indian society, the teaching fraternity has also failed to maintain its decorum and is facing a steep fall in moral values. Subsequently, the concept of Guru has become obsolete today. Teachers suffer from serious lacuna in their character. Many of the teachers in colleges and universities are even facing the charges of sexual and moral harassment of their students. As a result, current students no longer feel secure in the presence of their teachers, and such teachers, though very few, put a blot on the fair profession of teaching.

The study by Bhattacharya (2008) states that one of the major gap and constraints of India's development strategy is that while it grows on highly skilled services; it had all throughout neglected mass education and health services. India's elite educational institutions stand like isolated ivory towers in the middle of encircling poverty, illiteracy and backwardness. Rural India is completely neglected in health, education, nutrition and other elements of human capital. In India, there are only 400 universities and 16000 colleges yet only 8% youth manage to get admission into colleges and universities. Half of the villages in India do not have a primary school. Just 1% of adults in India are highly educated with professional qualifications. Only 4% has got general education and semi-skilled expertise. The investment in higher education has been careless and slow during the last couple of decades. With growing demand for highly skilled work force in both India and abroad, the supply of highly skilled work force in India is now failing to keep pace with demand. As a result, there is a danger of India losing its international competitiveness in skill induced economic growth.

The study by Ghuman et al. (2009) establishes that there is a virtual exclusion of rural population from higher professional education in India. The collapse of rural government school education and exorbitantly high fees and funds and other sundry expenses in higher professional courses, particularly in private institutions, are the main reasons behind the systematic exclusion of rural masses from higher professional education in the country. The national and state level entrance tests for admission have also played a significant role in inhibiting the entry of rural students in higher professional education.

Another challenge that Indian education system has been facing is ill-effects of private sector's malpractices involved in education system. During the first decade of 21st century, the private sector in higher education outpaced the state sector for the first time. According to the 11th Five Year Plan (2007 to 2011, Vol. II: 23), the Tenth Plan period (2002 to 2007) saw the private sector's share of higher education institutions rise from 42.6 to 63.2%, while its share of total enrolments increased from 32.9 to 51.5%. Between 2000 and 2006, enrolment in undergraduate and doctoral programmes across all (non-professional) faculties has been falling at an average annual rate of 1 and 3%, respectively and enrolment in medicine, engineering and teaching training has been rising at 19, 54 and 21%, respectively. There has been a great decline in the recognition of deemed universities (approximately 130) during the last 10 years.

The unfair practices adopted by many institutions, particularly, private institutions of education in India, are widely known and they include a large variety, starting from a period of foundation of an institution and getting recognition from the government to the conduct of examinations and award of degrees. In between, a multitude of unfair methods are practiced in areas such as admissions, levy of fees, recruitment of teaching and non-teaching staff, payment of salaries, assessment and accreditation of courses of study and various other aspects, all of which come broadly under the label of corruption. Several colleges and universities are established without proper permission from the appropriate bodies, students are admitted in these universities and degree and diploma programmes are offered which are not recognized by the government and accordingly fake certificates are issued. The existing laws are found to be highly inadequate to deal with all these issues. The degree of inequality among students is increasing at a fast pace as the rich and the dominant people use their power to get admission and jobs in various fields whereas on the other side majority of the poor but deserving candidates remains empty handed deprived of admissions into good institutes or jobs due to lack of power and money. Outside of a small elite sector, in “the real world” most jobs are obtained by investing social and/or economic capital in the form of bribes and commissions, networks, contacts, and “influence”. To put it sharply, a degree is a legal necessity, while competence is a nice but inessential luxury. For example, affluent professionals well endowed with social capital...
(doctors, lawyers, accountants, etc) who wish to pass on their “family business” to the next generation would be willing to pay a high price for the requisite credentials, secure in the knowledge that competence can be developed on the job. A second segment of demand may follow from the recognition that even a second or third rate degree is better than none. It is interesting to note in passing that the hyperbolic mixture of rage and anguish at falling standards and the “murder of merit” that reservations routinely provoke is entirely absent in Indian education system.

Expressing his concern over the establishment of two new central universities in Jammu and Kashmir, the Vice Chancellor of Kashmir University, Riyaz Punjabi, states: “It is a matter of concern as with the opening of central universities in states, the existing universities would become dysfunctional because the former would take away the experienced faculty from the latter because in India the retirement age (65 years) of teachers in central universities is higher than that in state universities (60). Secondly, central universities have much more finance resources than the state universities and can thus, provide better incentives to the teaching staff”. Further, aggravating the problem, Indian Union Minister Kapil Sibal has recently ruled category reservation (weaker sections of the society) in private universities resulting in the indiscriminate opening of private universities. With the opening up of large number of private universities in India, the finances of already deficient state universities will be hardly hit. As the National Knowledge Commission in India have declared to raise number of universities in the country to 1500, there are and there will be serious problems to ensure quality education to the existing and new institutions (Garg, 2010).

In his study, Kochar (2010) states that over the past decades India have devalued education in humanities, science and in engineering. Now, it is the turn of medical. It is partly due to the poor infrastructure in most of the private colleges, especially the ones started in the last decade. Of the 32000 M.B.B.S seats in India, less than half are in government colleges. The rest are in private colleges affiliated to state universities or deemed universities. The fees in most private colleges which are run by trusts headed by politicians are 1000 to 1500 times higher than in the government colleges. Over 7000 medical seats have been created in the country during the last five years with 75% in private colleges. Most medical colleges in the country, both in government and private sector, have failed to keep abreast of technological advancements and new teaching methods.

The same poor situation has manifested within Indian management institutions. More days and more hours of an Indian Master of Business Administration (MBA) aspirant are consumed by classroom teaching leaving little time for creative thinking. Indian business schools are indulging in excessive teaching of compulsory courses and the students are given a very limited choice for selecting advanced level elective courses. This has resulted in faculty shortage and in low levels of research output and competence. The management institutions have become teaching shops, and with the entry of foreign schools, it will be time for hundred of business schools to migrate to the next emerging areas of easy profit (Bhattacharya, 2010). Similar kind of study by Dharur (2010) brings into notice the losing charm, interest and achievements of Indian students in Mathematics. He states that India, which feels pride as being the land of Aryabhatta, Bhaskara, Ramanujan and a reservoir of traditional knowledge in Mathematics has been losing its fame and position in producing new high level mathematicians. He further contended that India has withdrawn when it comes to securing top prizes in Mathematics at the International Congress of Mathematicians (2010) in Hyderabad. No Indian was awarded with any of the prize. This is as a result of clear lack of interest among younger generation to take up research in basic mathematics. An entire generation of mathematicians has been lost to information technology and management sector. The main problem lies with school education. Teachers do not have enough study material to make mathematical subjects interesting for the students.

On comparing the development aspects of India and Japan, Sabbarwal (2010) asserts that despite having the most qualified human resource repository, Indians cannot still be counted among the developed nations. The reasons behind India’s poor development are the attitude of absence of the killer instinct, corruption, poverty, overpopulation etc. He states that Japanese people are much more disciplined, committed and civilized than the Indian people and thus, their economy is much more developed than India. And it is a real fact that in order to become committed, disciplined and civilized, a nation must have good education. However, Indian education system is clutched with shackles of corruption, inefficiency, poverty to mention a few.

The future of higher education policy in India depends on several factors like middle class population, government policy regarding funding higher education and supporting research universities and the elite sector of the system. India has largely not taken advantage of its extraordinary rich indigenous intellectual and academic traditions. The academic institutions and traditions in India have no importance today. One of the greatest challenges to higher education in India consists of providing access and equity to the growing segments of the population demanding post-secondary education. Significant quality problems exist in less-selective colleges and universities in India. Many of India’s impressive number of engineering graduates, up to 75% are too poorly educated to function effectively in the economy without further on-the-job training. The study by Palshikar (2010) brings into notice the complexities, inefficiency, poor management, and poor quality of higher
education in India. The study points out the eligibility equality of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree and University Grant Commission (UGC) National Education Training (NET) for the appointment of an assistant professor or lecturer. The study points out that Ph.D. is altogether a research and NET is altogether a theoretical subjective knowledge, thus, they can not be treated equally eligible for the appointment of lecturer. The author states that Indian UGC is probably not in a position to enforce standards and strict quality with the increasing number of aspiring research students. With the expansion of higher education, there is bound to be an explosion of fake degrees, including the research degrees. Therefore, educational policy makers, education administrators and the academic community are largely responsible for the inefficiency and poor quality of higher education in India.

Conclusion

In order to improve the quality in education sector, the role of public sector should be enhanced and higher education in India should continue to be subsidized by the government in an adequate manner. Policies of higher education should be designed to strengthen indigenous research agenda. Policies of India based on simplicity and sharing of facilities within and across institutions must be established and encouraged. To bridge the quality and quantity gap between private and government-run institutions, dedicated and honest endeavors are required to develop and apply the public-private partnership (PPP) concept with new vigor.

The situation as a whole warrants radical changes in the public policy pertaining to the social sectors, rural economy, rural education, and higher professional education of the weaker sections both in the rural and urban sectors.

SUGGESTIONS

The educational practice has three most important components: its content, the methodology to deliver it to the students and the evaluation of their receptivity. All the three are defective in the present education system in India. So any reform in the education policy must address them all. In the age of competition and innovation, there should be a stress on higher education and research. Investments in these activities yield high return. The broadening of education base is also necessary to have a more egalitarian development. It is now well-known that salary of skilled workers is rising much faster than that of semi-skilled workers, which in turn is rising faster than that of unskilled workers. Even for balanced growth and egalitarian distribution of income also, there should be a wider education base.

Today, India’s higher education policy is oblivious to the issue of knowledge production in Indian languages for degree and post-graduation level. The Indian UGC has apparently left this issue to the state governments, and state governments have chosen to ignore this core issue on which quality of the quantitative expansion of higher education depends. Research degrees too do not have adequate quality checks and apart from luring teachers to research degree because of the salary benefits involved, research degree courses only perform the function of offering a waiting room for jobless post-graduates. Therefore, the blame needs to be apportioned among educational policymakers, education administrators and the academic community at large.

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. In India, the educational policymakers are boasting by just filling this pail but there is a dire need to enlighten this pail. Expressing his concern over the depleting and worsening Indian higher education system, Honourable Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh stated that, “Indian university system is, in many parts, in a state of disrepair. In almost half the districts in the country, higher education enrollments are abysmally low; almost two-third of Indian universities and 90 per cent of Indian colleges are rated as below average on quality parameters. I am concerned that in many states university appointments, including that of vice-chancellors, have been politicised and have become subject to caste and communal considerations, there are complaints of favouritism and corruption”.

Rural, urban and gender disparities must be kept in mind by policy makers in planning and implementing the higher education system. While quantity is important, achieving double digit percentage for higher education quality is paramount. For making colleges and universities free from external interferences, there should be an apex institute in India which would finance educational institutions depending upon their performance. It may also help in setting up of new institutions. There is an urgent need to revamp medical education in India with uniform infrastructure, uniform minimum standards, uniform fee structure, a common all-India entrance test for the M.B.B.S & P.G and re-evaluation of both the private and government colleges.

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