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Abstract

Education is power. It constitutes the foundation of all the multidimensional socio-economic development of a country. In the present context, we need manpower or human capital for generating the growth and development in a country. The Government of India has taken several many initiatives for promoting education at all the stages i.e. Primary, Secondary and Higher. But still, we find such issues as a high dropout rate at all the stages of education, rural-urban disparity, gender disparity, interstate variations pose as some of the problems that impedes the development of human resources in our country. Even the work participation rate in India indicates the necessity of proper planning of skill training and employment opportunity. Most interestingly, the existing general and conventional higher educational institutions have not effectively been able to cope with the contemporary challenges and changes with the result that the nature of curriculum which is by and large in place tends to create only degree inflation in our country. So, we need such institutes and institutional arrangement that can cater to the contemporary challenges so as to upgrade the quality of education as well as to provide need based educational programmes that can develop human power in the society. Effective or quality education especially at higher level can play a vital role in bringing around multifaceted human resource development, enabling the learner's absorption in the job market and self-employment. This paper will discuss how the accessibility of education can be promoted to all through a convenient mode of education system and how the disparities in education can be minimized, and also focus on the various strategies for strengthening higher education system in the country.

Keywords: Access, Equity and Higher Education in India, Gender Equity,

Introduction

Access and equity in higher education are crucial aspects of a country's educational system, and they play a significant role in shaping the socio-economic landscape. In the context of India, addressing issues related to access and equity in higher education is essential for promoting inclusivity and ensuring that opportunities for advanced education are available to all segments of the population. Let's delve into the role of higher education in India concerning access and equity. Access to and equity in higher education have been widely regarded as the basic and key responsibilities of any government. Creating a high-quality higher education system which is easily accessible to all sections of society is thus one of the main higher education outcomes that a government seeks to achieve. Access to higher education has been defined as availability of sufficient number of institutions across the serviced region to adequately fulfil the demand from that region. Equity means equal opportunity to all sections of the society to participate in higher education. The Indian higher education system is the largest in the world in terms of the number of institutions and the second largest in enrolments. Access to higher education in India has grown tremendously in context of the number of institutions and enrolments. However, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is still much lower. Higher education in India faces six types of challenges related to equity each associated with gender, caste, interstate, religion, spatial, and income. In terms of efficiency while rates of returns were higher for higher education levels as compared to the lower levels of education in India, however, the problem of appropriate employment amongst higher education graduates still persists. Despite consistent efforts in enhancing the quality of higher education in India, effective measures are required to make it internationally competitive. Indian higher education will have to address equity, quality and efficiency

Equity: -

Equity is fair access to livelihood, education, participation in social, cultural, political affairs of the community/society. According to Martin Luther, “Where there is injustice for one, there is injustice for all.” Equity does not mean favour of few at the cost of many/others.

Social Equity in Education: -

Social equity in education means that the students from different social groups should have similar outcomes from educational institutes. There is no reason to accept disparities in educational outcome on the basis of caste, class, sex, religion, language etc. (may differ because of talent, efforts and motivation etc.)

Number of higher education institutions in India Three types of institutions exist in India, including universities, colleges and standalone institutions. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC, 2012), in 1950-51, the number of universities was 30 and colleges were 695. By September 2017, the number of universities increased to 903 and the number of colleges to 39,050, besides 10,011 stand-alone institutions (MHRD, 2018a). There are different types of universities in higher education in India of the various types of universities, State Public Universities consisted of the maximum number of universities (351), followed by State Private Universities (262) in 2017-18. 633 universities under states’ purview (State Public Universities – 351, State Private Universities - 262, State Open Universities – 14, Institutions under State Legislature Act – 5, State Private Open University – 1) collectively accounted for 70 % of the total universities. Out of the total 903 universities, 343 universities are privately managed (about 38 %). Central universities, or Union universities, are established by an Act of Parliament and are under the purview of the Department of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education. 2023.

14 December 2023, the of central universities published by the UGC includes central universities. Recently added Samaka Saraka Tribal university in Telangana	57
14 November 2023, the UGC active state universities.	479
14 November 2023, the UGC consolidated list of universities lists private universities.	455
14 November 2023, the UGC institutes	124
14 November 2023, these four types of universities total universities together.	1115

<https://www.ugc.gov.in/>

State universities are run by the state government of each of the states and territories of India and are usually established by a local legislative assembly act.

- The oldest establishment date listed by the UGC is 1857, shared by the University of Calcutta, the University of Madras and the University of Mumbai. Most State Universities are affiliating universities administering many affiliated colleges (often located in small towns) that typically offer a range of undergraduate courses, but may also offer post-graduate courses. More established colleges may even offer PhD programs in some departments with the approval of the affiliating university.
- Deemed university, or "Deemed to be University", is a status of autonomy granted by the Department of Higher Education on the advice of the UGC, under Section 3 of the UGC Act.
- which were granted the deemed to be university status. According to this list, the first institute to be granted deemed university status was Indian Institute of Science, which was granted this status on 12 May 1958. In many cases, the same listing by the UGC covers several institutes. For example, the listing for Homi Bhabha National Institute covers the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research and other institutes.
- Private universities are approved by the UGC. They can grant degrees but they are not allowed to have off-campus affiliated colleges.

There are universities of some kind in each of the 28 states of India as well as five of the eight union territories: Chandigarh, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and Puducherry. The state with the most universities is Gujarat with 97 universities, and Gujarat has also by far the most private universities,

63 in number. Tamil Nadu is the state with the most deemed universities, numbering 28, and Karnataka has the most state universities, 42. Delhi has 7 central universities, the largest number of all the states and territories.

Provision of Equity at Higher Education Level: - According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” Higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”

Our government is promoting equity in the field of education. Steps to promote equity are listed below:

1. Education Law: - Right to Education
2. Equality of educational opportunities lays a strong foundation for social justice,
3. If fair education is provided to people, the main body of community and their mind set for fairness and equitable behaviour than it leads to social equity Equal opportunities in education change the living standards of different groups and this will eliminate social disparities.
4. Improve the situation of education in backward areas to enhance the educational level of these areas.
5. Arrange more and more funds, expert teachers and frame effective policies and strongly
6. implement them, it slowly bridges the gap between less developed and developed areas.
7. Arrange education according to needs and characteristics of backward areas.
8. Scholarships and educational loans should be provided.
9. Migrant children should be equal treated.

Access to Higher Education: -

1. Selective Sector: - Expanding the sector of institutions operated upon selective basis and introducing a significant element of social justice therein.
2. Maintenance of proper standard in undergraduate affiliated colleges through
3. prescription of proper conditions of affiliation and their rigorous enforcement and the
4. development of correspondence course on a large scale and establishment of an open university.
5. Provision of free grants to students on principles of merit and social justice.

Structure of Higher Education: -

1. Restricting the work of the universities mainly to post-graduate teaching and research.
2. Establishment of Boards of Collegiate Education for metropolitan cities and separately for each State to grant affiliation to colleges and award the first degree.
3. Creation of autonomous colleges on a large and effective scale

Challenges for Equity and Equality in Higher education in India:

1. Social Equity and Equality:
2. India is facing a multi-faceted challenge for social equilibrium. Multi-culture, multi-castes, Multilanguage's, multi-regionality, and multi-religion are making India a very dynamic milieu to propose and provide any Equity and equality for education.
3. Gender equity and equality
4. Economic Equity and Equality
5. Low-income students today are just now enrolling at the same rate high-income students did 40 years ago. Low-income students and students of lower castes are far less likely than other students to enrol in institutions where most students graduate and far more likely to enrol in institutions that graduate few of their students and saddle them with excessive expenditure on education.
6. Even after accounting for all grant aid, low-income students must finance an amount equivalent to 76 percent of their family's annual income to attend a public university for one year a far higher burden than the 17 percent required for higher income students.
7. The bachelor's degree attainment rate among Black adults is just over half that of White adults, and the rate among Latino adults is even lower — just over one-third that of White adults.

Gender Inequity in higher education in India

Efforts to reduce gender disparity in enrolments in higher education have manifested in various forms like subsidized fees, exclusive girls' hostels, and higher education institutes among others. 15 universities and 11.04 % of colleges are exclusively devoted for women (MHRD, 2018a). While the GER for males was 15.2 and for females it was 10.7 in 2006-07, the gap between the GER for male and female further reduced in 2017 with GER for males being 26.3 and that for females at 25.4. However, a more important tool to measure gender-based inequality is the Gender Parity Index (GPI). GPI is derived by dividing GER of females with the GER of males at a particular level of education. Hence, GPI of 1 indicates persistent equality between male and female enrolment, in terms of pursuing higher education. If GPI is observed to be lesser than one, then it indicates inequity between males and females in favour of males. In India, GPI at higher education level in 2017-18 was 0.97 a rise from 0.7 in 2006-07. We know that there are huge inequalities in prospects along many dimensions (health, wealth and well-being) between those who have a college degree and those who do not have a college degree. Moreover, there are noticeable inequalities between those who have college degrees from elite institutions and those who have college degrees from other institutions. Access to college and elite college degree programs is thus highly consequential and access should be determined fairly.

Debates about Equality of Opportunity in higher education focus not only on the under-representation of certain groups, such as racial minorities and the poor, but also on inequalities in drop-out rates and inequalities between those applying to elite institutions in the first place. These inequalities may be symptoms of deeper social problems, such as wealth inequality and racism, that are not caused by the system of higher education. Nevertheless, higher education may have an essential role in the best solution to these social problems, controlling, as it does, access to elite positions of power and effecting the representation of minorities in those positions that may influence aspiration levels amongst members of disadvantaged groups.

One of the more controversial reforms associated with higher education and Equality of Opportunity is affirmative action, which reserves preferential treatment, and even quotas, for historically disadvantaged groups. This can lead to the complaint that merit, and not race or class, is the only relevant criterion for selecting college applicants and can lead to the stigmatization of members of those groups who do attend college as not deserving of their place. However, this is to forget that opportunities to develop merit are themselves unfairly distributed between groups historically. Notwithstanding this response, affirmative action remains a controversial response to a very difficult social problem.

Gross Enrolment Ratio for higher education in India

Although the absolute number of enrolments in higher education institutes in India at 36.6 million is huge and praiseworthy, however, a lot more effort needs to be put to assure an increase in access to higher education as measured by the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER). GER for higher education is defined as the number of students enrolled in higher education irrespective of their age group, as a percentage of the total number of the population belonging to the relevant age cohort (in India, 18-23 years). GER for higher education in India was 8.1% in 2001-02, 13.1 % in 2007-08 and 25.8 % in 2017- 18. If India is to gain from the demographic dividend, a larger number of students will have to pursue quality higher education. Such a huge percentage of the population out of the purview of higher education is not only a loss but also a danger to the socioeconomic future of the country.

Number of teaching staff and pupil-teacher ratio in 1950-51, the teaching staff in universities and colleges was 23,549 that increased to about 1.28 million in 2017-18 (UGC, 2012; MHRD, 2018a). Accordingly, the pupil teacher ratio exclusively for universities (and constituent units) in 2017 was 20, whereas the pupil-teacher ratio for universities and colleges combined was 30 (MHRD, 2018a).

Quality Concerns for Higher Education in India

One of the major challenges associated with an increase in access to higher education in India is the one associated with quality. Within the country, the attempts to assess the quality of higher education

institutions include the processes of accreditation and ranking of various institutions. However, higher education institutions of India at the international level have failed to mark a noticeable presence in any of the internationally reputed university rankings. The research output is also a crucial factor to adjudge the quality of higher education system. Hence, a discussion of the performance of higher education institutions in accreditation and national as well as international ranking is followed by the research output of the higher education institutions in India. The accreditation process is a vital part of the higher education quality enhancement initiative by the government. UGC made it mandatory for all higher education institutions in India to undergo accreditation¹⁴, and in case of failing, provisions have been made for severe punishments like, not releasing the financial assistance for the non-accredited government funded institutions and in case of privately funded institutions, their recognition notification could be repealed. The responsibility of accreditation of general education rests with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) whereas that for technical education lies with the National Board of Accreditation (NBA). While NAAC undertakes institutional accreditation, NBA undertakes program and institution accreditation for institutions offering technical education like engineering, technology, management, pharmacy, architecture, etc. In addition, the criteria, weightage and the processes that are evolved for accreditation differ between the two. Yet, both are based on the philosophy of self-evaluation, and accountability of the institutions volunteering¹⁵ for assessment and accreditation by recognizing their own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges to further enhance their quality. The accredited institution has to opt for three cycles of accreditation after each accreditation. The cycle period for each cycle is five years. Since its inception in September 1994, the NAAC accreditation process has undergone various improvisations in terms of criteria, weightages, grading method and process. As per the latest amendment introduced in July 2017, NAAC identified seven levels of accreditation ranging from A++ to C grade and D grade shows that the institution was 'not accredited'. Assessment is done on the basis of seven criteria¹⁶, further divided into 34 key indicators¹⁷ with different weightages (Joshi and Ahir, 2015). Moreover, the weightages for each criterion are different for universities, autonomous colleges, and affiliated colleges. A total of 11964 institutions (540 universities and 11424 colleges) had been accredited till March 2018. In 2017-18 alone a total of 7772 institutions were accredited (320 universities and 7452 colleges). Out of 320 universities, 201 universities secured grade A (63 %), 116 - grade B (36 %) and 3 - grade C (1 %). In contrast, out of 7452 colleges, 1621 colleges secured grade A (22 %), 5037 - grade B (68 %) and 794 - grade C (11 %) (NAAC, 2018a). Hence, universities scored more 'A' grades as compared to colleges that secured more 'B' grades

Conclusion

We propose that, for India, EER would be the most appropriate indicator rather than mere GER for assessing the access, quality, and relevance to higher education. The EER might be a refined measure to position developed and developing countries on the same plane and, therefore might portray a fairer picture about the enrolment in higher education. Moreover, in an era where lifelong learning facilitates continuously changing employment opportunities, it is high time to reconsider the current notion of an age-linked GER. The future of learning is undoubtedly in blended pedagogy comprising face-to-face, distance, continuing, digital and online modes of delivery. One must not forget that quality online education not only needs technology but a robust curriculum and pedagogy to facilitate independent learning. However, online education need not be used as an easy tool merely to increase the GER. Such steps may be detrimental, unless the quality, relevance, skills, and employability issues are sufficiently addressed. We should make efforts to improve the quality of school education as well as access and relevance to higher education to contribute towards national development and improve international competitiveness. We may need to deglamourize general education degrees and give social recognition/ prestige and equal or even higher status to skill and vocational training. A renewed strategy of bridging blue and white-collared education may help enhance the employment opportunities in India and abroad. This will probably be a great tribute to the vision of a rapidly emerging young and aspiring new India. higher education in India plays a pivotal role in fostering

access and equity. By addressing socio-economic disparities, implementing inclusive policies, and maintaining high academic standards, India can strive towards a more equitable and accessible higher education system that contributes to the overall development of the nation.

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