Past Present and Future of Higher Education and its challenges in India

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Abstract

Higher education in India has a long history extending back thousands of years. From the ancient colleges of Nalanda and Takshashila to modern institutions, India's higher education journey has been intriguing and revolutionary. Higher education is essential for research, education, and career opportunities, contributing to the development of the nation by providing significant hours into policy, research, scientific discoveries, inventions, etc. However, there are many challenges in its implementation, including the gap between developed and developing nations, limitations in infrastructure, and a lack of upgraded skills required for the new digital era of education. NEP 2020 aims to address some of these issues, but it must be implemented cautiously to benefit all sections of society. This paper discusses the past,present and future trends of higher education in India and the problems in higher education and proposes possible ways forward towards its solution.

Keywords: Ancient, NEP, Future, digital

Introduction

Education is all about learning skills and knowledge. It means helping people to learn how to do things and support them to think about what they learn. It is also important for educators to teach ways to find and use information. Education needs research to find out how to make it better.The higher education System in India has its own unique long history. During ancient and medieval times, India had a rich knowledge culture. The aim of higher education is to prepare a person to play his part well, as an enlightened member of society. Rabindranath Tagore rightly said, "The higher education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes life in harmony with all existence". India has a large higher education sector, the third largest in the world in student numbers, after China and the United States. This in itself is a remarkable achievement.(1) It has significant advantages in the 21st century knowledge race. But the severity of challenges that the system faces is exceedingly high, daunting, and at times looks insurmountable.The challenges confronting the Indian higher education system are also challenging, complex and have different hues.(2)

Past status of higher education in India

The roots of higher education in India can be traced back to the Vedic period, around1500BC,when learning was primarily religious and philosophical. Gurukuls, the earliest form of Indian educational institutions, focused on imparting knowledge in a residential setting. The guru (teacher) and shishya (student) system was the cornerstone of education, emphasizing a holistic approach to learning that included subjects like science, mathematics, and arts.

The establishment of universities like Nalanda and Takshashila marked a significant milestone in the history of Indian higher education. Nalanda, founded in the 5th century, was an international hub of learning, attracting students from as far as China, Korea, and Central Asia. It offered a diverse range of subjects, from

medicine to astronomy, and housed thousands of scholars and monks. Similarly, Takshashila, dating back to the 6th century BCE, was a renowned center for advanced studies. It is considered one of the earliest universities in the world, offering courses in law, medicine, military science, and more. These institutions laid the groundwork for a structured approach to higher education in India.

During the ancient period, two systems of education were developed Vedic and Buddhist.The medium of language during the Vedic system was Sanskrit, while those in the Buddhist system were pali. During those times the education was of Vedas, Brahmanas, Upnishads, and Dharmasutras .Higher Education encompassed a wide range of subjects including mathematics, astronomy, grammar, philosophy, medicine, and more.

The advent of British colonial rule in the 18th century brought significant changes to the Indian education system. The British introduced Western-style education, with an emphasis on English language and literature, science, and mathematics. The establishment of institutions like the University of Calcutta, the University of Bombay, and the University of Madras in the mid-19th century marked the beginning of modern higher education in India.This period also saw the introduction of formal degrees and examinations, which replaced the traditional guru-shishya system. The British model of education aimed to create a class of educated Indians who could assist in administrative roles, but it also inadvertently fostered a spirit of intellectual curiosity and reform among Indians.(4)

Present status of higher education in India

After gaining independence in 1947, India faced the colossal task of rebuilding its education system to meet the needs of a democratic and developing nation. The government took several initiatives to expand access to higher education and improve its quality. The structure of Indian Higher Education is three-layered, consisting of Universities, Colleges and Courses. The universities and colleges work in unison with regulatory as well as accreditation bodies to deliver standardized education. The establishment of institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) in the 1950s and 1960s aimed to create centers of excellence in science, technology, and management.(3)

Types of Universities
On the basis of management the universities are classified as:

- **Central Universities** - These are set up through an Act in Parliament. The establishment and operation are funded by the Union Government.
- **State Universities** - These are set up through an Act in the State Legislature. The state universities are primarily funded and operated by the State Government.
- **Private Universities** - These are set up through an Act in the State Legislatures. It includes specialized institutions and multidisciplinary research universities.
- **Deemed Universities** - These are well-performing institutes that are declared to be of equal standing as the universities by the Central Government on the advice of the Union Grants Commission (UGC).
- **Institutes of National Importance (INI)** - These are eminent institutions of India that are known to develop highly skilled individuals. They are funded by the Government of India and include all the IITs, NITs and AIIMs institutes.

Colleges
The colleges enabling higher Study in India can be affiliated either with central or state universities. The private colleges are mostly affiliated with state universities. Further, there are autonomous colleges as well

that enjoy autonomy in terms of deciding curriculum, admissions and examination process. But, they are also affiliated with a government university (central or state).

Courses

The courses offered in Indian higher education institutions can be generally classified into two categories:

• **STEM Courses** - STEM is a broad term that stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and it encompasses all the courses providing education in these disciplines. Instead of teaching the four disciplines separately, the purpose of STEM courses involves cohesive learning and it focuses on the practical application of the subjects. Effective education in STEM courses is not limited to theoretical learning but extends to experimental and research-based learning too. The well-equipped laboratories of Indian institutes enable the same and help the students to inculcate innovative, problem-solving and competent skills.

• **Non-STEM Courses** - The courses offered in disciplines such as Commerce, Arts, Business Management, Humanities, and Social Affairs are termed non-STEM courses. Yet again, the Indian institutions are well equipped to provide education in these disciplines wherein the students can gain expertise in the subject of their choice. Non-STEM majors like humanities open a wide range of career opportunities where the skills, knowledge and deeper understanding are made applicable. Similarly, education, accounting, marketing, English, journalism, language studies, etc degrees all have plenty of uses for various professions. A few examples for career options under non-STEM courses include counselors, education administrators, teachers, clinical psychologists, art or creative director, etc.

The Regulatory Structure

The entire ecosystem of higher Study in India is primarily overseen by the following authorities:

• **University Grants Commission (UGC)** - The main regulatory body that performs a range of tasks such as providing funds to the universities, establishing education standards for the universities and analysing the growth of the various higher education institutions. It is crucial for universities to meet the criteria set by UGC so as to enjoy degree-awarding authority. India's higher education is managed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the various councils. The UGC, set up under UGC Act 1956, has been empowered responsible for coordination, determination, and maintenance of standards and release of grants to universities and research organizations. Various professional councils are responsible for recognition of courses, promotion of professional institutions and provision of grants to undergraduate programmes. In the last six decades, the higher education sector in India has witnessed exponential growth, both in terms of the number of institutions and the rate of enrolment. While talking about the growth in student enrolment, the recent UGC report states that in 1950-51, when there were only 3,97,000 students enrolled in all disciplines in 750 colleges affiliated to 30 universities. Now, the growth of higher education in India has been phenomenal. As of 6 September 2016, India had 784 universities (47 central universities, 353 state universities, 123 deemed universities, 246 private universities etc.), around 100 institutes of national importance, over 45,000 colleges and about 13,000 stand alone institutions.(7)

• **All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)** - The regulatory body that coordinates, plans and develops technical education in the country.

Accreditation of the universities and colleges

NAAC

The NAAC is an autonomous organization set up by University Grants Commission and its headquarter is in Bengaluru. The main function of NAAC is to ensure that quality is the defining feature of higher Study in

India. It facilitates performance assessment and inspection for volunteering higher education institutions through a series of parameters. The accreditation granted by NAAC helps the institutions to identify and amend their internal planning areas, resource allocation and weakness through an extensive review procedure. On the other hand, the students get reliable information in terms of quality education offered by the concerned institution.

NIRF

The NIRF is the methodology approved and launched by the Ministry of Education (the Ministry of Human Resource Development) that outlines the procedure of ranking higher education institutes across India. The methodology revolves around ranking the institutions based on five broad categories which are sub-categorised as well.

The paradigm shift in the higher education system in India is aided by the integration of the latest innovation and technology. The transformed system focuses on the inclusive development of the learners and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 ensures the same. The main purpose of NEP 2020 is to implement and strengthen multidisciplinary, inclusive and technology-based learning that is accessible to all.

We need to emphasize the quality of education. In this process, ICT can play a vital role. Incorporating it strategically into the higher education system can have a transforming effect. As we can already see many MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) run online and give Personalized learning which customizes learning for each learner's strengths, needs, skills and interests. Certificates and credit score achieved by this is acceptable in the industry. This is an opportunity for both teachers and students to avail this opportunity, learn new skills and upgrade the efficiency of the teaching-learning process.Faculties were engaged in the development of online courses. 21st century skills can be best described as the 4C's : Critical thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication. For this our mentors and teachers have to be the lighthouse of students, visionaries of the future, well-trained and updated to direct students in the right and required direction, and most importantly with human values, and empathy.(3)

Future status of higher education in India

The future of higher education in India looks promising, with several trends and developments set to shape the landscape in the next five years:

1. Expansion of Digital Learning:
The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning, and this trend is expected to continue. Hybrid models that combine online and offline learning will become more prevalent, offering students greater flexibility and access to quality education.

2. Skill-Based Education:
There will be a greater emphasis on skill-based and vocational education to bridge the gap between academia and industry. Higher education institutions will collaborate with industries to design curricula that are relevant to the job market and equip students with practical skills.

3. Internationalization:
Indian higher education institutions will increasingly seek collaborations with foreign universities to offer joint degrees, student exchange programs, and research partnerships. This will enhance the global competitiveness of Indian universities and provide students with international exposure.

4. Innovation and Research:

The focus on research and innovation will intensify, with initiatives like the National Research Foundation (NRF) driving cutting-edge research in various fields. Universities will foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, encouraging students to develop solutions to real-world problems.

5. Inclusive and Equitable Education:

Efforts to make higher education more inclusive and equitable will continue, with policies aimed at increasing access for marginalized communities. Scholarships, financial aid, and infrastructural improvements will play a crucial role in achieving this goal.

6. Sustainable Development:

Higher education institutions will integrate sustainability into their curricula and campus operations. There will be a greater emphasis on educating students about environmental issues and sustainable practices, preparing them to contribute to a sustainable future.

NEP

The National Education Policy (NEP) has laid out a grand vision about what education in India should be like over the next 50 years. The policy

- supports and promotes problem-solving, innovation, and creative thinking
- recognizes students' interests, inherited skills, and the need for well-resourced infrastructure, and a trained, passionate team of teachers
- focuses on recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student through the development of conceptual understanding.

It is based on five pillars, "Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability and Accountability" and carries the potential of transforming India into a vibrant knowledge hub. Some of its features related to higher education are-

1. **In the pursuit of increasing access, affordability, and equity,**

The government and the HEIs will extend special support to Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDG) in the form of to make education affordable to the masses of India, HEIs will be instructed by the government to reduce opportunity costs and fees for pursuing higher education in addition to providing more financial assistance and scholarships to SEDGs.

2. In the pursuit of achieving quality higher education in India,

- The existing rigid curriculum will be revamped and will be transformed into a flexible, broad-based, and multi-disciplinary curriculum.
- The pedagogy, method of assessment, and student support will also be revamped according to the needs of the present times. The student's report card will be evaluated based on a 360-degree assessment, keeping in mind the mental abilities of his behavior, which the student's classmate and teacher will evaluate.
- In order to ensure quality faculty in institutions, the integrity of faculty and institutional leadership positions will be reaffirmed through merit- appointments and career progression based on teaching, research, and service. In addition, a professional standard for teachers will be developed by the National Council for Teacher Education by the year 2022.
- To help the students of India to get World-class education in India itself, the top 100 HE institutions in the world will be encouraged to set up their branches in India.

Considering the vital importance of education in a country's economy, the traditional human capital theory has dealt with the necessity of investment in education. Investing in higher education contributes vitally to

accelerating the rate and process of economic growth by enhancing human skills and productivity. The positive externalities associated with education and the high returns expected from investment in education necessitate the role of the State in financing higher education.

In these times of fascinating technological advancements, human capital is grabbing center stage as one of the major boosters of the global economy. The workforce of a country, if properly educated and skilled, can contribute more to the production process in the economy. The Taskforce on higher education and society in their report 'Higher education in developing countries, peril and promise' stated that "High-quality human capital is developed in high-quality education systems, with tertiary education providing the advanced skills that command a premium in today's workplace."(2)

Major Challenges Higher Education faces in India

Poor-quality of Curriculum

Major problem in higher education in India is the poor quality of the curriculum, which in turn leads to the poor quality of human capital in India. 90 percent of the universities and higher educational institutions in the country have an outdated curriculum which is keeping them from making it into the top institutes of the world.The curriculum in India has not been changing with changing industry needs. It still imparts knowledge that is obsolete and irrelevant in present times. In addition, the learning process is content-based rather than application-based, and training in essential skills is not provided by many institutions. This feature has further aggravated the problem of low employability of graduates.

Inadequate focus on Research

There is inadequate focus on research in India. Some of the significant barriers to the development of research in India.

- Lack of sufficient resources and facilities required to pursue research.
- Lack of quality faculty to guide researchers
- Higher education institutions are poorly connected with research centers
- Inadequate allocation of funds for research

Commodification of education

As seen from the above figures, there is a prevalence of privately managed colleges in India's higher education sector, with most of these colleges being financially unaided by the government. When facing the lack of financial support by the government, these institutions act as profit-seekers and therefore try to charge maximum fees from students.This rational nature of private educational institutions leaves economically weak students with public educational institutions as a last resort. However, the high level of competition among students to secure a seat in these public educational institutions leaves out many poor students who couldn't get proper secondary education in the past.Hence, good quality higher education ends up becoming a commodity unaffordable for the masses of India. This commodification of education is also held responsible for the low GER.(5)

As said by Barack Obama, "Higher education cannot be a luxury reserved just for the privileged few. It is an economic necessity for every family. And every family should be able to afford it." Hence higher education in India should be made more affordable and consequently accessible.

Unattractive compensation packages, lengthy recruitment procedure, and working environment not conducive to retention are some other problems faced by higher educational institutes. As a result, a substantial

proportion of high-ranking students who could fill up such assignments prefer to work elsewhere or go abroad. Most institutions offer outdated programmes with inflexible structures and content. (6)

Strategies To Overcome The Challenges That Come After Higher Education

1. Strategic Job Search:

- **Building Network:** Build and leverage professional networks through platforms like LinkedIn. Attend industry events, join relevant groups, and connect with professionals in your field.

- **Volunteering and Internships:** Gain practical experience through internships, volunteer opportunities, or part-time positions during or immediately after your education to enhance your resume.

2. Financial Management:

- **Budgeting:** Create a realistic budget that includes living expenses, loan repayments, and savings. Prioritize financial stability by identifying areas where you can cut costs.

- **Plan Repayment of Loan:** Explore various loan repayment plans, and consider consolidating or refinancing loans to ease the financial burden.

3. Transition to the Professional World:

- **Professional Development:** Participate in workshops, webinars, and training programs to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical skills.

- **Seek Guidance:** Connect with mentors or professionals in your industry who can provide insights and guidance on navigating the professional world.

4. Career Planning and Adaptability:

- **Constant Learning:** Stay informed about industry trends, advancements, and emerging technologies. Invest in ongoing education, certifications, and training to remain competitive.

- **Adapting:** Be open to adapting your career plans based on changing industry demands. Embrace a growth mindset and view challenges as opportunities for learning and development.

5. Managing Job Insecurity:

- **Diversify Skills:** Develop a diverse skill set that makes you adaptable to different roles within your field. This versatility can enhance your employability and resilience in a dynamic job market.

- **Freelancing and Projects:** Explore side projects or freelancing opportunities to gain additional experience and create a portfolio that showcases your skills.

6. Work-Life Balance:

- **Set Boundaries:** Establish clear boundaries between work and personal life. Communicate expectations with employers and colleagues to ensure a healthy balance.

- **Self-Care:** Prioritize self-care to maintain mental and physical well-being. Regularly engage in activities that bring joy and relaxation outside of work.

7. Building Experience for Entry-Level Positions:

- **Internships and Entry-Level Positions:** Pursue internships, co-op programs, or entry-level positions to gain the experience required for more advanced roles.

- **Highlight Transferable Skills:** Emphasize transferable skills gained during education in your resume and cover letter to showcase your suitability for entry-level positions.

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8. Continuous Learning and Skill Development:

•   **Professional Development Courses:** Enroll in online courses, and workshops, or attend seminars to acquire new skills and stay updated on industry trends.

•   **Mentorship:** Seek mentorship from experienced professionals who can guide you on relevant skills and knowledge needed for career advancement.

9. Navigating Workplace Dynamics:

•   **Observation and Adaptation:** Observe workplace dynamics and adapt your communication and collaboration style accordingly. Learn to navigate office politics with professionalism.

•   **Effective Communication:** Develop strong communication skills to build positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors.

10. Pressure to Excel and Meet Expectations:

•   **Set Realistic Goals:** Establish realistic short-term and long-term career goals. Break down larger goals into manageable steps to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

•   **Performance Feedback:** Seek constructive feedback from supervisors and colleagues to identify areas for improvement and demonstrate a commitment to growth.

11. Career Development and Advancement:

•   **Set Clear Goals:** Clearly define your career goals and create a plan outlining the steps needed to achieve them.

•   **Networking for Advancement:** Build a strong professional network to access mentorship and potential career advancement opportunities.

12. Coping with Rejection and Setbacks:

•   **Resilience:** Develop resilience to cope with setbacks and rejections. Learn from failures, adapt your approach, and use setbacks as opportunities for growth.

•   **Seek Support:** Reach out to friends, family, or mentors for emotional support during challenging times.(1)

Conclusion

The evolution of higher education in India is a testament to the country's rich intellectual heritage and its resilience in adapting to changing times. From ancient universities like Nalanda and Takshashila to modern-day IITs and IIMs, the journey has been remarkable. As we look to the future, the next five years hold immense potential for transforming higher education in India, making it more inclusive, flexible, and aligned with global standards. With the right policies and a commitment to innovation, India is poised to become a global leader in higher education. Education System in India currently represents a great contradiction. On the one hand we have IIMs & IITs that rank among the best institutes in the world and on the other hand there are number of schools & colleges in the country that do not even have the basic infrastructure. Even more than 66 years after independence we are far away from the goal of universal literacy. But on a positive note, Indian professionals are considered among the best in the world are in great demand.

Globalisation has made it mandatory to treat the world as one giant market for each and every product, service or process. Hence, no matter what the domain is, it is inevitable to consider its prospects and ramifications worldwide. Therefore, it has also become mandatory to restructure our systems and processes because for a global market, a system that stands the test at the global level is required. These are global challenges and global opportunities for what one has to offer to the 21st century world. In this context of ceaseless

transformation in every sphere, education has no luxury to be a glorious exception. Across the world, it is pertinent to note that education is also measured against global benchmarks and international parameters. University rankings are the testimony of this globalized benchmarking of higher education. At such a time, when higher education is also undergoing a paradigm shift in terms of its foundational concepts, practices and benchmarks, it would be ideal to revisit higher education in India and discourse on its relevance to the globalized nature of the 21st century Indian scenario.

The main spirit behind national education policy aims at making India global knowledge superpower and global study destination making higher education more holistic,flexible and multidisciplinary. The main five pillars are access,quality,equity,affordability, accountability, it leads to holistic human development that involves development of all parts of person be it physical,emotional,mental and social development.

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