

Higher Education Reform in India: Prospects and Challenges

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The system of higher education now existing in India was originally implanted by the British rulers in the mid-19th century to serve the colonial economic, political and administrative interests, and in particular, to consolidate and maintain their dominance in the country. It was inherited by the state managers after independence (in 1947) as a colonial legacy, and has been expanded phenomenally during the last five decades. The massive system of higher education in India consists of 214 (198 state and 16 central) universities, 38 institutions 'deemed-to-be universities,' 11 institutes of national importance, 9,703 colleges, and 887 polytechnics. The system now employs 321,000 teachers and caters to 6,755,000 students.

Critical appraisals undertaken by the governmental committees and independent academicians have highlighted the crisis confronting the system: 'over-production of "educated" persons; increasing educated unemployment; weakening of student motivation; increasing unrest and indiscipline on the campuses; frequent collapse of administration; deterioration of standards; and above all, the demoralizing effect of the irrelevance and purposelessness of most of what is being done.' While the politicians and policy makers have often spoken about the need for *radical reconstruction* of the system, what has been achieved in reality is only *moderate reformism*.

After a long period of protected expansion with state patronage until the mid-1980s, a complex turn of events has thrown higher education into a vortex of change. The foremost among such events was the adoption by the Government of India in 1990 of structural adjustment reforms. Influenced by the World Bank-International Monetary Fund combine, structural adjustment has meant the gradual withdrawal of state patronage for higher education and a coterminous privatization of that sphere. However, with the government dithering about the long-term policy to be adopted in this regard, higher education in India is now passing through a period of stunted growth and uncertain future.

The conventional university system in India, confronting as it is a systemic crisis, has proved itself to be incapable of introducing any significant educational innovation or effectively implementing any educational reform. Given the mounting pressure for increasing accessibility and over-democratization, the trend in the universities is toward reducing everything to the lowest common denominator or leveling down quality rather than raising it. The Indian university system is extraordinarily rigid and pronouncedly resistant to change: The impetus to change does not come from within the system. When experiments or innovations are introduced from outside, they are resisted; if enforced, they are ritualized. The fate of such innovations as the merit promotion scheme, faculty-improvement program, vocationalization of courses, semesterization of courses, curriculum-development centers, annual self-appraisal report, college-development council, academic-staff college and refresher and orientation courses are too well known. It is indeed ironic that higher education, which is expected to function as an agency of change, should itself be resistant to it.

The void created by the paralysis and drift of the conventional university system is being filled by private entrepreneurial initiatives. Thus, significant educational innovations and experiments are currently taking place in institutions outside the university orbit and in the private sector. In view of the rapid expansion of and increasing variety in knowledge and skills, there is enormous scope for educational innovations and initiatives. The private institutions have been more responsive to the demands of the economy and industry and the changing employment scenario. They have also shown their ability to match relevance with flexibility both in costs and regulation. This does not, however, mean that all private institutions are necessarily good. Some of them are brazenly commercial establishments out to swindle gullible people looking for better-quality education at affordable prices. As in any commercial operation in a market economy, such establishments get exposed.

Privatization of higher education is apparently a fledgling but welcome trend: Higher education requires it to maintain creativity, adaptability and quality. The economic trail of liberalization and globalization demands it. Considering the chronic paucity of resources, gradually unburdening itself of

the additional responsibility for higher education may be advisable for the government. Instead, it could better utilize the scarce resources for realizing the goal of universalization of elementary education and for improving the quality of school education.

Privatization of higher education, however, is not without social costs. In a polity such as India's, where structured inequalities have been entrenched, privatization is sure to reinforce existing inequalities and to foster inegalitarian tendencies. This requires the social supervision of the private sector and effective measures for offsetting imbalances resulting from unequal economic capacities of the population. Thus, we again confront a dilemma: Theoretically, how do we advance equality without sacrificing quality? Practically, how do we control the private sector without curbing its creativity and initiative? That is the challenge in higher education at the beginning of the new millennium.