

The Context, Complexity and Concerns of Higher Education in India: Search Areas for Reform**

S. Bisaliah*

The Prologue

A review of philosophy of education, its expected role, its importance in creating a learning society for socio-economic transformation and empirical evidences on its importance suggests three important inferences. **First**, to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a great teacher-cum-philosopher of last century, the two foundations of human civilization are: Ideas and Ideals which are expected to emanate mainly from educational institutions, especially from colleges and universities. **Second**, the normative standards set for higher education system by Dr. Radhakrishnan are: The intellectual pioneers of our civilization are to be found and trained in our universities and colleges. These institutions of higher education are the sanctuaries of the inner life of a nation. The question that should bother us is: How far our higher education institutions are closer to or far away from the normative standards set by Dr. Radhakrishnan. Related to this is the dream of Dr. Abdul Kalam for India to become a developed nation by 2020. A major prerequisite for this is to have a large pool of high quality teachers, engineers, doctors,

managers and so on. How prepared (or unprepared) is our higher education system to produce this high quality manpower: Perhaps more unprepared than prepared. **Third**, in fact, knowledge gap is the one that differentiates less developed countries from that of more developed counterparts. Therefore, creating a learning society for knowledge acquisition and application should be one of the major objectives of government policy.

In fact, policies directed to support learning societies would enable the developing countries to close the gap in knowledge and standard of living in comparison with developed countries. Hence, both learning and learning spillovers are crucial for developing countries to escape from the vicious circle of low standard of living.

Against the preceded backdrop, three issues on higher education are addressed. **First**, what is the context in which higher education is placed at present, and what are the complexities confronting higher education? **Secondly**, what are the concerns and maladies of our higher education system? **Thirdly**, what are the major

* (Former Vice- Chancellor, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bengaluru) Professor Emeritus of Economics Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's M P Birla Institute of Management, Bengaluru.

** This invited paper is a modified version of the convocation address of the author at Kuvempu University on March 24, 2016.

search areas for reforming and revitalising higher education to make it globally competitive?

The Context and Complexity: Higher Education Ecosystem

The context in which higher education is placed and the complexities confronting it would be major determinants of needed reforms in higher education. Further, the concerns and maladies of higher education would be suggestive of pathways for reforming and revitalising it.

With regard to contextual issues of higher education, two major areas are examined: The paradigm shifts which have taken place in higher education, and the syndrome of globalization, liberalization and marketization which is applicable to education sector also under WTO regime. In case of paradigm shifts: there has been a shift from limited access to expanded access as a part of egalitarian ethos, from transcendental and philosophical value of education to market value, from general to professional education, from higher education as a merit good to non-merit good (i.e from subsidized to cost recovery) and from public sector to private sector domain. Yet another contextual issue is treating education as a tradable commodity between member countries of WTO, under which foreign universities can open their campuses. Added to these two contextual issues is "failure" of our institutions to be visible in the ranking of global institutions of excellence, whereas the institutions of countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taipei, Japan and China have made it to the rank list of institutions of excellence. Does this mean that excepting a few islands of good institutions in India, the country has a sea of substandard institutions? The obvious question is: what is it that these countries have done that India has not?

The complexity of higher education in India could be gauged in terms of multiplicity of types of higher education institutions and of regulatory authorities. There has been a considerable increase in the number of universities from 30 in 1950-51 to 744 as on Feb 16, 2016. Of these 744 universities, 343 are state universities, 232 private universities, 123 deemed to be universities, and 46 are central universities. The

number of colleges in the country has increased from 750 in 1950-51 to over 37,204 in 2012-13, student enrolment from 2.63 lakh in 1950-51 to a little over 215 lakh in 2012-13, and teachers from 0.24 lakh to 9.51 lakh during the same period. Even with respect to universities and colleges, there are different types like Monodiscipline University versus Multidiscipline University, aided colleges versus unaided colleges, and autonomous colleges versus affiliated colleges. The complexity of higher education sector could also be examined with respect to regulatory authorities like MHRD, UGC, AICTE, ICAR and so on at the Centre, and there are regulatory authorities at the State Level also. Complexity has been compounded due to lack of single line of command over higher education institutions in the country.

Concerns and Maladies: A Pathetic Landscape of Higher Education

There are three vertices of higher education triangle: expansion, equity/access, and excellence. There has been considerable progress in expansion. Perhaps, there is visible progress in equity/access also. But in this process, excellence has been the casualty. This is reflected in low global ranking of Indian universities, dismal performance of faculty position aspirants in National Eligibility Test, and declining standards of teaching, research and examination. The institutions of higher education in India are known for lack of cutting edge research. In fact, even countries like Brazil and China are ahead of us in research. There may be some micro success stories but these are obscuring macro realities.

- Even though quantitative expansion of higher education is Vivid at macro level, GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) is far below in India compared not merely to developed countries but also to some of the developing countries. GER in India is less than what it is in Brazil and China and it is about 20% of what it is in USA, Russia and Australia.
- It has been established empirically that GER and HDI (Human Development Index) are highly correlated. For USA, HDI is 0.914 and GER is 95%. For China the corresponding values are 0.79 and 35%, and for India both HDI and GRE are low. Similarly public

expenditure, GER and HDI are directly related. India has registered low public expenditure, low GER and low HDI, and that is one of the major concerns. In fact, government expenditure as a percent of GDP is about half of what it is in countries like UK and USA, and even what it is in countries like Brazil, Malaysia and Mexico.

- Considerable progress in higher education in terms of quantitative expansion needs to be subjected to the analysis of disparity index in terms of inter-state, region, gender, rural and urban and religious groups. For example, southern region with its youth population of 2.9 crore has over one third of colleges in India, whereas central region with a youth population of 4.7 crore has only 22% share in total colleges in the country. It is possible to infer that uneven distribution of colleges would give rise to skewed socioeconomic development of the country across regions.

Further, in addition to regional disparity in expansion of higher education institutions, there is also disparity with respect to participation of different social groups in higher education. Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Muslims have failed to have access to higher education commensurate with their population share. In this regard, southern region has done better in terms of participation of bypassed groups like SC, ST and Muslims in higher education than central and North-Central India.

- Student-teacher ratio is very high in India compared to not merely developed countries but also to Latin American Countries. In fact, it is closer to Sub-Saharan Africa. With over-crowded class rooms, one can understand the effectiveness of teaching-learning system.
- Even though expansion of higher education in India has been considerable, most of the expansion has been in the private sector, and bulk of it has been in professional and vocational courses such as engineering, medicine, and management at the cost of basic sciences, social sciences and humanities which have been put at the back burner as dispensable. This kind of expansion of higher

education will lead to market driven education system with no concern for a balanced socio-economic transformation.

- Creative and transformative governance, leadership and management are not merely far from satisfactory, but initiatives in these fronts are likely to be discouraged by regulatory authorities in the name of uniformity across the country. The experiences of Delhi University and of Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore are the best examples of regulatory bodies curbing innovation in higher education.
- The recent proposals of MHRD and its institutional organs on common syllabus, common admission, and transferable faculty for central universities, and uniform syllabi for all undergraduate courses with minimum amount of deviation, have given rise to some concerns in higher education. First, whether the authoritarian power structure would defeat the very spirit of academic autonomy? Are we leading towards destructive autonomy, creativity and diversity? Secondly, with the implementation of these proposals, whether our universities will become teaching shops and coaching centres? Thirdly, if these proposals are implemented, will there not be uniform mediocrity instead of uniform excellence, lowering academic standards of our best universities? Fourthly, with these proposals implemented whether India will confirm the wrong approach (i.e one-size-fits all) to higher education.
- Total lack of infrastructure and manpower in our institutions of higher education is yet another concern. For example, some of the colleges in rural areas are nothing more than run-down barracks. About 40% of faculty positions across the country are vacant.
- The decline of intellectual discourse, the absence of vibrant academic culture and the difficulties of attracting the best of faculty and students – all these do not support a creative and imaginative academic environment.
- Added to all these concerns and maladies are: Academic inbreeding with less scope for cross fertilisation of ideas and experiences, more emphasis

on physical landscape and less on intellectual landscape, institutions as academic enclaves with less of connections and communications within and between higher education institutions, compartmentalization and fragmentation of knowledge system, lack of vision map on the future growth and contours of institutions, craving for cosmetic changes, drifting and non-directional policy frame for higher education, and so on.

Search Areas for Reforming Higher Education: Some Pathways

Perhaps, there is no greater challenge to the future of India than the urgent need to revamp our institutions of higher education. This is much more so when we recognize that “All is not well in Indian Universities”. Effective transformation of higher education involves four important things: substantial resources, (to build basic state of the art infrastructure rather than creating new institutions) a progressive regulatory environment (not the one which is eager to control and direct universities), under which there is a trust between universities and government (without which higher education sector remains static), a new governance model for creating opportunities and space for research and scholarship, and an enabling environment to incentivize, reward research and publications.

In fact, the context, complexity, concerns and maladies of higher education analysis have brought out some of these pointers for reform, and they are suggestive of pathways for piloting a globally competitive education system in India. Some of the specific areas of reform could be: change in curriculum, retooling of teachers, a reward system for quality work in research and publications, orientation to faculty in education technology, short term faculty exchange programmes among universities/colleges (for intellectual repotting), more emphasis on knowledge creation than knowledge dissemination alone, creative and transformative governance, leadership and management, student support system, placement of soft sciences like basic sciences, social sciences and humanities in the proper prospective of an integrated transdisciplinary teaching and research, a progressive regulatory system with a sense of direction and with respect for academic

autonomy, accountability of teachers, administrators and students, educational alliance through institutional networking, induction of quality parameters into higher education system, inclusive higher education system to address the problem of disparity in spread of higher education facilities and of differential degree of participation of social groups in higher education, establishment of Research Council (Research Advisory Board) at the university level as a policy making body and choice of appropriate globalisation model for higher education. Let us examine six of these search areas for reforming and revitalising higher education.

Faculty: Retooling, Reward System and Accountability

If has been the validated experience that in world class institutions of higher education, quality of teaching and research are directly proportional to quality of faculty. Quality of teachers depends, among others (like recruitment process), on retooling of teachers with basics of education technology, reward system for quality research and publications, and a system for making faculty accountable to stake holders.

The knowledge of subject matter alone is inadequate to be a “good” teacher. The faculty are to be oriented and retooled in many directions through education technology (which is much more than the use of ICT): How to address the learning needs of heterogeneous groups of students by designing learning activities, communication structure, teaching methods, question paper construction methods, assignment preparation, and learning evaluation methods? How to provide an overview of the course in the first session, provide scientific/theoretical contents to students, practical experiences/general observations, draw out inherent creative powers of students (to facilitate their psychological victory in the class), develop analytical capacity of students, and how to bring the course to a close in the last session by integrating bits and pieces of learning in a course into a structured theme? Because teaching is more than a perfect package of wisdom, the faculty need orientation in how to shift from lecture method to discussion method in a partnership mode, shift instruction skills from knowledge of subject matter alone to listening, questioning, responding,

and participating in joint intellectual efforts. The faculty need orientation in how to motivate students for academic pursuits, and develop competencies in collection – analysis – organization of information, for team work, in verbal and written skills, in social skills, analytical – application – creative skills, and so on. The faculty can be oriented in all these areas through workshops. Added to all these is the need for examining critically the indiscriminate use of internet in teaching – learning system, and whether the “reverse movement” of going to library, discussing with people, and seeing the places is better than hooking (addicting) to internet only. Perhaps operating in a virtual world of internet, not in real world, can be gratifying, stimulating, and addictive too. Is it not the time for us to understand the implications of living in a virtual world? Does living in virtual world lead to breakdown of real world relationships? Let us engage in some mental rioting to navigate - treating these issues as intellectual compasses.

In addition to retooling and orienting faculty through education technology, a reward system for research and publications has to be designed for implementation, based on the practices prevalent in central research institutions, and Agricultural University System. Orienting faculty in preparing a fund winning research project proposal, and earmarking some amount in the annual budget of the institution for supporting faculty during their early career could yet be other institutional strategies for promoting a broad – based participation in research. This could foster a robust connection between teaching and research. The institutions of higher education have to be not merely consumers of knowledge but also producers. Faculty exchange programme for a short period could be an excellent strategy for intellectual repotting of faculty for new experiences and exposure.

In addition to autonomy, accountability of faculty is a widely debated issue. Student evaluation of faculty is one of the major instruments for addressing the issue of accountability of faculty. Evaluation is not to be treated as an instrument to exercise punitive power but to constantly improve the performance of faculty as evaluated by students. Whether the faculty performance results should be publicly displayed to

instill accountability is a debatable issue. But to use the method of evaluation as a positive tool to help faculty to improve their performance is perhaps less contested. If course-wise evaluation reports are computerised for every year/semester, the performance improvement of the faculty over a period of time could be graphed, and feedback could be provided to the faculty.

Autonomy and Diversity: Strong Foundation for Quality Augmentation

There appears to be an urge to standardize and centralize higher education. This kind of urge appears to depend on the premise that standardization and homogenization are the one-step solution for the problems of higher education. This kind of strategy is a blow to diversity and pluralism in higher education, and a threat to autonomy of institutions. It will narrow the scope for innovation in higher education and will discourage creativity. India’s extraordinary diversity would foster design of different course packages with their own syllabi to foster academic growth, instead of accepting administration and market-driven system of standardisation and centralisation. First Education Commission (1948) headed by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has well-articulated the need for autonomy to institutions of higher education: we must resist, in the interest of our democracy, the trend towards governmental domination of our educational processes. Higher Education is, undoubtedly, an obligation of the state, but the state aid is not to be confused with state control over academic policies and practices. This observation still holds good, much more so when the autonomy is at threat. Hence, academic autonomy is absolutely required, (of course with accountability) and there may be other checks and balances by the government. However, a well designed debate may be needed to discuss the issue how far higher education could be State and market driven.

Trans-disciplinary System of Teaching and Research:

The importance of basic sciences, social sciences and humanities has been side tracked in our enthusiasm to start market driven vocational courses. It is difficult to imagine quality in engineering education without the support of physics, chemistry and mathematics. Social

sciences and humanities are essential to understand the impact of science and technology on our planet. There is a need for understanding how nations and societies could deal with authority, ideologies, politics and power. Perspectives of social sciences are absolutely needed to help in dealing with these issues. Further, research teams consisting of faculty from basic and social sciences are required to undertake problem solving research (in applied sciences) in a transdisciplinary mode. In fact, the concept of integrated teaching, research and development work would call for interdisciplinary initiatives. Two initiatives for encouraging basic sciences and social sciences could be mentioned in this context. First, the Karnataka Science and Technology Academy has instituted scholarships for encouraging study of basic sciences at under-graduate and post-graduate level. Secondly, Institute for Social and Economic Change (Bangalore) in collaboration with Bangalore University has instituted Talent Search Scheme in Social Sciences, under which financial support is extended for the study of social sciences.

Positive Discrimination and Inclusive Higher Education System

It is possible to derive a theorem on positive association among public expenditure, GER and HDI: Higher the public expenditure on education, higher the GER and higher the HDI. Further, it is also recalled that disparity index of higher education is suggestive of the inference that some regions and some social groups are bypassed in our drive for expansion of and access to higher education. Added to these, there is a trend towards passing the responsibility of developing higher education to private sector. The private universities are usually not affordable for poor students. Hence, adequate budgetary allocation has to be made by the Government to improve the quality of education in State Universities, and the policy of positive discrimination has to be implemented. It is true that the constitutional compulsions are there for government to treat education as a public good and to enable the youth from deprived social groups and backward regions to participate in higher education programme. When it comes to constitutional compulsion, an observation by Andre Beitelte may be kept in view: A constitution

may indicate the direction in which we are to move but the social structure will decide how far we are able to move and at what pace. Unless the participation of youth is broad-based, India will not be able to derive maximum demographic dividend. If India is to become a knowledge economy, quality of higher education has to be the priority of Government (of course, in addition to improving the quality of primary and secondary education), and participation of youth has to be broad-based for which positive discrimination is the right instrument and that would develop an inclusive education system in the country. In addition to making provisions for admission, provision has to be made for special learning opportunities for the youth from the deprived social groups and regions.

Educational Coalition: Networking in Partnership Mode

For quality augmentation of higher education, education coalition among stake holders such as other universities/colleges, industry and former students could be the pathway. This coalition of stakeholders would enrich the institutional environment through cross fertilization of experiences and ideas. No institution can be self-contained with all the physical and manpower resources. Hence the coalition with other institutions. Educational coalition with other institutions may involve: Faculty resources sharing, sharing of laboratory facilities, joint research and consultancy work, joint faculty development programmes and so on. In case of institution-industry tie up, the industry may be of help in curriculum design, in sharing their views in seminars/workshops on emerging problems in technology and science, in providing facilities for experiential learning, and in supporting research work. Further, representatives from the industry may also be inducted as members in academic bodies. Yet, another area of education coalition could be the association of former students with the institution as resource persons, visiting faculty and mentors, and as associated members of academic bodies.

Selective Globalization

Selective globalization of higher education is one of the pathways for reforming and revitalising higher education. Globalisation of education is likely to be

both a threat and an opportunity for our universities. It is a threat, because some of our institutions may find it difficult to face global competition leading to exit from the system. Further, in course of time, bright students who can afford to pay higher fees may join foreign university campuses and the good faculty are also likely to migrate to these institutions. These in turn could drive national institutions to survive with “leftover” students and faculty. But entry of foreign universities may also provide an opportunity for our institutions to “retool” themselves in all respects to face competition. Since the entry of foreign universities is almost certain (In fact, it has started happening in case of management education), this is the compelling reason for our institutions to start “retooling” process. In case of threats, the Foreign Education Institutions Bill (Regulation of Entry and Operations) pending with the parliament is likely to provide checks and balances, once the Bill is passed by the Parliament. Further, it is to be realised that globalisation is not a panacea for addressing all the concerns of higher education. But selective globalisation such as joint ventures (like in industry) in higher education joint courses/joint degree programmes, collaborative research, student/faculty exchange programmes, twinning partnerships, summer schools, joint conferences on teaching skills – all these joint intellectual efforts could give rise to Tagoor’s cultural reciprocity. In the words of Tagore: India’s obligation of offer to others the hospitality, of her best culture and India’s right to accept from others their best. Does this not illustrate the concept of “World in One Nest”? The next level perhaps could be ‘World is One Family’ – Vasudaiva Kutumbakam!

The Epilogue

It has been established that policies directed to support learning societies would enable developing countries to close knowledge gap and gap in standard of living in comparison with developed countries. Our higher education system is more unprepared than prepared to meet the norms of excellence. Three important issues need critical examination.

First, what is the context in which Indian higher education system is placed, and what are the complexities confronting the system? The contextual

domains could be examined in terms of paradigm shifts in higher education, and of the threats and opportunities of globalization and liberalization of higher education. The complexity of the system could be examined in terms of expansion of higher education, different types of universities and colleges, and multiplicity of regulatory bodies.

Secondly, the main concern of higher education in the wake of expansion and increased access is that excellence has been the casualty. This casualty is reflected in dismal performance of Indian higher education institutions in the global ranking, in lack of cutting edge research and our failure to see the positive association between public expenditure on higher education, GER and HDI. India is found to have registered low public expenditure (in terms of percentage of GDP), low GER and low HDI, higher education disparity index, high student-teacher ratio, less and decreasing emphasis on pure sciences, social sciences, and humanities, the absence of creative and transformative governance, leadership and management. There are many other concerns such as academic inbreeding, less emphasis on intellectual landscape of our institutions, absence of adequate networking among institutions, lack of vision map, and initiatives of regulatory bodies for common syllabus, common admission, and uniform syllabi for undergraduate courses, and threat to the very fabric of academic autonomy.

Thirdly, which could be the possible search areas for reforming higher education? The major search areas are: Retooling of faculty, introduction of reward system, making faculty accountable to the system, institutional autonomy (of course with accountability wherever needed), and institutional diversity instead of standardization and centralization, transdisciplinary system of teaching and research, an inclusive higher education system with positive discrimination in case of deprived social groups and regions, and educational coalition with other universities/colleges, within and outside the country, with industry and with former students for cross fertilization of ideas and experiences.

Any failure to reform higher education in the needed directions would “cost” heavily to the country, and the country fails to understand the spirit of present century:

We live in a world of high velocity change. Change will ruthlessly destroy institutions and people who cannot or will not adapt. It is a world where to-day's winner will be tomorrow's nobody. To survive, we must think differently and prepare to jettison old habits and mind sets. If we continue to play to-day's game with yesterday's tools, we will be out of game. The choice is quite clear: Either Adapt or Die. It is as good as operation of Darwinism in our higher education system. Given this perspective, the "fate" of higher education is too important to be left only to regulatory bodies and market forces. This is perhaps the right time for government to set up an Education Commission which can be mandated, among other things, to recommend measures needed to make Indian higher education system globally competitive.