

Accessibility, Excellence, and Accountability in the Indian Higher Education System

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The concepts of accessibility, excellence, and accountability are exercising today their respective pressures on the system of higher education in India. Although working at cross-purposes, all the three have powerful forces to press for their due claims in the democratic edifice of our country. A comparative investigation into the end-result of each pressure would reveal the real character of our democracy, which may not be in consonance with the spirit of our lofty constitution. Keeping in view the constraints of space and time, let us have a look at the facts as they obtain today in the world of Indian higher education, and analyse them in terms of the three concepts which do work as determinants of the policies and programmes related to our universities and colleges.¹

Although India, like all other modern nations of the world, inherited the basic principles of the western Enlightenment, those principles have not met with as much measure of success in the complex society of the Indian state as they have done in the comparatively simpler (that is homogeneous) societies of the western world. "Two great social principles of the Enlightenment are, firstly, that the determination of life-chances by the accidents of birth (ascription) should be mass rather than elite participation in democratic societies. Education has been seen as central to this agenda, in helping to provide the technical skills for modern society and in selecting the talented for upward mobility."² Even though these twin principles have been enshrined in our Constitution, just as they are enshrined in the characters of the democratic countries, the gap between the ideal and the actual is perhaps much wider in India than in the countries of the west. The reasons for this wide gap are not difficult to identify.

In a country where only about 50% of its population gets

access to primary education, where opportunity to learn alphabets is denied by birth, the lofty principles of the democratic ideal seem entirely out of place. No doubt, there has been an expansion of education in the last 50 years, raising the enrolment at the primary level from 42.6% in 1950-51 to 94.9% in 1999-2000. But the official figures in this regard reveal intriguing facts. In the year 1999-2000, the enrolment figure at the primary level is shown to have reached 1136 lacs, but the figure soon sinks to 420 lacs at the upper primary level in the same year, raising the figure of dropouts to 73 per cent. The story at the higher education level is not very different. No doubt, expansion of higher education, too, as also of accessibility to higher education during this period have been quite significant. From about 20 universities and a little over 500 colleges in 1946, we have today over 275 universities and 11,600 colleges.³ Besides, we have a few open universities and almost as many Directorates of Distance Education as there are universities. Also, we have several thousand self/financing institutes of technology and management offering higher education courses and training. And yet, not even this expansion of education and accessibility is good enough for providing equal opportunity to all those born to a complex of inequalities and in a country of over one hundred crore population. Adding even 500 colleges every year in a country where about 5 crores are annually added to the already staggering figures of our population is not good enough to improve the chances of equity and accessibility in higher education.

Besides the factor of birth benefits only the creamy layers of both the lower castes as well as the upper, there are also other factors, such as globalisation, privatization, and technologisation of higher education, which disadvantage the lower classes. The fact that despite our best (or not so best) efforts the enrolment figures through both formal as well as non-formal streams of higher education, have not exceeded even 1% of our total population shows the depth of inequality inbuilt in the nature of our society and the system of our education.⁴ As for the accessibility of higher education to those eligible (in terms of their having passed the senior secondary examination) we have attained only about 6% level (including the figures of both formal non-formal streams). Considering the accessibility figures of countries like the U.S.A., which is about 60%, Canada, which is 54%, even Israel, which is 33%⁵ the status of our economy, as well as of higher education,

compares very unfavourably with these developed countries. Also, the inbuilt social inequalities as well as policy priorities leave out the majority of the masses far away from the entry doors of our higher education edifice. The phenomena of globalisation, privatization, and technologisation in the field of higher education have all combined to make higher education extremely expensive, especially for the overwhelming majority of our population. Consequently, only the creamy layers of our forward as well as backward castes can take advantage of the competitive higher education. The requirement of several lacs of rupees for admission to medical and engineering education in the private sector, which now counts for more than 50% of our total intake capacity in these courses, automatically shuts the doors of accessibility to the majority of our students aspiring to join these courses. Whereas the phenomena of globalisation and privatization have both made available higher and technical education to the wards of those who cannot make it on the basis of merit but can afford to buy it, the phenomenon of technologisation has made higher education expensive even for those who solely rely on merit, thereby making even the doors of the public sector institutions of higher education inaccessible to those meritorious but not rich. Before these phenomena, those meritorious but not rich could make it to the doors of higher education. After these phenomena, a significant change has taken place in the demography of technical education sector. Whereas earlier the wards of the educated middle class families made the majority in the professional courses, now it is the wards of the not-so-educated neo-rich sections, consisting of all those who are able to make money by hook or by crook, who, despite inferior merit (or even no merit), overwhelm all others.

The concept of merit or excellence as a means to ensure equity in higher education, making admission on the basis of open competitions on the state or national level, is also an aspect of the ideology of Enlightenment, which formed the basis of modern democratic states. Once again, we have to take this western concept with a pinch of salt. In this foreign concept, adopted by the third-world democracies including India, meritocracy is supposed 'to give full expression to the twin social principles which have shaped so much of economic and social life since the Enlightenment, in the equation "intelligence + effort = merit"'.⁶ All components of the concept defined here are questionable, for what passes for 'intelligence', for instance, in one culture or society, and even for

different castes or classes, groups and regions, within the same culture and society, is never the same thing. In the context of the present scenario of our higher education system it will not be very wrong to say that 'mediocrity + money=merit'.

The disparities between region and region, caste and caste, class and class, and between individual and individual within the same region, class and caste, in terms of both money and morality are so wide that any talk of equity sounds altogether alien in our native environment. The UGC's table showing regional disparities in access parameter (Formal System) of higher education among the various states of the Indian Union reveals a good deal about the state of equity(or inequity) in our higher education system. The table shows that while the national access parameter is 5.75% it ranges from 10 to 13% in the states of Goa, Manipur and Delhi from 5.7 to 10% in the states of Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Pondichery, and 3 to 5.69% in the states of Andhra, Arunachal, Assam, Bihar, Himachal, Kerala, Madhaya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, Rajasthan, U.P., West Bengal, Sikkim and Tripura.⁷ Thus, our borrowed concepts of equity, merit, and accessibility are fraught with all sorts of problems hard to be straightened, given our legacies of the caste system, the colonial past, and the corrupt present. These disparities are still greater in the case of women education. While Kerala, for instance, has 53.8% women in higher education, Bihar has the lowest of 19%. While Punjab with 51.7% is only next to Kerala; Harayana continues to have percentage lower than the national average.

As for the question of excellence, the scenario is not less dismal than that of equity. The question of excellence is also linked with the question of equity, for the disparity is not in terms merely of accessibility of higher education but also of the availability of infrastructural facilities required for quality education. To begin with the very fact that 60% of our public sector institutions of higher education are in the urban sector, which counts for 20% of our population⁸, shows how unequal are the parameters of accessibility for the two sets of population. And if we include the private sector also, than the ratio changes from 60:40 to 80:20. Since the quality of an educational institution is linked with the quality of life the place of its location offers, the urban institutions have a distinct advantage over those in the rural areas. If we go into the statistics of spendings on infrastructural facilities respectively in the urban

and rural colleges, the picture about the difference in the quality of education and available in the two categories of these colleges becomes all the more clear. In other words, the institutions of excellence are not better than a few islands in the large ocean of mediocrity. These islands, undoubtedly, are the institutions in the metropolitan cities, such as, the Indian Institutes of Technology, or the Universities in Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, etc. It is a different matter though that the UGC has granted excellence to several state universities, and has denied it to Delhi University.

In the case of the general universities, there is a vast difference between those managed by the center and the others managed by the states. The very statistics of spendings show the differences between the two. While the central universities like Aligarh Muslim University and Banaras Hindu University receive each an annual grant of over 70 crores a year. These spendings have direct bearing on the degree of excellence (or the lack of it) the two categories of the universities are able to create in their products. Besides the difference in the annual grants, these two categories have even greater difference in the working conditions of their teachers. While a department of Delhi University may have twenty odd Professors and double the number of teachers drawn from the colleges affiliated to it to teach the course of M.A. and M.Phil, in the same department of a state university not more than one or two professors and half a dozen other teachers are made to do teaching for the same two courses. Besides, in many a state university today, these very half a dozen teachers have to handle those courses also in the Directorate of Distance Education of their university, in some cases, as a compulsory component of their duties, in others, as an added attraction owing to extra payment. In such stringent working conditions as obtain today in our state universities, any expectation would sound rather preposterous.

Expansion of higher education has helped in both enlarging accessibility as well as undermining excellence. The number of new colleges established in the last ten years has been over 3000, showing an increase of 87% in medical education, 1% in technical education, and 41% in Arts, Science and Commerce education.⁹ Since education today has come to mean skill and training, which have better market than liberal education, greater expansion has taken place in the areas of applied sciences (called technologies) and the managerial skills. But this expansion has brought about, for sure, a marked decline in the standards of technical education.

One reason for this has been the Governments incomprehensible policy of not pressing for the Private University's Bill introduced in Parliament in 1995, but promoting individual entrepreneurship to carry out the required expansion in the field run their self-financing institutions with minimum investment in infrastructural facilities, quite often only for laundering their black money earned in trade or business. The concerned authorities of the All India Council for Technical Education, which grants technical approval for these institutions, the state governments, which have to issue no objection certificate to them and the universities, which have to give affiliation to them, all have found the idea very profitable. This private sector in higher education, to say the least, is almost comparable to the parallel economy of the black money in the national market. The norms and standards of education in these institutes, compared to those obtaining in the proper institutions like the IIT's and REC's are very poor.

As for the norms and standards of higher education in the non-technical colleges and universities, there is a sharp decline of late. The responsibility for the decline lies squarely on the shoulders of the governmental authorities in the states. The state-managed universities and colleges receive funds barely for the establishment, which means salary bill of teachers and non-teaching staff. As for the quality and number of teachers, both are utterly inadequate in terms of the norms and standards laid down by the UGC. It is another matter, though, that the UGC has not done enough to ensure its own norms and standards in the state-run universities and colleges. In a state like Harayana, large part of the college teaching is done by unqualified teachers engaged on part-time basis who are paid not more than one third of the prescribed salary for the amount of work-load they are made to carry. Beside, the direct politico-bureaucratic interference right from the creation of colleges or departments, the requirement of teachers or non-teaching staff, to the admission of students or examinees has been largely responsible for the dismal absence of excellence in higher education today. The policies of paid seats and reservations of all sorts based on caste, region and schooling have created such a strange mixture of merit and down merit or demerit in the college classes that the teachers have to tune themselves, perforce, to the lowest common denominator. Logically, the examinations have also to measure only the practical inputs in the classroom. The UGC document for the Xth Plan speaks of 'genuine demand for Indian

brain power', and of 'recognition of Indian graduates at global level'.¹⁰ This exportable human commodity, however, is only microscopic, confined to the areas of Information Technology, Medicine and Engineering. The vast quantities of our human commodities are, not only unexportable, but also not of much use even in the domestic market.

The unemployment of the national educated force is staggering in numbers. The employment exchanges, created by the Union and state governments, have already ceased to be of any use. In fact, the graduates have stopped going in for registration with these offices, knowing full well that no job will come forth through this agency of the government. A study made about the uneducated employment a decade ago is revealing.¹¹ Not less revealing is a survey made by a committee of the government of the engineering colleges in the state of Karnataka. One of the members (Dr. Amrik Singh) disclosed to this writer that over 20 thousand of qualified engineers were unemployed in the state. And yet, the political bosses were busy doling out more 'No objections' for the setting-up of new institutions. Interestingly, majority of these institutes are in the private sector and most of them are owned, directly or indirectly, by the politicians. One such institute was found functioning in the garage of a minister of the state. Once a similar study of these technical institutes was made in the state of Maharashtra. As it was reported in the *Times of India* a few years ago, not more than 7% of the students enrolled in these colleges qualify in the first attempt. And I remember having noted myself personally that over a dozen of these institutions were being owned by none else than the then Education Minister of the state. All these facts give a fairly clear idea of the level of excellence obtaining in the Indian higher education. UGC's NET is another indicator of the degree of excellence obtaining in the various universities and colleges in different parts of the country. While the UGC is still not ready with the state university and subject-wise analysis of its NET results (although it has been holding the examination for 12 years) I have personal knowledge about English in which the national average is 2 to 3%. As for the universities in our region, the percentage is not higher than the national. In fact, in states like Haryana, Himachal, and J&K, it is less than the national average.

Coming to the third component of our talk today, the status of accountability in the Indian system of higher education, we find that, as usual, the idea has been borrowed from the west. With the

increasing dominance of business in the recent years, which has acquired precedence even over politics, it was but natural that the universities and colleges would be subjected to stringent parameters of accounting and auditing. Since higher education has become expensive owing to advanced technology, it is understandable that those funding higher education would be impatient to impose conditions on spending. The financial auditing of the institution of higher education has always been there. In fact, the universities in India have pre-audit system, where all spendings are done only after the proposals have been scrutinized by the government's own auditors. When we hear clamours for accountability, it is as a matter of fact, an attack on the autonomy of the university. The reason for this aggression are not far to see. One relates to the global phenomenon of the state's attempt to control the instruments of economic and industrial development. Since higher education is the most powerful instrument of scientific and technological growth, universities would automatically invite greater political and administrative attention that they did even before. The following from the report of a recent Canadian Commission on higher education would show how the call for accountability is a global one.

The problem is that various governments, particularly in England, Australia and some US, have seen fit to impose rigid requirements and form budgetary formulas in the name of accountability. The Commission believes that Canada would be ill-advised by adopting a heavy handed bureaucratic approach to this matter Apart from normal financial auditing, what Canadian universities need to demonstrate is that they are genuinely accessible to those with the appropriate abilities, are equitable in their admission practices, and are producing an appropriate number of graduates who are satisfied with the education they have received and whose worth is satisfactory to their employees. That is what people expect and that can be measured.¹²

Thus, what lies behind the façade of accountability is actually an attempt to have direct control of the universities, making it possible for the government to interfere in the decision-making processes of these institutions. From selections to admissions, the government is trying to have an effective say in the academic domain. The state universities in India know how they are subjected to all kinds of direct as well as indirect control of the government in their

daily affairs.

To ward off the threat of accountability the academics have devised their own elaborate mechanism of evaluating quality, using the industry's norms of measuring quality of its produce. UGC has adopted these norms and has already initiated the measure, awarding three, four, five, or seven stars to the universities, indicating their rank among the fraternity. These mechanical norms continue to be questioned by the liberal academics, but the voice of liberalism is no longer heard in the market-driven corridors of power. The danger of mechanical measurement of quality in higher education is that the individual initiative, which emanates from autonomy, and the spiritual vision, which springs from the institution's inner energy, get curbed and trampled. It is certainly not advisable to insist upon these unacademic measures for making universities socially responsible or officially accountable. As has been aptly summed up by Cabal,

... the concept of accountability is bound up with that of autonomy' (Albornoz 1991). Indeed, if by accountability we understand the relation between ends and means, in university terms they are relations that ought to exist between mission and functions. If these are well conceived and well achieved, the university strengthens its institutional autonomy and deserves to be recognized. In turn, the clear distinction... between external and internal accountability is the same as the two senses of the verb administrate... The University organizes itself internally to provide external service to society.¹³

As is apparent from the argument here, the external form of accountability is bound to be counter productive. The internal form implies an external expression. If the internal content is good, the external expression is bound to be good. What is therefore required is, not bureaucratic application of mechanically formulated criteria, but an inbuilt system of checks and balances to be operated from within. The bureaucratic attempt to create remote control to operate the university system can only ensure the killing of the very spirit of enquiry on which the system of the university is founded.

Incidentally, what is there, after all, for which we are so keen to clamp the coercive apparatus of accountability on the necks of these poor universities? As of today, the government gives no funds for books and equipment, nor for providing properly qualified adequate faculty. In such a situation, who are we trying to hold

responsible for all these deficiencies? Rather than book a starving man for his ill health, the government should discharge its duty of providing him the needed nutrition. As George Strong said it long ago,

It seems certain that we shall effect nothing lasting or important except by and through teachers of the first order and the higher repute.... With professors of respectable mediocrity or a little above it, a college will languish, but may subsist indefinitely. But a university cannot be planted and long sustained in life without professors of splendid name and ability.

Here is a vision of excellence for which universities are created. The question of equity and accountability are in a way extraneous to the domain of the academia. Equity to the extent of fairness to all the deserving students and researchers is internal to it, but equity in the sense of education for all, merit or no merit, is a social or political concept, not academic. Similarly, accountability in the bureaucratic form or business form is also foreign to the spirit of the university. Its accountability has to be to itself, to its bodies created by the Act of legislation, not to any external agency including the UGC, the AICTE, or any other outfit created for the purpose. Added to the existing agencies is the Accreditation Board, another borrowed idea from the west. These agencies have acquired the bureaucratic character, functioning like any department of the government. The huge funds being spent on them for maintaining their establishment were better spent on the universities. It is a strange approach to higher education that you starve the man on the wheel, so to say, and spend large sums on keeping supervision on him. This approach is bureaucratic or governmental, responsible for several ills in our democratic machinery. Earlier, the universities had small breathing spaces of their own, away from the fangs of bureaucracy. Now, they are being brought right under the fangs, leaving no room for their individual existence.

Concluding the discussion of the three key issues in higher education today it can be suggested: (i) That the system of higher education should be made self-regulatory on the model of our juridical system, so that it can have the measure of autonomy it requires for the pursuit of truth; (ii) That the political form of equity, call it social justice, should end with the school education, and that only the economic concessions should be offered,

irrespective of caste, creed or religion, to all those meritorious students who are unable to pay the cost of higher education; (iii) That the private sector should be encouraged to establish universities and the petty entrepreneurship should be discouraged; (iv) That the Central Government should bear the burden of higher education by bringing universities on the central list; (v) That rather than promote parallel economy in education in the form of petty institutions, proper public sector institutions should be allowed to have the system of paid seats; (vi) That the Distance Education Mode should be an essential component of every university, of course, not as a milch cow without subsisting input, but as a proper department in its own right with the necessary and full academic infrastructure. These measures, hopefully, can tone up our higher education system to a reasonable level of excellence.

NOTES

1. See *India 2002*, Govt. of India Publication, New Delhi, p. 79.
2. See *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, ed. by A.H. Halsey, Hugh Lauder, Phillip Brown and Amy Stuart Wells, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, p. 632.
3. See University Grants Commission's *Annual Report 1998-99*, pp. 16-17.
4. See *UGC's Xth Plan Profile of Higher Education in India*, New Delhi, October 2001, p. 6.
5. See *ibid.*, p.13
6. See *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, p. 632.
7. See *UGC's Xth Plan Profile*, p.16.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 18
9. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
10. *Xth Plan Profile*, pp.11-12
11. See *Graduate Unemployment in India*, Project Coordinator: J.L.Azad assisted by Prava Aggarwal, AIU, New Delhi, 1991.
12. See *The University as an Institution Today: Topics for Reflection*, UNESCO Publication, Paris, 1993, p. 210.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 213.