

Education System in Modern India: Challenges and Solutions via the Capability Approach

Ipsita Pande¹, Shivani Sharma²

^{1,2}College of Technology, G B Pant university of Agri and Tech, Pantnagar, Uttarakhand-263145
¹shivani.gauniyal@gmail.com

Abstract: *It has been a comforting slogan: "The world is aging, but India has youth on her side". By the end of this decade, the average age of Indian population will be 29. As the result of this "demographic dividend", by 2040 a quarter of the globe's incremental increase in working population is set to occur in India. Our present workforce (the 15-64 age group) comprises 430 million people. In next 20 years, India will add another 480 million people to its existing workforce of 430 million [1]. To convert this demographic dividend into a viable economic resource and to harness the latent potential of the human capital, education remains the most indispensable means. The proposed paper, aims to observe the gaps and loopholes within the Education system using the fundamentals of the Capability Approach, as a holistic mechanism of evaluation and ways which may help in solving the aforementioned problems, thereby, making it possible to utilize the vast demographic dividend of our country.*

Keywords: *Capability approach, Higher education, human resource*

1. BRIEF HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

The issue of quality of Higher Education in India cannot be understood without digging into the past. Historical records reveal that in 1916-17 there were only four engineering colleges in India with total annual intake of 74 students. The growth of the number of institutions of higher education was slow until Independence. After Independence, Higher education became one of the crucial agendas of the newly formed government. They realised that the development of our nation depended immensely on building the human capital by providing them with good quality education. Our first Prime minister advocated the scientific approach, the scientific outlook and the scientific temper. He had an inherent fascination not only for science but also for what he termed the scientific temper which he described as, "search, inquiry and applying your mind to it...and search by experience and reasoning...It is a way of training the mind to look at life and the whole social structure." [2] He intended to imbibe these ideals of rationality and social responsibility into the people through education so they may evolve into

responsible citizens who may use their skills for the welfare of the nation. With this aim, the first Prime minister of our country made enormous contribution to the development of various institutes of Higher education especially those focusing on technical and managerial skills. He wished to make these institutes' world class centres of research and learning.

The public expenditure on Higher Education in India had continuously increased from Rs 171.5 million in 1950-51 to Rs 95,620 million in 2004-05. It had a good growth rate in the 1960s. The funding slightly decreased in the 1970s and improved again in the 1980s. The extent of public expenditure on any item can be taken as an indicator of the priority which the government gives to it. Under the pressure from various international funding agencies, the subsidies allocated for higher education were diverted towards the development of primary education as it was argued that investment in higher education benefits only a tiny section of the population whereas primary education would provide leverage to a wider section of the population. Privatization of Higher education took place following this drastic reduction in the state funding. Statistical information, reveals that in 2002, 78.2 percent of engineering and technical colleges and 71.3 percent of medical colleges were in the private sector. These private institutes mushroomed mainly to fulfil the huge demand for professional courses such as engineering, medicine, law and management. The number of universities went up from 20 in 1947 to as high as 659 in 2011, and a similar trend was observed as the number of colleges increased from 500 to 33,023.

TABLE 1: Data for Higher Education Institutes in India [3]

Higher Education Institutes	Academic year 2011-12
Universities	659
Central Universities	152
State Universities	316
Private Universities	191
Colleges	33,023
Central	669
State	13,024
Private	19,930

As the funds shrunk, further development in higher education got arrested. State governments refused to set up new universities, faculty recruitment received a setback and very limited funding was available for innovative academic programmes. The focus of the education policies increasingly shifted from the Nehruvian vision to quantitative growth with an aim to meet with the ever increasing demand from the youth. The initial purpose of the education system was to inculcate the values of intellectual capacity and social responsibility in the people so that they may contribute to the socio-economic development of the country. However, as it has been pointed out by CEOs of many well-known Multinational Corporations, our education system is churning out unemployable degree holders with little or no practical expertise. According to a World Bank-FICCI survey in 2009, only 64 percent of employers are somewhat satisfied with new graduates passing out of Indian engineering colleges. Hence, to assess and examine the problems within the education system, the principles of the Capability Approach can serve as useful guidelines.

2. CAPABILITY APPROACH

The Capability Approach (Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum) is a theory of welfare economics which focuses upon the individual's ability of achieving a particular goal depending upon the core five factors as stated below [4] :

1. The importance of real freedoms in the assessment of a person's advantage
2. Individual differences in the ability to transform resources into valuable activities
3. The multi-variant nature of activities giving rise to happiness
4. A balance of materialistic and non-materialistic factors in evaluating human welfare
5. Concern for the distribution of opportunities within the society

3. ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION SYSTEM VIA CAPABILITY APPROACH

Firstly, "Capability" denotes the ability of a person to generate beneficial outcomes without infringing upon personal choice. The freedom of choice provides people with a long term incentive for cumulative economic achievement and space for personal growth. Societal pressure instigates people to engage in certain kind of sphere of education based on the popular perception of what is considered the "better" degree. Economic need greatly influences a person's choice of the type of education, at times driving them to give up on individual interests. In such cases, no intrinsic motivation exists which severely affects not only their skill development but also their performance as an employee. People are often unable to

pursue the courses of their choice due to high merit requirements in government colleges and relatively expensive education in private colleges. Hence, equal employment opportunities should be created in all sectors and industry relevant practical training should be a part of every curriculum. It would regulate the excessive drainage of human resources into one sector and contribute to the development of each and every sector thus promoting the wholesome economic growth of the country.

David Kolb's experiential learning describes four types of learning processes-Divergent, Convergent, Assimilating and Accommodating. The ability of individuals differs based on their thought process and learning style. Some learn via logical analysis, some by group discussions and some by practical applications. But the education system is not very accommodative for all learning styles. Indian classrooms are designed for typical Assimilating learners (those who learn by watching and thinking). There is a focus on theoretical knowledge while practicals are treated as secondary. If education is imparted while considering the various learning styles, the students would be able to gain much more from the class and hence, be more capable of applying it in real life scenarios.

In our country, one has to choose their subject of study before entering the college, He or she is then restricted to a certain domain and rarely do they get a chance to shift their course of study. This rigid and inflexible system is dangerous as it inhibits the growth of the individual and people may end up choosing a subject under peer pressure and be stuck with it for the rest of their lives. This is in stark contrast with the Liberal Arts system prevalent in the US and many European countries. Under this system, students get a chance to study every subject of their choice for the first one or two years in college. They get a chance to discover their niche and develop a broad knowledge base over many fields of study before plunging into the final decision about their degree. Apart from this, there are absolutely no restrictions on the field of study upto the graduate levels. Intense specialization within the subject area takes place only after the undergraduate programmes. It is not uncommon for humanities majors to apply and get accepted at the top ranked medical schools in the US. Such a flexible system provides adequate time to people for making an informed decision regarding their profession and field of study, without being bogged down by societal pressure.

Another problem with the Education system is the enormous focus it has on cramming of concepts with the "final exam" as the main agenda. The systemic suppression of intellectual curiosity takes place at a very early age where school attending children are not encouraged to ask meaningful questions. Due to shortage of the teaching staff in many colleges, the packed up classrooms are left at the mercy of Teaching Assistants who only aim to finish the courses and pay little attention towards fostering the intellectual

curiosity and skill development. There are cases of colleges running a course with non-existent classes while conducting the exam for the same. There is an intense race over the highest marks and getting a good “placement” is considered the main goal. This narrow approach to education may seem to be time-saving and an easier path in comparison with the approach of intellectual enquiry but in the long run, it leads to people feeling disillusioned by the rigid competition and many feel dissatisfied as they realize that they are not really learning anything of much use. Even though getting a job remains the main target during college, employers repeatedly complain of Indian graduates who finished at the top of their class and yet are not able to work satisfactorily and apply their theoretical knowledge. One solution is to invest in training the teaching staff by providing them with continuous workshops about innovative teaching technologies and to ensure a good student to teacher ratio in colleges that enables the teachers to monitor the individual growth.

The obsession with getting a “placement” is a reflection of growing consumerism in the society where social status is ascribed to conspicuous consumption. Our education system, manufactures a homogenous mass of self-oriented people who are never really encouraged to take an active part in social development, political activities and are not taught to exercise their discretion in making the right choices regarding the socio-political scenario of the country. A quote by Alvin Toffler reads, “The secret message communicated to most young people today by the society around them is that they are not needed, that the society will run itself quite nicely until they- at some distant point in the future- will take over the reigns. Yet the fact is that that the society is not running itself nicely...because the rest of us need all the energy, brains, imagination and talent that the young people can bring to bear down on our difficulties. For society to attempt to solve it’s desperate problems without the full participation of even very young people is imbecile.” People need to be made aware of the fact that their decisions matter not only to themselves but also have an impact on the society and they are responsible for bringing about a systemic change when the time calls for it.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The flaws of the Education system have been elaborated upon with respect to the five principles of the Capability Approach. Investing in the education of the huge demographic is the need of the hour and to reap the maximum benefit out of the growing young population; the disparities relating to quality and distribution of educational opportunities need to be resolved within a very short time frame. The conversion of these potential economic assets into destructive liabilities needs to be prevented. A disillusioned and frustrated youth is susceptible to manipulation by extremist groups (as visible in the Naxalite stricken areas) and can lead to political instability, chaos and a huge economic setback. There is also a dire need to analyse and scrutinize the education policies by the central government and regulatory authorities at the national level. A sensible National Education Policy needs to be formulated to check upon the qualitative and also the quantitative growth of institutions, to ensure that education satisfies not only the industrial but also an individual’s needs. Implementation of the policies need to percolate to the general population and should not remain just as a blueprint. Often these policies get caught up due to red tapism, corruption and a general disinterest on part of the regulatory and monitoring authorities. It is imperative to resolve these issues with a strict and systematic approach before the Indian higher Education system plunges into deep, unrecoverable chaos.

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