

Access and Expansion of Educational Opportunity in India

With Reference to Higher Education

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Abstract—Access, or rather non-access to higher education in India has been prevailing in many forms. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) to HE in India has not even reached 15% of the population by 2010. The University Grants Commission of India, which is responsible for the growth or non-growth of Higher education in India, has worked out the measures such as opening 30 more central universities and numerous state, private and deemed universities and colleges, particularly in rural and hazardous backward areas, with a view to increasing the GER in Indian HE. However, there are inherent ‘left-outs’ from Indian HE which the powers have failed to address. These ‘left-outs’ are caused by the factors like rural-urban disparities, gender disparities, inter-religious disparities, inter-class disparities, inter-caste disparities, inter-state and regional disparities, age disparities and the disparities facing differently-abled persons, disparities caused by skills or non-skills in English language. In our paper we analyze the lengthy, marshaling facts and figures and the causes generating these disparities. At the end we may also discuss how one particular university had sought to overcome the above-mentioned disparities and handicaps.

Keywords—Access to Indian Higher Education; Higher education; Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER); left-outs of Indian HE; disparities in Indian HE; University Grants Commission of India; gender disparity; caste disparity

I. INTRODUCTION

Access, or rather non-access to higher education in India has been prevailing in many forms. Quantifying it would be an arduous exercise. In 2007, the University Grants Commission of India (the UGC), tried to take stock of the situation in the field of higher education by holding four regional conferences of Vice-Chancellors of Indian Universities which culminated in an All-India Conference of Vice-Chancellors in October 2007. This gigantic exercise was undertaken, probably for the first time in the history of India and for 3 long days where the most free and frank discussion on a whole multitude of problems and issues of Indian higher education took place. The results of this national conference manifested in a valuable document titled “Development of Higher Education for Expansion, Inclusion and Excellence” that the UGC has published. This voluminous document is replete with facts and figures. By the way, when statistics are

reeled out to me, I am reminded of the proverb “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride”. I am tempted to replace the word “wishes” with the word “figures”. Then it becomes “If figures were horses then beggars would ride.” However, in the absence of any other plausible tool of measuring progress or regress, we must have recourse to this necessary evil. For instance, the UGC document mentions that the number of universities has increased from 20 in 1947 to 378 in 2007, the number of colleges has grown from 500 to 18,064, that of students enrolled in higher education has grown from 100,000 to 11.2 million while the number of teachers has ascended from 15,000 to 480,000 during the same period. The increase in the enrollment ratio from 1% in 1950 to 10% in 2007 could speak volumes about the expansion of access to higher education in India.

Nonetheless, everything, as they say, is relative. The gross enrollment ratio (GER) of higher education in India is quite dismal if we compare it with the GER of 60% in the US and Canada, 40% in a number of European countries, and 20% in several developing countries. That is probably why the UGC has set its target to “enhance the access to higher education so that the GER is raised to a minimum threshold level of about 20 percent for sustained economic development. In immediate terms, the 11th Plan has set the target GER of 15 percent.”¹

The UGC has suggested several measures to help achieve the target of increasing access to higher education:

- opening 30 more central universities and numerous state, private and deemed universities and colleges, particularly in rural and hazardous backward areas;
- increasing the enrollment capacity of existing universities and colleges. The optimal enrollment should be a minimum of 10,000 students per university and 5000 per college;
- diversifying the courses and programmes of studies;

¹ Chapter 1: *Access and Expansion*, National Conference on Development of Higher Education for Expansion, Inclusion and Excellence, University Grants Commission, New Delhi, October, 2007.

- changing the affiliating system prevailing in many universities;
- expanding the private sector in higher education;
- setting up specialized universities;
- professionalizing higher education;
- expanding technical education in rural and remote areas;
- augmenting the teaching of humanities and social-sciences in professional, technical and market-oriented courses with a view to retaining the humane face in these disciplines;
- introducing double-shifts in existing colleges and universities;
- establishing post-graduate departments in the colleges and so on.

II. DRAWBACKS CAUSING DEFICIENCIES IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION ALL KINDS OF DISPARITIES

The paradox of Indian higher education lies in the fact that even if we achieve the target of 20% GER 65 years after the attainment of independence, it will still be a drop in the ocean. Firstly, it should be clear even to a layman that this so-called quantum jump in terms of absolute numbers would not come anywhere close to making it an inclusive growth if we relate it to the whole spectrum of higher education. In reality, this kind of growth would not change the exclusive character of Indian higher education. It will continue to suffer from the following drawbacks:

- rural-urban disparities
- gender disparities
- inter-religious disparities
- inter-class disparities
- inter-caste disparities
- inter-state and regional disparities
- age disparities
- disparities faced by differently-abled persons

To say that higher education is like the third or fourth story in a multiple-storied structure, is in evidence. The upper stories simply cannot be built unless the stories below it are well constructed. In the Indian structure of education, there crop up very serious blockages to higher education at the ground level.

A. Rural-urban Disparities/Regional Disparities

The first stumbling block is the rural-urban divide. Rural India stubbornly refuses to be a feeder-channel to the modern hydro-power dams of higher education from which hydro-power, the light power or power of higher education, could reach out to the larger masses of India. I remember that when I went to university and when I obtained a PHD. degree in 1973, I was the first one to do so among the several millions

of rural population in my district. Sadly, thirty-five years later, there is little change of the situation.

The reasons why rural Indians are resistant to or inaccessible to education in general and higher education in particular are relevant to region. Firstly, the farming community simply cannot spare working hands to attend school. Secondly, the quality of education at different levels is so abysmal that a huge chunk of school children have to drop out due to poor performance at the primary, middle or high school levels. Thirdly, even those who make it to college and obtain the first degree, i.e., a bachelor's degree, in the job market they are rejected wholesale, particularly when it comes to recruitment to the better-paid jobs. The main stumbling block is their poor grasp of the English language. Students passing out of rural schools stand nowhere when they have to compete with candidates from English-medium urban private schools. Graduates from a rural background today can hardly expect to get any white-collar job with an assured monthly salary. The tragedy is confounded further as such graduates or college drop-outs become, more often than not, useless to the village economy and the community. This is because, as college-educated young men, they cannot return to farming which, being manual work, is considered socially degrading. So these idle minds become the devil's workshop. At best they become political touts vitiating the atmosphere in their vicinity, or participating in honor killings of innocent young people in love, or fanning the flames of communal fires, be they in Gujarat or elsewhere.

It is true that India's middle class has grown in a significant way. Indeed, according to rough estimates, out of India's population of 1210 million, the middle- and upper-class strata of society constitute approximately 110 million people, the major part of which lives in the urban areas. It is people in this part of the population who can afford to send children to expensive private schools. The poor and under-privileged of the urban population living mostly in *jhuggi-jhonparis* (the shanty towns and slums) are either not able to send their children to school or have to send them to government or municipal schools where education is free. The overall atmosphere in such schools is one of squalor and misery. Obviously, children studying in such schools either drop out altogether or the quality of education is so pathetic that more often than not they cannot make it to college or university. The extent of poverty among a very large section of the urban and rural population is so great that most families have no option but to force their children to work as child laborers rather than send them to schools. They need working hands rather than hands holding books and pens and pencils. Even schemes like providing mid-day meals to such children of school-going age has not made much difference. A major part of school-age children from these strata of society have to be relegated to the first category of 'left-outs' so far as college level education is concerned. Thus a very powerful feeder channel to higher education is doomed to remain choked almost permanently.

B. Gender Disparity

The second category of 'left outs' from higher education is created by gender disparity. The bias against the child girls in

Indian families obtains from the plight of women in Indian society. It is true that substantial strides have been made towards emancipating women from household or societal slavery. This is fairly true of urban middle class and upper middle class women. Nonetheless, the prejudices against women in Indian society are so great that girls in most families are considered to be a curse. The major factor that contributes to this situation is the heavy dowry system. There are numerous cases where girls and even parents commit suicide because they are unable to offer enough dowry to satisfy the greed of the would be in-laws. Many newly married girls are forced to burn themselves alive, tortured by mothers-in-law and husbands for bringing an inadequate dowry. It's no wonder that a newborn girl child is unwelcome in most Indian families. What's worse, even advances in technology are used against the female babies. Sex determination tests have resulted in large scale feticide in both urban and rural areas. For many girls, education, and higher education in particular, is totally inaccessible. Obviously, girls constitute a very big part of the 'left-outs' from the ambit of higher education, leading to the choking up of yet another very significant feeder line to higher education.

Several commissions set up by the government for defining the strategies and tactics of higher education in India had foreseen the challenges faced by Indian higher education. The Kothari Commission (1964-66), for instance, had underlined the importance of education for girls thus: "The significance of the education of girls cannot be overemphasized for full development of our human resources, the improvement of homes, and for shaping the character of children during the most impressionable years of infancy, the education of women is of even greater importance than that of men."²

Such platitudes were repeated in report after report submitted by various commissions, committees and educationists. But most of them failed to recognize that being a woman was a disability in itself. Anitha Ghai is right when, she states in her very significant paper presented at a National Seminar on the Education Commission (2006): "The dominant construction that gets reflected is that of wives, mothers and housewives by and large reinforcing the dominant paradigm which, to quote T. Saraswathi, viewed women in a 'linear way'. For instance Saraswathi (1999) says, "Females in all social classes are groomed to become good wives and mothers. Even the increasing career option of the middle class girls are subsumed under the primary goal of marriage and motherhood, leading to consensus rather than conflict in parent-child relationships. In a culture where chastity is considered more precious than life itself, girls are over-socialized from childhood to accept their subservient role in patriarchal set-up"³. This paradigm is reflected in the Kothari Commission's formulations in which the concern is not to recognise the identity of women in their own right. On

the contrary, education of girls, according to them, was to serve an "instrumental function" and not to change the very status of women in society, not to emancipate them from multiple slaveries. Thus even though the percentage of girls' enrollment in education has increased from 10% in 1950-51 to 39.7% in 2003-04, the disability continues to hamper the goal of women's emancipation and prevents them from becoming equal members of society in the real sense of the word, particularly among the under-privileged strata of the society.

Table: Percentage of Girls Enrollment to Total Enrollment by Stages⁴.

Year	Primary I-V	Middle VI-VIII	Sec./Hr. Intermediate (IX-XII)	Hr. Education (Degree & above level)
1950-51	28.1	16.1	13.3	10.0
155-56	30.5	20.8	15.4	14.6
1960-61	32.6	23.9	20.5	16.0
1965-66	36.2	26.7	22.0	20.4
1970-71	37.4	29.3	25.0	20.0
1975-76	38.1	31.3	26.9	23.2
1980-81	38.6	32.9	29.6	26.7
1985-86	40.3	35.6	30.3	33.0
1990-91	41.5	36.7	32.9	33.3
1991-92	41.9	38.2	33.8	32.3
1992-93	42.6	38.8	33.9	33.2
1993-94	42.7	39.1	34.3	33.5
1994-95	42.9	39.3	35.9	34.0
1995-96	43.1	39.5	36.1	36.0
1996-97	43.2	39.9	36.4	36.7
1997-98	43.5	40.3	36.6	37.5
1998-99	43.5	40.5	37.8	38.1
1999-2000	43.6	40.4	38.9	38.7
2000-01	43.7	40.9	38.6	39.4
2001-02	44.1	41.8	39.5	39.9
2002-03	46.8	43.9	41.3	40.1
2003-04	46.7	44.0	41.1	39.7

C. Inter-Religious Disparity

The next stratum for which higher education has remained inaccessible in real terms is that of differently-abled people. Access to higher education for such persons has also been discussed in the reports of various education commissions and committees. The need for addressing this problem had been recognized. But hierarchies inherent in Indian society had, probably forced even an outstanding educationist like Prof. Kothari to analyze the problem of the "handicapped" in rather a "conservative" way as an "individual problem". And I quote: "Their [handicapped] education has to be organized not merely on humanitarian ground, but also on grounds of utility. Proper education generally enables a handicapped child to overcome largely his (or her) handicap, and makes him also a useful citizen."⁵

Anita Ghai is right when she says, "Instrumentalist underpinning" of such an argument goes against the over-all

² Dr. Anita Ghai, *Gender and Inclusive Education at all levels*, National Seminar on the Education Commission, Seminar Papers (Vol. I), National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, Dec., 2006, p. 151.

³ Ibid. p. 152

⁴ Dr. Anita Ghai, op.cit., p. 156.

⁵ Dr. Anita Ghai, op.cip., p. 162.

understanding of the Kothari Commission which had accepted “education as an inalienable right of every citizen.”⁶

Indeed, the patronizing attitude of our educationists towards differently-abled people stems, probably, from the religious belief that physical and mental deformities in individuals are a kind of punishment visited on them for the sins committed by them in their previous lives. Indian mythological and epic literature is replete with characters who suffered handicaps because of the curses called down on them for their so-called sins by hallowed sages or men of purity and high morality. In most cases, such characters in Indian epics are depicted in villainous roles and pursuits. The family feud leading to the legendary war depicted in the epic *Mahabharata* was the result of over-indulgence by the blind King Dhritarashtra towards his 101 sons, the Kaurvas, resulting in grave injustice to the the Pandavas, the 5 sons of his brother Pandu. This injustice was further fanned and facilitated by Shakuni, the lame brother-in-law of Dhritarashtra. Even in Indian films the blind and the dwarfs are often portrayed in unflattering roles. True, in an age of technological revolution, our educationists cannot afford to be so brazen. Nonetheless, attitudes towards differently-abled people continue to be condescending rather than empathetic. For instance, a reservation of 3% in higher education and teaching jobs in universities and colleges has been flouted in both letter and spirit almost universally in most of the institutions of higher education. Only recently, thanks to the intervention of Indian courts, has this begun to be implemented. According to the data published by the National Sample Survey and Census of 2001, the number of persons with disabilities, in India, is approximately 20 million, i.e. 2% of the Indian population.

It is true that the Indian government has drafted the “National Plan of Action on Children and Youth with “disabilities”. Hopefully, the perception of “normal” and “abnormal” persons embedded in the Indian psyche will be erased and we will see all human beings treated alike integrated humanism could be fostered universally.

TABLE I. PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (IN MILLIONS)⁷

Disability	NSSO, 2002	Census, 2001
Locomotor	10.63	6.10
Visual	2.82	10.63
Hearing	3.06	1.26
Speech	2.15	1.64
Mental	5.09	2.26

D. Inter-Class Disparity

Another significant feeder line to Indian higher education gets blocked due to the Indian system of caste. Before Independence, the so-called untouchables of Indian society had no access to education let alone higher education. The

children of Indian *shudras* had the doors of school and university shut in their faces. After the attainment of independence, thanks to the system of reservation, in admissions and jobs, guaranteed by the Indian constitution to Indian *dalits*, some openings came their way. It is true that a substantial number of progeny of first and second generation *dalit* learners has come to occupy a pivotal place in the realm of education. Indeed, a number of Indian *dalits* have come to occupy very significant positions in higher education. Even the present chairman of the UGC belongs to the community of *dalits*. However, exceptions do not make a rule. Vast numbers of Indian *dalits* still remain outside the ambit of higher education. Even when *dalit* boys and girls (very few in number) make it to a school or college they have to suffer humiliation on several counts. Many *dalit* writers, in their autobiographies, describe how they were maltreated by upper caste teachers and students, how they were forced to sit somewhere near the door, near the heaps of shoes of upper caste students, and how upper caste teachers tortured them and tried to force them to leave their schools.

As and when *dalits* make it to institutions of higher learning it has been often observed that the upper caste teachers either fail them or give them very low grades. *Dalit* students face immense hardships owing to their pathetic economic situation. They often cannot pay the board and lodging fees so that they have to abandon their studies halfway through.

It is true that now the UGC, individual Universities, and Government are making vigorous efforts to help *dalit* students in all possible ways. As a result of such positive steps, many *dalit* students are able to complete their studies. Thanks to the reservation of a certain percentage of jobs in the government sector, *dalits* are able to find jobs. But this again is a drop in the ocean. A large mass of *dalits* of school and college age in India still remain beyond the pale of higher education.

E. Long-standing English backwards

The biggest stumbling block in the access to higher education is backwardness of rural and socially weaker sections of Indian society which have come to remain what I call in a lighter vein, ‘Englishly’ backward. There are several reasons for this backwardness. Firstly, rural areas in India have largely remained educationally backward. However, due to the spread of universal education this gap has been bridged to a large extent. Nonetheless, the backwardness in English is blocking the access to higher education for a very large section of Indian society. That is precisely why our central and state governments and educationists are waking up to the reality that without proficiency in English our younger generation will not be able to go very far. That is precisely why most states in India have decided to introduce the teaching of English from the first standard itself in place of its introduction from sixth standard as has been the practice hitherto. It is also against this background that the government of India, through an act of the Indian parliament, decided to create a full-fledged Central University, i.e., The English and Foreign Languages University (EFL University), of which I became the first Vice-Chancellor on 3rd August, 2007. The University has an all-India jurisdiction. That is why the EFL

⁶ Idem

⁷ Dr. Sudesh Mukhopadhyay, *Commission’s vision on Inclusive Education: Beginning of a long Journey*, National Seminar on the Education Commission, Seminar Papers (Vol. 1), National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi, Dec., 2006, p. 141.

University has been conceived as a multicampus university, which will have five campuses located at Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh), Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh), Shillong (Meghalaya), Thinkalkarikkam (Kerala) and Meham (Haryana). The University also operates through two Regional Institutes of English located at Chandigarh in the North and Bangalore in the South. Apart from this, the EFL University runs English Language Teaching Institutes (ELTIs) in Allahabad, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Guwahati and Ranchi; State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) in Aizawal, Kohima, Patna and Raipur; State Institute of English for Maharashtra (SIEM) in Aurangabad; Institute of English in Kolkata; HM Patel Institute of English (HMPIETR) in Vallabh Vidyanagar. The University also runs approximately fifty District Centers around the country. The main activity being pursued through this network is the training of English teachers and the preparation of master trainers with a view to meeting the growing demand for large numbers of teachers of English. In order to implement the mandate given to the University, infrastructural facilities like large-scale hostel and guest house accommodation for trainees and teachers, digitalized class rooms, auditoriums, language laboratories, text-books and other teaching aids are being created at a fast pace.

The problem of backwardness in English of the present generation, particularly of the one inhabiting rural India, is being addressed through remedial teaching and coaching. Parallel with mainstream classical programmes, the University is running short-term proficiency programmes for learners from diverse backgrounds.

III. COUNTERMEASURES OF THE GOVERNMENT BY LAW AND BY REGULATIONS

There are probably more than 25 millions 'left-outs' from higher education in India. We are convinced that the major factor for higher education remaining exclusive rather than becoming inclusive is the economic and educational backwardness. It is against this background that our country, for the first time in the history, with a view to overcoming these handicaps, has worked out an egalitarian fee structure described below:

With a view to realizing this goal, the EFL University has decided that the fee or fund structure and modalities of exemption from the payment of fees or funds will be laid down as given below:

A. Exemptions and Subsidies

1) *No fee shall be charged from SC/ST students.* In addition, they will all get adequate scholarships for meeting expenses on course books, board and lodging.

2) *Differently-abled (physically-challenged) students will be exempt from payment of all kinds of fees.* Depending on the degree of physical disability such students will also be eligible for adequate grants/stipends that will cover their board, lodging and other expenses.

3) *The following categories of students will be eligible for exemption from payment of fees if they apply and a case for the same is made out:*

Those who had passed out from schools run by Government (other than Kendriya Vidyalayas, Sainik Schools etc.) /Municipalities/ Panchayats or other governmental local bodies; or whose family income falls below the limit to be fixed from time to time by the Vice-Chancellor of the university on the recommendation of a Standing Committee of the Academic Council.

Generally, all those needy students, if they apply and make a case for assistance, will be given adequate scholarships for meeting the expenses on board and lodging.

(PS:Those receiving UGC or other scholarships will not be eligible for scholarships / stipends to be granted by EFL University from the resources generated by it through its own channels and savings. If the amount of scholarship being received by such students exceeds a limit to be laid down by the Vice-Chancellor on the recommendation of the Standing Committee of the Academic Council, they will not be eligible for exemption of fees.)

4) *Students who had studied in private / public schools (i.e. those schools not covered under clause 3 above) shall pay fees and contribute towards reserve funds not more than what they paid at the school level.* However, the quantum of the fees and reserve fund will be as approved by the Vice-Chancellor on the recommendation of the Standing Committee of the Academic Council to be reported to the Academic Council / Executive Council at the next meeting. However, students of this category can apply for fee exemption by making a case for the same if:

a) *they had paid schools fees less than a limit of amount to be fixed from time to time by the Vice-Chancellor of the university on the recommendation of a Standing Committee of the Academic Council. The same will be reported to the Academic Council/ Executive Council at the next meeting.*

b) *their family income falls below the limit to be fixed from time to time by the Vice-Chancellor on the recommendation of a Standing Committee of the Academic Council. The same will be reported to the Academic Council / Executive Council at the next meeting.*

c) *those who are not eligible for exemption under 4 a) and b) above but who make out a case for exemption shall be examined by the Standing Committee which will assess each case on its merit and make recommendations about the extent of exemption, if any, to be given with the approval of the Vice-Chancellor.*

B. Usage and Functions of the Collected Fees/Funds

1) *The amounts of reserve funds collected from students shall be credited to the Students' Welfare Fund and financial grants, scholarships and stipends referred to in clauses 1 to 3 above will be paid out of the Students' Welfare Fund.*

2) *All the tuition fees collected shall be treated, for purposes of budget, as income from fees.*

With reference to clause 4, for all the courses (except self-financing, part-time and distance mode courses), the fees and reserve funds will ordinarily be an average of the ones

paid at the school level. Accordingly, for different courses the fees and reserve funds will be worked out by the Standing Committee of the Academic Council and the same will be published in the annual prospectus of the University with the approval of the Vice-Chancellor. The fees and reserve funds for foreign students of all categories, students of self-financing courses, part-time courses, courses of distance teaching mode shall be worked out by the Standing Committee of the Academic Council which also will be published in the annual Prospectus of the University with the approval of the Vice-Chancellor. The Vice-Chancellor will be empowered to introduce changes at his / her discretion in the quantum of all kinds of fees and funds recommended by the Standing Committee of the Academic Council as stated above. Such decisions of the Vice-Chancellor shall be reported to Academic Council / Executive Council at the next meeting”.

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we are aware that our initiative, as a university, can neither become a movement like that of “Community Colleges” in Scandinavian countries nor the one that obtained in Soviet Union under the rubric “Workers’ Universities”. However, our initiatives have the potential of becoming a path-breaking experiment. That is precisely why our government has called upon us to establish Centers of English Language Teaching (CELT) in countries like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In days to come, we believe, our multicampus University will be hopefully making a tangible contribution in overcoming the biggest stumbling block hindering access to higher education, i.e., the backwardness in English Language among a very large mass of Indian people.