



NAAC and Beyond: The 'Politics' of Excellence in Indian Higher Education Context

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Abstract:

While attempting at unveiling the 'politics' of higher education in Indian context in a dispassionate yet empathetic way, the paper aims to take stock of the scenario of higher education in India right from the times of pre-independent India and the Nehruvian liberal access to university/higher education, and the post 1990s globalization and privatization of higher education. Obviously engaged in a devil's advocate role, the paper pitches the argument in the harsh yet perceivable reality of the base situation, and to unveil what is hampering the excellence in higher education by way of pointing out what excellence means exactly, secondly whether excellence is related to the matrix of Indian socio-cultural and politico-economic set-up, thirdly whether excellence and 'massification' (large scale and rapid expansion) of higher education are not contradictory, in principle, and fourthly enquiring into the notion of universal and/or by default achieving excellence since excellence is always limited, and hence taking a cautious stand by differentiating between 'massification' of higher education and achieving excellence in higher education, and lastly the paper hints at the need and the augur of the dawn of a overall and 'metamorphosis' and/or profound change from within and outside of the higher education field of India, against the odds of inherent challenges and contradictions.

Key Words: Excellence, introspection, Politics, Pragmatism

Introduction

At the outset, the author of the paper wishes to clarify that he does not use the word, 'politics,' in a pejorative sense. However here is a modest attempt at problematizing the word, 'politics,' and to comprehend the word *a la* Bismarck's way: "Politics is the art of the possible, the attainable—the art of the next best." Thereby an attempt is made to defamiliarize and to internalize the 'politics' of higher education in Indian context, and to have pragmatism to avert frustrations.

Path to excellence in any field cannot be a 'smart' express highway without hitches and hurdles. Undoubtedly,

seeking excellence in higher education in Indian context is a worthwhile task. However, any mandatory and candid introspection of the scenario of higher education of India compels us to take note of the backdrop and contributory forces and resources, and their seminal role in shaping the field since neither this field nor any for that point can exist and function in isolation of the ethos of a given society. So an attempt is made to take the stock.

Education More as a Means for Individual to Scale Socio-economic and Power Ladder:

To take a historical perspective of higher education in Indian context, one has to



concede that education in India in the past had a limited access, and was proved to be a prerogative of a limited sections of the society. Further, education always had been associated with the ensuring, and enhancement of status in the society. Perhaps the point to be reckoned is education in most instances has been pursued more as a means to hike in socio-economic conditions than as a means to fulfill a passion and/or to innovate. This is not to mean to dilute the high-end intentions of higher education and research, especially in the post-independent India. But it is just an attempt to take a practical and down to earth stand on the matter of higher education in India.

Colonial Master's Intention in Introducing Modern Higher Education

It is imperative on our part to take cognizance of the colonial ruler's obvious/explicit and implicit intentions in introducing the western mode of higher education in India: "I am quite ready to take the oriental learning at the valuation of the orientalist themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education." Macaulay in his (in)famous Minute on Education, 1835.

While taking note of the cultural snobbery of Macaulay, which is perhaps the inevitable feature of a colonial ruler, the author of the paper opines that the colonial master could introduce the western education but not the accompanying cultural ethos. While stating this, the author of the paper is

not intending to denigrate his own society and its rich culture and regard for academics, if not the modern sense, which have been long standing. However, the point to be made in the argument is western mode higher education demands certain prerequisites and ambience to flourish. Perhaps, it must be clarified that this is confessed without any prejudice to postcolonial pride and responsibility of a former colonial nation.

The 'Politics' of Higher Education in Indian Context and the Role of Successive Governments in making the 'Compromise':

The post-independent Indian polity with the burden of the past on its back, soaked in anarchy, monarchy, feudalism, and colonialism, in a way, made a big 'leap' to democracy, and in fact as of today the country is the largest democracy. The gesture had made a grand promise of realizing the thwarted growth of millions of Indians. Accordingly, the rulers of free India, in its early stage were, though beset with limitations of various types and nuances, perhaps committed and/or compelled by the aspirations of the populace in multi-directions to rise to the occasion.

Since independence, true to the spirit of democracy and the practice of the art of 'politics' thereof *a la* Bismarckian way: "Politics is the art of the possible ...," successive governments have been attempting to meet the aspirations of the people, and to make the nation grow in all fronts including the front of higher education. As the governments are engaged in this commitment, the expansion of higher education has begun with Nehru, who still remains as the harbinger of higher education in a liberal and accessible manner. Nehruvian initiation and catalyst act has caused the



expansion of it in manifolds. The rapid expansion is to meet the demand of the large populace who were denied opportunities and status—social, economic and political due to lack of higher education. Expectedly, this resulted at least to a substantial extent, uplifting the masses, and meeting the aspirations of the middle class who in turn have become human resources to the ever burgeoning polity and economy of the nation.

Therefore, successive governments while practicing “the art of the possible” in the expansion of higher education were initially slow, either intentionally or unintentionally, in developing assessment mechanism for ensuring quality in the higher education. Consequently, the practicing of ‘politics’ of higher education in Indian context has nearly achieved the desired goal of meeting the psychological and practical needs of the people and the nation in many fronts. Perhaps, at times, this also has resulted in creating standards of our own, i.e., Indian standards, which may not match with the international *a la* western standards.

Privatization of Higher Education—Pre and post-independent Times: Pros and Cons

[Post1990s and in the age of Globalization and in the times of advent of Private Universities]

Privatization of higher education is not a new phenomenon. There have been colleges offering PG, UG and plus two programmes during the pre-independent and post-independent times. In fact, their contribution to the dissemination is reckonable and more than substantial. Perhaps, in view of the limited resources and also with a view to involving the

public, the successive governments have been encouraging the private persons/societies/committees participation in the expansion of higher education. It must be firmly conceded that the virtues of private persons / societies / committees role can never be exaggerated.

However, the much hyped PPP—Public Private Participation—mode in the manner of grant-in-aid for the institutions worked out for some time. But unfortunately, the grant-in-aid was discontinued perhaps starting with late 80s and turning it into an undisclosed yet practiced policy matter in the early 1990s with many states. So, this has resulted in the birth of exclusive self-financing institutions more in the fields of technology, medical and management of higher education. Presently, as a step forward, path is cleared for entering private universities into the arena of higher education of India which is simultaneously ever expanding, unwieldy and unaccountable.

Ailing Privatization of Higher Education and the Consequent Portents:

With due respect for currently much avowed PPP, yet found in practice all the while in higher education field, and fearing to state the obvious, the paper is to put in plain terms the ailments of privatization of higher education in terms of excellence. However, it is definitely imperative to reiterate the fact the private sector has always contributed to the expansion of higher education. In fact, the governments practicing the art of the doing the possible have encouraged the private managements to be their partners. Keeping in view this backdrop, it is worthwhile to discuss the much discussed factors that have caused the expansion but not the excellence.



Since it is already conceded that what is ailing the privatization of higher education in India is obvious, the paper tries to put forward the same briefly and pertinently. The hindrances are twofold: one the cultural limitations of our society—may be everybody is a party to the situation. Secondly, the managements and limitations on their part, and the third limitations on the part of employees thereof are to be reckoned.

Though put in a euphemistic manner, cultural limitations, read as, apathy and/or indifference for excellence, along with missing ambience for creating and sustaining excellence, remnants of feudal elements, hegemonic attitudes and lack of sincerity coupled with 'red-tapism.' In nutshell, the mindset, notwithstanding the sagacious virtues of our society, has to change, along with the ambience as is partly reflected in the following ranking of India in the world *vis a vis* our verified track record for honesty/integrity, freedom and human dignity and fair society (of course comparatively speaking):

- “1. India ranks 119 on 2015 FM Global Resilience Index.
2. India ranked 143rd in Global Peace Index.
3. India is home to the highest number of hungry people in the world, at 194 million, surpassing China, according to United Nations annual hunger report.
4. Corruption Index – India ranked 85th among 175(Denmark topped) published by Transparency International India (TII)
- 5.“Ease of Doing Business” report - India ranked 142 among the 189 countries (Singapore top) Published by World Bank
6. Gender gap index – 114 (Iceland top the list followed by Finland & Norway)

Published by World Economic Forum's 2015

7. World Press Freedom Index 2015 - 136 in the list of 180 countries
- 8.. World's best countries for doing business 2014 – 134
- 9.. Global Peace Index 2014 – 143 (Iceland top the list while Syria the most violent place)
- 10.. Global Innovation Index 2014 – 76”

The Crux of the Problem & the Possible Resolution:

Keeping the global standards in mind, and thereby speaking comparatively, it can be said that the crux of the problem, the near-elusive 'Excellence in Higher Education field in India', essentially lies in the 'compromise and/or complicity of the governments and the private sector, and the mindset of the society and the individuals rooted in limitations of socio-cultural and politico-economic nature, and the ambience of the society which is not fair enough, notwithstanding the hoary past. Maybe the author is obliged to reiterate that this is not an attempt to discount the multi-faceted development and growth in higher education and research. But it is more an empathetic and 'insider's' opinion that it is high time we went beyond NAAC and the fulfillment of its requirements, and to seek a phenomenal change from within.

Though NAAC is a means towards achieving excellence, by itself and by its grading, it cannot ensure an excellence that perpetuates itself. Perhaps this is possible; if we, collectively--governments and us—appreciate the fact that what has been achieved is spreading of higher education, which in itself is not a small feat. The point to be recalled is the priority for spreading higher education was accorded in the past perhaps as part of the doing the art of the possible on the



part of the governments and as per the wishes by the people. However, it is time we acknowledged this, and stopped blaming the higher education institutions and universities that have existed for not achieving the excellence straightway which was in fact was not on the agenda until recently.

Lastly, it may be warranted on the part of the author of the paper to state that what has been said is to not infuse complacency but to avert frustration. Secondly, it is again the responsibility of the governments and the general public to turn the expansion into excellence by changing internally and holistically. The whole fabric of the nation on all its fronts—social, cultural, political and economic—rather the national mindset has to change. Thirdly, all this warrants sacrifice—sacrificing hegemonic/narrow-minded, parochial, bureaucratic attitudes and traditions and prejudices of various nuances, and to develop professionalism, and to create an arena where fairness and equal opportunities can flourish, and where passions are tolerated and nurtured, and where innovations are invited, supported and waited for patiently.

References

Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835.
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