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**FACILITATING ACCESS TO QUALITY
HIGHER EDUCATION**
THE PATHWAY FOR A NEW INDIA

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FACILITATING ACCESS TO QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION THE PATHWAY FOR A NEW INDIA

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The ancient Indian education system was an epitome of excellence demonstrating multidisciplinary teaching; diversity of scholars from around the world; extensive research and debate; as well as real time interactions with the tangible world of practice. It's the 'ideal type of education' which one would aspire for. However, the burgeoning populace of India presents enormous challenge of delivering high-quality education at unprecedented scale, yet at affordable costs. This article attempts to present some potential interventions towards meeting these markers of excellence while acknowledging the present challenges and progress made thus far.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Indian education system was an epitome of excellence demonstrating multidisciplinary teaching; diversity of scholars from around the world; extensive research and debate; as well as real time interactions with the tangible world of practice. These aspects continue to exemplify the much-lauded practices of a thriving education system even today, despite the transformational changes in the world since. While these are lofty goals on their own, the burgeoning populace of India presents an additional challenge of delivering high-quality education at unprecedented scale, albeit at affordable costs.

This Essay attempts to present some potential interventions towards meeting these markers of excellence while traversing the growth of Indian higher education system and the concomitant challenges of access and quality.

THE CURRENT INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: A PULSE CHECK

The modern Indian higher education system has come a long way since independence to become the third largest education system in the world. It caters to over 37 million students, next only to the US and China. In the last decade itself, the overall Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) increased from 15 per cent in 2009-10 to 26.3 per cent in 2018-19 (AISHE, 2018-19). While the number of students enrolled has increased from 20 million to 37 million (an increase of 85 per cent) in the same time period, the number of universities and colleges has increased by 127 per cent and 54 per cent respectively to 993 universities and 39,931 colleges. This is a great achievement in terms of increasing access to higher education.

On the equity front, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for females (26.4 per cent) is higher than that of males (26.3 per cent), with nearly half of the enrolled students being girls. The GER for SC and ST students also increased from 11.1 per cent and 10.3 per cent in 2009-10 to 23 per cent and 17.2 per cent respectively

in 2018-19. Despite these commendable developments in terms of access and equity of higher education, there is a lot of ground yet to be covered for India to have an inclusive and vibrant higher education system.

Meeting the Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education For All

The global education development agenda reflected in the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG--4) of the 2030 Agenda adopted by India in 2015 seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reiterates the commitment by setting the target of 50 per cent GER in higher education by 2035 (GoI, 2020).

Access

The current GER in higher education is 26.3 per cent with 37.4 million students in higher education. With the current population rate, it can be estimated that we would need approximately 33.7 million additional seats in higher education to achieve a GER of 50 per cent by 2035. This would require an enormous amount of human and financial resources in the next 15 years.

Equity

The rise in GER across various identities such as gender and socio-cultural groups Scheduled Cast (SC)/Scheduled Tribe(ST)/Other Backward Class (OBC) is a result of the persistent efforts and welfare measures taken by the central and state governments such as scholarships, free residential schools for girls from marginalised communities and monetary incentives. However, as the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data demonstrates, regional inequity still plagues the country. For instance, the GER in higher education in Tamil Nadu is 49 per cent but in Bihar, it is still 13.6 per cent. Similarly, there are only 7 colleges per lakh population in Bihar as compared to 50 in Telangana. In order to achieve the goal of 50 per

cent GER by 2035, a strategic roadmap targeting low-performing areas is critical.

A study by the World Bank in 2008 used National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data from the years 1983 to 2004, with statistical estimates of educational attainment, access, and transition to higher education across socially and economically disadvantaged groups. One of the significant findings of the paper was that variation across states in enrolment is largely due to variations in completion of higher secondary education. The Unified District Information on School Education (UDISE)--2018-19 data shows that the GER drops from 79.6 per cent at the secondary level to 58.56 per cent at the higher secondary level. This is the point where maximum students drop out. These figures are alarming for some eastern and north-eastern states. As a result, the pool of students for higher education also shrinks, leading to a GER of only 26.3 per cent in higher education — much below the world average of 37 per cent.

Quality

The Indian Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) have been credited for having produced outstanding scientific and technical manpower, which has propelled the transition of India's economy towards a knowledge economy. The IT manpower of the country has proven its mettle across the globe, as has the scientific community. However, low rankings in the research domain — in comparison to the US and China — are a matter of concern.

There are only 15 researchers per lakh population in India as against 111 in China and 423 in the US. Out of the total scientific publications in the world, the share of Indian scientific publications therefore stands at a low 4.8 per cent vis-à-vis 18.6 per cent for China and 17.8 per cent for the US. A closer analysis of the data from AISHE 2018-19 reveals that PhD enrolments constitute only 0.5 per cent of total student enrolments in India, with only 2.5 per cent of the colleges in the country running PhD programmes. This explains the research deficit in the nation. It is quite evident that we need to create a conducive environment so that more students take up research in India.

The quality of an educational system is also characterised by the quality of its graduates and their employability. The India Skills Reports 2019 by the Wheebox (2019) shows that only 46.3 per cent of India's graduates are employable (Wheebox, 2019). Though the number seems low, recent improvements have been encouraging. The employability increased from 33 per cent in 2014 to the current 46.3 per cent and can be attributed to recent initiatives by AICTE to improve employability in colleges.

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: A CATALYST FOR TRANSFORMATION

NEP-2020 marks a monumental development in the country's education system. Advocating a forward-thinking, cogent reform, NEP-2020 is an amalgamation of need-based policy, cutting-edge research and best practices, paving the way for a New India. It does a thorough analysis of issues pertaining to access, equity and quality in the higher education system of India. The recommendations suggested therein are revolutionary, progressive and catalytic in nature. The potential interventions to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" under SDG Goal – 4 have been discussed below in the light of recommendations of NEP-2020.

Access: Bringing Higher Education to the Doorsteps of Students

As discussed achieving the goal of 35 per cent GER by 2035 would require 33.7 million additional seats in higher education. However, relying only on the brick-and-mortar model of education might not be the prudent way forward — both financially and logistically. The following measures have the potential to propel our country towards universal higher education.

Open and Distance Learning and Online Degrees

There is a pertinent need to expand the scope of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Online Degrees(OD). As per

AISHE Report 2018-19, at present the distance mode of education accounts for only about 10 per cent of the total higher education enrolments (AISHE 2018-19). The latest UGC regulations allow Higher Educational Institutions having an National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) score of 3.26 and above or having a rank of 1-100 in the University category of the National Institutional Ranking Framework to start full-fledged online programmes without prior approval of the UGC. However, the following measures need to be taken to ensure the success of these initiatives:

- a) In order to make OD and ODL programs more utilitarian, equal treatment be given to them as the regular degrees/diplomas/ post-graduate programmes. It must be ensured that they are not deprived when it comes to admission to higher courses and employment scrutiny— both in the public and private sectors.
- b) In order to increase the reach of OD, convergence with existing schemes of the Government of India will be instrumental. The Bharat NET Yojna needs to be leveraged for community online study centres at the Panchayat level in coordination with the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. In urban areas with high mobile device penetration, the recently announced public Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) schemes to set up wi-fi hotspots that can democratise online learning by offering free internet connections. For optimising its usage, PM-WANI could be restricted to essential educational and related sites for students.

Reducing Dropouts at Higher Secondary Level

The drop in GER from secondary to higher secondary is 34 per cent as per UDISE 2018-19 data. As already highlighted, this leads to a smaller pool of students eligible for higher education. Clearly, without improving the access and retention rate at the school level, we won't be able to achieve the access goals of 50 per cent GER in higher education by 2035. To address this issue, a couple of steps might need to be taken differently:

- a) National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) surveys have identified the reasons for school drop-out as: no interest in studies, low academic performance, domestic work, economic activities by boys, etc. A targeted approach will have to be taken to address the root causes of drop-out.
- b) State Institute of Open Schooling (SIOSs) will have to be strengthened on the lines of National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) in a phased manner, starting with states with high incidence of dropouts and lower GERs.

Equity: Making Sure that Every Student Learns

The Government of India has been taking a targeted approach towards the overall development of socio-economically disadvantaged groups. These targeted approaches are based on the identification of geographical areas with a high incidence of poor educational indicators, namely the Educationally Backward Districts and Educationally Backward Blocks.

The NEP–2020 has widened the ambit of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups by covering gender identities, caste and tribe identities, urban poor, minority identities, out-of-school children and vulnerable children. Therefore, it is an opportunity to ensure that every single child in the country from the remotest of places gets a quality education. The key lies in identifying the geographical areas for setting up Special Education Zones (SEZs). NITI Aayog has done a similar exercise to identify what we know today as Aspirational Districts. The following measures may be taken to set up SEZs:

- a) A composite index based on certain developmental indicators critical for education may be prepared;
- b) Each block or district may be assigned a score on the basis of the above indicators;
- c) The poorest performing areas may be designated as SEZs.

The Gender Inclusion Fund and Inclusion Fund for SEDGs as proposed in the NEP will provide the necessary human and financial

resources to design and implement evidenced-backed interventions in improving the educational status in these SEZs.

Quality: Facilitating Education that Matters

The National Education Policy 2020 strives to achieve all markers of excellence — multidisciplinary teaching, diversity of scholars from around the world, and profound research and debate.

Research Output

India's Research & Innovation investment was only 0.69 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018-19 as per AISHE data. Investments are critical to support budding and established researchers and the innovation ecosystem in the country. The proposal to establish a National Research Foundation to fund research in a non-partisan and merit-based approach will facilitate budding researchers to undertake path-breaking studies. The following measures may also be considered to infuse a culture of research in the country:

- a) School education is a feeder to higher education. The students should be exposed to inquiry-based learning from the very beginning. The Atal Innovation Mission at NITI Aayog has established tinkering labs in schools to give the students hands-on experience on the latest technologies and the principles of design thinking. Similar programs may be designed by state governments to develop a research temperament within students from an early age.
- b) The current appraisal system of faculty in higher education is not conducive for research. There are many states that are yet to adopt the Academic Performance Index (API) system for technical colleges. The API gives considerable weightage to research output and publication in high impact factor journals. Since such measures are not fully adopted, the status quo might not change.

Multidisciplinary Education

The National Education Policy recommends that all HEIs should eventually be transformed into large multidisciplinary universities and colleges with 3,000 or more students. The curricula of all HEIs should be made multidisciplinary to integrate humanities and arts with science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Such a step will play an instrumental role in developing a rounded and holistic understanding of the world among students. This would also open opportunities for more and more collaboration between students and faculty.

Employability

In the multidisciplinary education proposed by the NEP–2020, students will be provided internships and research opportunities so that they may actively engage with the practical side of their learning and, as a by-product, further improve their employability. The central government and AICTE have already taken a lead in this direction by mandating internships as part of the engineering curriculum. In addition, tie-ups with internship aggregators and government-supported internship opportunities in urban local bodies is a great step towards leveraging the private and public sectors to increase internship opportunities for students. The following measures may further boost the employability of students:

- a) Creating mandatory credit courses for soft skills, introductory – Information and Communications Technology (ICT), programming and communicative skills as part of the multidisciplinary degree will ensure that every student at any HEI would possess these critical employability traits.
- b) Project-Based Learning should be made a mandatory part of the curriculum to ensure practical application and appreciation of various disciplines among students.

FINANCING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The various recommendations of NEP will require continued financial support to achieve its vision and goals. The Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA) will play a critical role in meeting the financial commitments for implementing the NEP at this level. However, there is a need to explore innovative financing mechanisms to translate the ideas of NEP on the ground. The following measures may be considered:

- a) One of the untapped areas that can make higher education institutions dynamic and self-sufficient is Public-Private Partnership. Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs) are a great example where the government provides initial capital and operational expenditure for a period of five years. After this, the institutions run on their own by generating revenue through student fees, research consultancy, short-term courses, endowments etc. Many such partnerships need to be forged.
- b) The government recently modified the Viability Gap Funding Scheme (VGF) to include social infrastructure projects, including education. Universities can get funding up to 60 per cent as Viability Gap Funding from the central and state governments for greenfield projects. They could get close to 80 per cent of the funding as Viability Gap Funding and an additional 50 per cent as operational cost in initial years for pilot projects in education. Universities must leverage such schemes to transform their institutions.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE TO SUPPORT TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGES

The implementation of progressive ideas recommended in the NEP-2020 may not be possible in the existing governance framework that drives the higher education system of India. There are issues of conflict of interest where the regulatory body also plays the role of the academic body. Therefore, the separation of functions in the

form of four councils viz. i.) National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) – a single point regulatory body (Excluding Medical and Law) ii.) National Accreditation Council (NAC) for graded accreditation. iii.) Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) for financing and scholarships; iv.) General Education Council (GEC) to frame expected learning outcomes for higher education programmes, as proposed in the Policy will ensure fair, transparent and effective implementation of the reform ideas recommended by the NEP–2020.

CONSLUSION

The NEP–2020 envisages an unprecedented range of possibilities for the Indian Higher education system that can help restore it to its former glory. The choice and independence offered to Indian students in the form of learning at their own pace, multiple entry and exit options, credit banks and multidisciplinary degrees can be path-breaking initiatives. These initiatives can unshackle multiple and dynamic learning arenas for an agile and ambitious youth. The new India that prides itself on the vivacity of its youth can now have the wherewithal to empower them to carry the country confidently forth in the rapidly evolving knowledge-driven world.

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