

# Growth and Challenges in Indian Higher Education

Dr. Bhagwan Dass

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Govt. Degree College Rewalsar, Distt. Mandi, H.P.

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## ABSTRACT

India has emerged as the third-largest educational system globally, following China and the United States, in terms of both institutions and student enrollment. Despite substantial growth in universities and colleges and increased government funding over the years, the quality of higher education in India has not shown significant improvement. Persistent challenges include skill gaps, unemployment among graduates, inequitable access, inadequate faculty, deficient infrastructure, and outdated curriculum designs. The rapid evolution of information technology has revolutionized the sector, presenting both challenges and opportunities. This paper explores the entrenched issues within India's higher education system and argues for urgent reforms. It highlights specific challenges and opportunities through a secondary data analysis, aiming to propose recommendations. While acknowledging the current difficulties, the study also identifies potential avenues for improvement and growth in the future of higher education in India. It emphasizes the importance of addressing foundational issues and calls for a comprehensive reorientation of the education system to meet contemporary demands.

**Keywords:** Education quality, skill gaps, information technology in education, education reforms

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a continuous process and it changes with the development of civilization. The higher education system in India at present is at a transition stage. A stage where changes have taken place for good and more transformations in thoughts and processes are desired. The intrinsic meaning of higher education is higher and specialized education of highly talented peoples; such by education through which specialists are prepared for different fields in the country. Its importance and need then becomes self-evident. The benefits of higher education are well known. So the higher education has been rightly defined as the mother of all professions. The higher education shapes the behaviour, minds, social and human values of the community. The education imparted at the higher education level has a direct impact on economy and society. Therefore, the advantage of higher education is that it works out the solutions of economic and social problems. Indian higher education has been engaged in a process that is expending to serve students from all walks of life. Motivating this effort is widespread belief in the power of education to create social and economic mobility and morality with social values of making higher education accessible to everyone.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The world is swiftly transforming into a global village, prompting ongoing experimentation within the education system to adapt to evolving circumstances. The studies highlighted here represent various scholars' efforts to explore the challenges and opportunities confronting the Indian education system. Hans (2013) found a vast section of population has no access to higher education. In order to effectively plan for reforms and improvement, it is necessary to have realistic perceptions of what is possible and what is not. In his article, Kumar (2013) noted that the Indian education system is deficient in the implementation of comprehensive planning and recommended the creation of an audit body to supervise the execution of strategies. In the age of globalization, Ramesh (2013) highlighted low female enrolment, employability issues, and rigidity as the primary issues facing Indian higher education. He also recommended that an adequate policy be put in place to help India reach its goal of a 30 percent gross enrolment ratio by 2030. Amutha (2014) observed infrastructure, linguistic and physical barriers in India for people who wish to access higher education. Agarwal (2014) has addressed that quality, infrastructure, faculty shortage the real challenges before the Indian education sector. He suggested actions to be taken to make India a real knowledge hub of the world and also suggested deeds to be taken to improve the quality of education in India. In his discussion of the effects of globalization on Indian higher education, Mohanty (2014) discovered that many changes, possibilities, and difficulties are brought about by globalization. However, the internet, and computer advancement also transformed Indian education at the same time. The study of Bhat and Shetty (2014) demonstrates that

there are numerous flaws in the current education system, including admission procedures, fee structures, syllabus, course methodology, and so on. Patil, et. al (2014) concluded lack of means, quality issues and disparities are the main challenges the Indian higher education is facing. Arora (2015) have made an attempt to identify those critical issues faced by education sector because of which India lacks behind the developed nations and advocated accessibility and affordability for all students. Singla (2015) studied the present scenario and challenges (low GER, quality issues, and inadequate funding) facing Indian higher education sector as well as suggest the ways to make the sector globally competitive by unconditional co-operation in curriculum development, implementation of innovative practices, use of new technologies, exchange of experts and promotion of collaborative research.

**Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this present study are outlined as follows:

1. To know the progress of the higher education institutions
2. To study the enrollment trends in higher education institutions
3. To identify the challenges faces the higher education system
4. To propose policy recommendation for sustainable growth in Indian higher education
5. To explore the future prospects in higher education in India

**Data Base and Research Methodology**

The main objective is to provide a structured approach to comprehensively study the dynamic landscape of Indian higher education, offering insights into the hurdles it faces on the basis of the secondary data collected from different sources such as Annual Report of Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2010 & Annual Report of Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2011 and some other selected educational statistics.

**Progress of Indian Higher Education in Pre Independence Period**

India has a rich tradition of higher education that dates back to many millenniums. It can claim to have one of the earliest university systems in the world, dating back to seventh century B.C. But the present system of higher education in India started with the establishment of Calcutta Madarssa in 1781, by the first Governor- General. After that Christian Missionaries also founded various colleges. The system of university education was actually introduced by the Britishers in the year 1857, when University of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were established. Lord Macaulay and Sir Charless Wood were the early pioneers of modern system of education in India. The following table depicts the progress of higher education under British rule in India.

**Table 1: Progress of Higher Education under British Rule**

| Year    | Number of Universities | Number of General and Vocational Colleges | Total Nos. of Students in General and Vocational Colleges |
|---------|------------------------|---|---|
| 1881-82 | 4                      | 68  | 5399  |
| 1901-02 | 5                      | 179                                       | 23009   |
| 1921-22 | 12                     | 207                                       | 66258   |
| 1936-37 | 17                     | 366                                       | 126228  |
| 1947-48 | 19                     | 452                                       | 240000  |

**Source:** Lal, Raman Bihari and Sinha, G.N., Development of Indian Education and Its Problems, R. Lal Book Depot, Meerut, 2012, p.391

This table provides an overview of the growth in higher education institutions and student enrollment in India during British rule, spanning from 1881 to 1948. It tracks three main parameters across five different years: the number of universities, the number of general and vocational colleges, and the total number of students enrolled in these colleges.

The number of universities grew gradually but steadily over the period, reflecting a sustained expansion in higher education infrastructure. The number of general and vocational colleges saw a more dramatic increase, particularly from 1901-02 onwards. The total number of students in general and vocational colleges increased exponentially, indicating a growing demand for higher education and possibly an increase in the population eligible for higher education. The data demonstrates significant progress in the higher education sector under British rule. The substantial increases in institutions and student enrollment suggest an expanding educational landscape, likely influenced by various educational reforms and policies implemented during this period. The growth in higher education may have contributed to the intellectual and professional development of the Indian populace, setting the stage for further educational advancements post-independence.

But the history evident it that the main objective of British rulers educating Indian was to rise up the class of persons qualified for employment in the civil administration of India and maintain their economic and political empire through cultural imperialism. The objective of the system of education concerned by the British government for India was to produce a class of intermediaries between the rulers and rules. Thus, the main aim in starting of the schools for children as well as the institutions of higher learning in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was to propagate Christianity, to have competent scholars in the Muslims and Hindu law, and to train the British civilians in Indian languages, Indian law and history.

**Progress of Indian Higher Education after Independence**

After partition 19 universities were left in India and 3 universities went to the Pakistan. From 1950-51, all the development works in our country began in planned way. After independence, India made concerted efforts to improve access to the higher education and the system grew rapidly after independence reflecting huge demand for university education, and over the decades that ensued, India saw phenomenal growth in the number of higher and technical education institution, and a corresponding growth in enrolment .The growth in the number in universities and overall higher education institutions with the absolute number of enrolled students in these institutions is given in table 2 and table 3.

**Table 2: Progress of Higher Education in India from 1950-51 to 2010-11**

| Year    | Number of Universities | Total Number of Higher Education Institutions | Total Number of Students studying in Higher Education Institutions (in lakhs) |
|---------|------------------------|---|---|
| 1950-51 | 27                     | 605   | 3.60  |
| 1960-61 | 45                     | 1844  | 6.37  |
| 1970-71 | 82                     | 3359  | 20.25   |
| 1980-81 | 110                    | 4345  | 29.43   |
| 1990-91 | 184                    | 5932  | 45.73   |
| 2000-01 | 254                    | 10406   | 74.18   |
| 2010-11 | 544                    | 31868   | 146.25  |

**Source:** Selected Educational Statistics, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2010 & Annual Report of Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2011

This table outlines the expansion of higher education in India from 1950-51 to 2010-11. It tracks three key parameters: the number of universities, the total number of higher education institutions, and the total number of students enrolled in higher education institutions, measured in lakhs (100,000s). The table depicts that the number of universities grew steadily, with a more rapid increase observed after 1990-91, reflecting significant expansion efforts in higher education. The total number of higher education institutions showed exponential growth, particularly noticeable after 2000-01, indicating a broadening of the higher education landscape. The total number of students enrolled in higher education institutions increased exponentially, with the most substantial growth occurring between 2000-01 and 2010-11.

The data illustrates significant progress in India's higher education sector over the 60-year period. The substantial increases in the number of universities and higher education institutions, along with the exponential rise in student enrollment, suggest that there were concerted efforts to expand access to higher education. This growth likely contributed to the intellectual and professional development of a larger segment of the Indian population, supporting broader socio-economic advancements in the country.

This table 3 presents the progress of higher education in India during the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, which spans from 2012-13 to 2014-15. It tracks various parameters including the total number of universities, the total number of colleges, the number of standalone institutions, enrollment in higher education, and the gross enrollment ratio (GER) for males, females, and the total population.

**Table 3: Progress of Higher Education during the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan**

| Years | Total Number of Universities | Total Number of Colleges | Number of Standalone Institutions | Enrolment in Higher Education (Total in Million) |        |       | Gross Enrolment Ratio (Total) |        |       |
|-------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--------|-------|-------------------------------|--------|-------|
|       |                              |                          |                                   | Male   | Female | Total | Male                          | Female | Total |
|       |                              |                          |                                   |  |        |       |                               |        |       |

|         |     |       |       |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|---------|-----|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 2012-13 | 667 | 35525 | 11565 | 16.7 | 13.5 | 30.1 | 22.7 | 20.1 | 21.5 |
| 2013-14 | 723 | 36634 | 11664 | 17.5 | 14.8 | 32.3 | 23.9 | 22.0 | 23.0 |
| 2014-15 | 757 | 38056 | 11922 | 17.9 | 15.4 | 33.3 | 24.5 | 22.7 | 23.6 |

**Source:** Compiled from various Reports, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India

The data from the 12th Five Year Plan highlights significant progress in higher education in India, with increases in the number of educational institutions and student enrollment. The rise in GER suggests that more of the eligible population is accessing higher education, which could lead to improved educational outcomes and socio-economic benefits for the country. The emphasis on expanding and diversifying higher education options reflects a commitment to enhancing the quality and reach of education in India.

**Challenges in Higher Education System**

Despite the constraints of resources, the quantitative expansion has been highly spectacular in the post independence period. The institutions have not only multiplied the student enrolment at colleges and universities have registered exceptional high rate of growth. The number of new entrants is now more than the number of students in higher education prior to independence. While India has seen unprecedented growth in the university and colleges and GER in turn from till date, it is not without its share of problems. In 1947, the condition of higher education was very pathetic in India. Neither its aims were clear nor was its curriculum utilitarian. In India the higher education is still being governed by bureaucratic, conservative hierarchical, rigid directors and dictating self killing model. At present a continuous effort is being made to solve the major problems in the field of higher education, in our country, but due to politics of vote and the lack of honesty and dedication among stakeholders some problems remained unsolved as follows:

**Orthodox Curriculum Alignment**

In India curricular reforms are not coping with the rate of advancement of knowledge. The expectations of market and society are different nowadays. The curriculum is often not oriented to encourage entrepreneurship and innovations among students. Additionally, the adoption of new mode of delivery, such as technology-enabled teaching learning efficiency has yet no become widespread.

**Lack of Infrastructure and other Facilities**

Many of the higher education institution in India still lack even of the basics and don't have adequate infrastructure or facilities. Many of the university and colleges are running courses without classrooms. It is not enough even the some of the colleges in public sector are running in shelter accommodations and modern technology is still out of reach to the students.

**Lack of Quality Teaching-Learning and Research**

The way out to compete with smart people across the globe is to ensure smart teaching and learning as well as high quality of research and innovations. But in India there is inadequate focus on research in higher education institutes. The causes include insufficient resources and facilities, as well as limited numbers of quality faculty.

**High Student-Teacher Ratio and Faculty Crises**

The recommended teacher-student ratio in higher education in India is 1:23, which is relatively very high as compared to the other countries of the world. As per the recommendations of University Grants Commission teacher-student ratio are 1: 12 and 1:15 for post graduate students and undergraduate students respectively. In most of the departments of these institutions faculty position are lying vacant. The political interference in appointments in the higher education has further complicated the situation. Faculty shortage and the inability of the system to attract and retain well-qualified teachers have been posing challenge to quality education.

**Demand and Supply Aspects of Higher Education**

Among all one of the aspect of the problems is the heavy pressure of admission in higher education institutions and every year thousands of students fail to take admission. Out of frustration some of them drop their further education. With the rising levels of enrolment in the school education, the supply of higher education institutes is insufficient to meet the growing demand in the future.

**Problem of Access and Equity**

While India has made significant progress in ensuring access to primary education, the proportion of students who remain in the education system until higher education is considerably less. Ensuring equitable access to higher education is also a challenge with disparities seen across gender, regions and socio- economic groups. In terms of GER in higher education, India lags behind to a great extent as compared to the developed world, as well as, other developing countries. With the rising levels of enrolment in school education, the supply of higher education institutes is insufficient to meet the growing

demand in the country. Additionally, the corresponding figures for SCs and STs are very low. There are regional variations too in access to higher education in our country, reflecting significant imbalances within the country.

### **Increasing Political Interference in Higher Education**

Politicians in India do not directly or indirectly interfere with the working of the higher education institutions but many of the private institutions imparting higher education in India are owned by the political leaders. They exploit the students for their political purposes sometimes. In the past decade or so, the plan of quality education failed because of the intrusion of politicians.

### **Poor Quality Standard and High Fee Structure of Private Institutions**

Due to the concurrent nature of education in our country, it is a public work and its organization is a joint responsibility of the centre and the state governments. But reality is however that both the governments are unable to organize it properly. Public co-operation was already being sought earlier but in recent many types of self-financed higher education institutes are being given recognition liberally. There is no problem as far as the questions of recognition to such institutions but these institutions are charging exorbitant capitation and high annual fees. As a result higher education is becoming very costly and going beyond the reach of the economically backward classes. Due to weak mechanism in our country some of the private higher education institutes have come up and starting giving admission to undeserving students with liberal procedures. Because of these private institutions the students are not getting quality education. This is going to affect the carrier prospects of the students. Maximum of these institutes are not run for providing good quality education-beyond the core focus area. They care about two things- huge number of admission and fee.

### **Lack of Student Placement and market Linkage**

Employability is a very important aspect of higher education. Placement services in many higher education institutes are very limited resulting in a lack of co-ordination between job seekers and prospective employers who are looking for suitably qualified candidates. The Indian higher education system on the whole is not aligned to the skill and manpower needs of the market. Skill shortages across sectors are accompanied by high levels of unemployed youth. The industry academia gap is widening still. What is being used in corporate is not being taught in colleges and universities.

### **Opportunities in Indian Higher Education Sector**

In 1944, the Government of British India presents a plan, called the Sargent Scheme for the educational reconstruction of India, with a goal of producing 100 per cent literacy in the country within 40 years, i.e. by 1984. Although the 40 year time frame was derided, at the time by leaders of the Indian independence movement as being too long a period to achieve universal literacy, India had crossed about the 74 per cent level by 2011 census.

It is viewed that the future of higher education does not bleak in totality. The need is to understand the real requirements. The problem should be sought at the grassroots level to begin with. The higher education system in India is passing through a tremendous change and it requires re-orientation. India has the third largest higher education system in the world in terms of enrolments and also acknowledged to have the largest higher education system in the world in terms of number of institutes. Higher education is the second largest opportunity in the Indian education sector. The factors acting as growth drivers to the higher education sector are:-

1. A booming economy and growing middle class with increasing incomes
2. Huge demand for Indian students in international market
3. Growing economy with numerous employment opportunities
4. Unsaturated demand for quality education over the world
5. Low Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education-the target GER of 30 per cent by 2020 would mean 24 million new enrollments
6. Increasing share of the services sector further emphasizes the role of the education in developing manpower to global standards
7. Several reforms by the government including the Education Bill are on the anvil to give a push to the education sector
8. Foreign investment likely to come in with the passing of the Education Reforms Bill
9. The support of the government to the higher education is significant compared to some other countries of the world and inadequate resource allocation to meet its own target leaving enough scope for private participation and foreign collaboration
10. Huge market size both in terms of number of students and annual revenue with a potential growth rate of 16 per cent is expected over the next five years.

## CONCLUSIONS

Twenty first century society is a knowledge based society and higher education is driving force to it. It is the tool for human capital formation. It is expected that in near future, India will be amongst the youngest nations in the world. With one of the largest pool of people in the college going age group, one in every four graduates in the world will be a product of Indian higher education system. This is possible only we become pioneers of a higher education model that is not just the best in the world, but the best for the world. In order to do this, we need to tackle many issues such as market orient curriculum design, sufficient finance, internationalization of the higher education system and extensive use of modern inputs and technology. Indian higher education needs reorientation of organizational structure. It is the time to cater the Indian higher education otherwise instead of boon it will become bane for the nation.

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