

Social Justice, Inclusion and Excellence in Indian Higher Educational Institutions



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Abstract

India has a massive higher education system with a number of colleges and universities. It is perhaps one of the biggest education systems of the World. Issues of Inclusion and Excellence in Higher Educational Institutions have to be taken up seriously in order to face the challenges of Higher Education in the new century. Higher Education has been more popular in cities and among elites. To make it popular among the disadvantaged and the marginalized sections of the society more efforts have to be made. Excellence in education can be achieved by providing equal opportunity. Abilities of students need to be recognized. Sometimes excellence is defined by people who have the power to define standards and make the rules that are not inclusive. In a country like India with diverse population, the issue of equity becomes more complex. Diversity includes different classes, gender, culture, ethnicity, race, religion, language, sexual orientation and some other factors. All these when included represent Inclusiveness in Higher Education. Inclusion can be seen in a just society. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's main thesis is that a single set of "just" principles neither enable us to identify nor deal with injustices in the world. Research and Knowledge creation are utmost necessary for Institutions of Higher Learning. When people from different cultures, background, languages, race, ethnicity and lifestyle meet they contribute much to the educational thoughts. Therefore Universities should include the voices of Women, ethnic groups, people of different sexual orientations and others. The principles of equity may also be followed in employment of staff and faculty. Recently the demands of education of the expanding middle class have been met by private institutions. To promote Inclusive Education in India many efforts have been made. Even then majority of people from SC,ST and OBC's remain outside the higher education system.very often there is news in Indian media and social media regarding the problems of reservation policy in India. Petitions were also filed in the Supreme Court of India to exclude the creamy layer from amongst the scheduled castes(SC),Scheduled tribes(ST) and other backward classes (OBC) so that only truly backward in the SC/ST/OBC could avail the benefit of reservations.And also students from economically backward upper classes should be provided reservation in educational institutions and jobs.Then only social justice can be attained. Often it is said that quality gets diluted when institutions of higher learning become socially and culturally inclusive. In this paper an attempt has been made to explain that Inclusion and Excellence can be pursued simultaneously without compromising one for the other and that both become strong when taken together rather than contradict one another.

Keywords: Educational Institutions, Inclusion, Excellence, Equality, Global competition, Social Injustice.

Introduction

India has a massive Higher Educational System with a number of colleges and Universities. It is perhaps one of the biggest education systems of the World. It is seen that from past few years there is a lot of demand for higher education in India.Now education has become a means of national development and also a means of social mobility. An unprecedented manifold increase in higher education and technical education against the allocation during the 10th five year plan shows firm commitment by the Indian government to reverse the declining budgetary allocation since the beginning of fiscal reforms to make expansion of higher

education inclusive with commensurate attainment in quality. (Bhushan 2008; Thorat 2008). Article 15(1) and 15(2) of Indian Constitution prohibits the state from discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for women and children. Article 15(4) empowers the state to make special provisions for advancement of socially and educationally backwards or SC/STs. Article 15(5) goes one step further and empowers the state to make reservation in admission into educational institutions including private schools or colleges whether or not aided by government. Thus article 15(3) and 15(4) are foundational bricks of reservation in the country. Article 16(1) and 16(2) provide a general rule that there shall be equal opportunity for all citizens in government jobs. Article 16(3),16(4),16(4-A) and 16(4-B) provide further strength to all sorts of discrimination among the people on account of their unequal status.(IASPOINT 2013) In this way Indian Constitution has a reservation policy set by Dr. BR Ambedkar. Very often there is news in Indian media and social media regarding the problems of the reservation policy. Petitions were also filed in the Supreme Court of India to exclude the creamy layer from amongst the scheduled castes (SC), scheduled tribes(ST) and other backward classes (OBC) so that only truly backward in the SC/ST/OBC could avail the benefit of reservations. And also students from economically backward upper classes should be provided reservation in educational institutions and jobs. Then only social justice can be attained. It cannot anymore be taken for granted that the entirety of the SC,ST or OBC Communities are backward and have remained so for nearly 70 years, because that would be a sad commentary on this nation's governance, said Samta Andolan Samiti in its petition. (By IANS, 2018.Business Standard, New Delhi).

Aim of the study

The present study aims to point out the ways that bring about Inclusion and Excellence together in higher educational Institutions . For this, ideas of reknowned authers from around the world have been studied and mentioned in this paper.

Excellence and Inclusion in Education

Excellence can be defined both at the individual level and at collective level. By definition, it is a comparative term:"for excellence.....the presence of others is always required."(Arendt 1958, 6).Sometimes excellence is defined by people who have the power to define standards and make the rules which are not inclusive. In Privilege and Diversity in the Academy, Frances Maher and Mary Kay Thompson (2007) make the important point that excellence is not so much a mark of quality as a mark of privilege.

Inclusion in Education means including and guaranteeing access to education for people from historically disadvantaged or marginalised communities. The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), for example, lists among its objectives 'to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education. It is recognised that access issues

cannot be based on the 'individual deficit' model traditionally employed to explain the under representation of people from marginalised communities within higher education (Skilbeck & Connell, 2000).The report on the action group on access to Third Level Education acknowledged that under-representation of people with disabilities in higher education is "the consequence of attitudinal and environmental barriers both within higher education and external to it, which preclude and diminish the possibility of students participating within that process"(Department of Education and Science 2001, p.63).

Social Justice

Social justice is a political and philosophical concept which holds that all people should have equal access to wealth, health, wellbeing, justice and opportunity. (Investopedia, 2018) In Indian educational institutions social injustice is a big problem. Reasons for this are poverty, social discrimination, gender discrimination and many others. Majority of the Indian population lives in villages and towns and they are not provided with proper facilities for quality education. There are so many government policies for the education of poor students. But due to corruption at every level they are deprived of all the facilities provided by the government. By all their efforts even if they succeed in acquiring a graduate degree they remain unemployable because of their poor quality of education. 75% of engineering graduates are unemployable said N.R.Narayana Murthy, Chairman and Chief Mentor of Infosys quoting from a report.(The Hindu,2012). He called for reforms in education, industry-university tie-ups. Because of social injustice in educational institutions the quality of education is very poor. Rajindar Sachar Committee submitted its report on the contemporary status of Muslims in India. The Rajinder Sachar Committee is a report on the contemporary status of Muslims in India which was commissioned in 2005 by the then Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh. This document stated that the status of Muslims in India is abysmal. (Sachar Committee-Wikipedia). Sachar Committee placed Indian Muslims below Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in backwardness. (The Indian Express, 2016). The feeling of being a victim of discriminatory attitudes is high amongst Muslims, particularly amongst the youth. There is a perception that the socio-cultural diversity of India is often not articulated in School textbooks.This sense of discrimination combined with issues of identity and insecurity has led to an acute sense of inferiority in the community which comes in the way of its full participation in the public arena and results in collective alienation.(Sachar Committee Report, page 15).In India,a significant proportion of the relevant population stillremains deprived of the benefits of higher education,and the Muslims comprise an important category of the deprived communities.(Sachar Committee report,page-64).The SCs/STs and the Muslims are the most disadvantaged as their respective shares are much lower than their share in the population. 9Sachar

Committee Report,page-65). Only one out of 25 undergraduate student and one out of the 50 post-graduate student is a Muslim in premier colleges.(Sachar Committee Report,page-69).

Can Inclusion and Excellence proceed simultaneously in Indian higher educational Institutions?

Despite many efforts in India young people with disabilities remain on the margins of Higher Education. In the United Kingdom, participation rates for students with disabilities within higher education ranged between 3.9% and 4.5% (Borland & James,1999).In addition, students with specific learning disabilities(dyslexia) comprise the largest group within the designated population with disabilities in higher education (Hoey,2000).

Altbach (2000, p.2) has summarised some of the achievements arising from expanded higher education systems as i) increased opportunities for social mobility, ii) increased income levels associated with higher education, iii) academe opened up to women and "historically disenfranchised groups worldwide". Altbach concludes that "inequalities remain, but progress has been impressive". Both the extent and the details of these achievements differ in between societies but can be found to some extent virtually everywhere.

There should be equity and equality of educational opportunities, social justice is to be ensured. We cannot afford to leave some groups of people behind because when women are excluded, then half the brain power of society is lost and same is the case when caste or race is a factor in exclusion. Through providing equal opportunity we can achieve excellence in education. Ability in students needs to be recognised. Equal opportunity does not mean equal treatment but fair treatment.

Woodrow (1999, p.343) presented four myths commonly heard within higher education institutions as arguments against promoting equity:

1. It's not the responsibility of higher education to promote social inclusion.
2. Equity is the enemy of academic excellence. Low status students will lower standards.
3. The admission of access entrants is the last resort of institutions desperate to recruit.
4. We are in favour of widening participation, but at present we just cannot afford to.

It is not necessary that students from lower socio-economic groups who study in elite institutions also succeed in getting higher quality jobs. Possession of appropriate social and cultural capital may also be necessary in order to convert educational success into employment success, especially in some occupational fields (Brennan and Shah 2003).

Looking at the larger society and higher education beyond the elite sectors, one finds international differences in the importance of educational credentials but the following points according to (John Brennan & Rajani Naidoo, 2008, p.294) are probably all more or less true:

1. Credentials are getting more important in the determination of life chances.
2. There is unequal access to credential

3. Credentials combine with other social and cultural factors to determine life chances and may disguise the continuing importance of these other factors.
4. Mass systems and their credentials are increasingly differentiated-elite sectors remain, new vocational sectors and qualifications are created for the masses; different classes of higher education come to serve different social classes.
5. There may be a larger social order function within increasingly unstable societies where the appearance at least of opportunity structures for all is essential to the maintenance of order.
6. In other words, it's your own fault if you don't succeed. Difference and inequality are thus legitimised.

There is a considerable literature on the extent to which equal opportunities are achieved through higher education and on the factors that are important to their achievement. Higher Education has been more popular in elites. Does quality appear to be diluted when institutions of higher education become socially and culturally inclusive? Can inclusion and excellence be pursued simultaneously without compromising one for the other? Will there be inner conflict between the two? "Generally excellence is often posited in opposition to equality."(Noddings 1993,731).However, several comprehensive studies and empirical evidence on the issue indicate that the two are compatible.(Bowen and Bok 1998).In countries with diverse populations, the issue of equity is more complex both because difference is multifaceted and also because the "diversity" refers to deviation from an arbitrary norm. Here people of different caste, class, gender as well as religion and languages are seen. The intersection of one's personalities produces different and distinctive experiences which are beneficial for the society. As (Ghosh,Ratna 2012,351) feminist theorists have argued, locationality and positionality are not fixed categories but are relational, complex, ever changing and volatile.

Nobel Laurate Amartya Sen's (2009) main thesis is that a single set of "just" principles neither enable us to identify nor deal with injustices in the world. He writes, "A theory of justice that can serve as the basis of practical reasoning must include ways of judging how to reduce injustice and advance justice, rather than aiming only at the characterization of perfectly just societies."At the heart of Sen's argument is respect for rational differences in our understanding of what a "just society" really is and what it means to different social groups. He proposed that justice should be seen along a continuum rather than in binary terms as having been achieved or not. While influential educational thinkers like Paulo Freire focussed on justice for the oppressed of the world. According to him "One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding." From the above examples it can be said that Inclusion and

excellence when pursued simultaneously become strong.

Equity, Excellence and inclusion are not contradictory to each other rather they are friends. Equality is perfected only in Excellence. Equality is not worth having if there is no excellence with it. Equality should lead towards the attainment of Excellence. When equality is taken as an independent value (Thomas E. Schaefer.p.49) and is given a meta physical status above excellence, counterfeit egalitarianism allows the conversion of an instrument into a goal. A similar misperception has marked the history of education since the nineteenth century. "Since the end of the nineteenth century," according to Timar and Krip (1987), "education has not generally been appreciated for its own intrinsic value but rather for what it could do-for its instrumental value."(p.206)This misperception, moreover, values education mostly for the economic benefits it confers. Therefore egalitarianism has a hidden agenda which promotes reforms "not because education, like virtue, is its own reward, but because reforms would make the nation economically more productive" (Timar and Krip.1987)

Conclusion

Better economic performance should not be ignored rather it is utmost necessary, but at the same time such improvement should be seen as a discovery of truth which is the primary purpose of an educational institution or a school. Education should lead to social justice, equality, excellence and should facilitate inclusion of underprivileged minority groups and all other marginalised groups like women, SC, ST, OBC's and other economically weaker sections. Because in India there seems to be a vicious circle, the most vulnerable people do not get the opportunity to qualify for the high status jobs where they are under represented. Reservations are benefitting only those who have already benefitted in the past. But only a minority from SC/ST groups have been beneficiaries and the majority remains at the lowest rungs of the labour market. (Ghosh, Ratna.2012, p.362).In the Indian Constitution discrimination based on caste has been abolished but it is still prevalent in the society and also minorities are also still disadvantaged. Government of India should take serious steps against the matters of bribery and corruption in case of appointment of teachers in degree colleges.Researches need to be conducted and different ways need to be suggested for closing the gap between the educated and the uneducated, and between the haves and have-nots. Global competition requires highly educated, innovative people and at the same time peace in the nation depends on equalization of distribution. That is both excellence and inclusion are needed, a system of higher education is needed where there is "excellence with inclusion."Only then social justice can be ensured in Indian higher educational institutions.

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