Higher Education in India and the Changes it Requires

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There has been a phenomenal growth of higher education in India since independence. There were only 20 universities and 500 colleges at the time of independence. Today India has a total of 610 universities, 43 central universities, 299 state universities, 140 private universities, 128 deemed universities and 5 institutions established through state legislation, 30 institutions of national importance. There are 45 technical institutes, 13 management institutes, 4 information technology institutes, 6 science and research institutes and 3 planning and architecture institutes and total colleges are 33,023 (UGC Annual Report 2012-13).

Despite such a development, today's higher education in our country is still full of flaws and inadequacies. The colonial masters introduced education system in India to create clerks and civil servants loyal to them, and since then we have not changed much. If there are a few bodies catering to educational excellence, for each of those there are thousands of sub-standard colleges and now even universities that do not meet even minimum required academic standards. Allowing hundreds of colleges and private universities to mushroom is not going to solve the crisis of higher education in India. And a crisis is that we live in a country where people spend their parents' life savings and borrowed money on education and even then do not get standard education, and they struggle hard to find employment of their choice.

If things have changed a little bit somewhere, elsewhere things have sunk into further inactivity, corruption and lack of ambition. Today we have scores of IITs, IIMs, legal schools and other institutions of excellence; students now routinely score 90% marks so that even students with 90+ percentages find it difficult to get into the colleges of their choice; but we do more of the same old stuff. Rote learning still plagues our system, students study only to score marks in exams, and sometimes to crack competitive exams. In this country, millions of students are victim of an unrealistic, pointless, mindless rat race. A tough competition and rote learning do not only crush the creativity and originality of millions of Indian students every year, they also drive brilliant students to commit suicide. Today we have hundreds of colleges and almost around 300-400 universities across the country that produce thousands of Graduates and Post Graduates every year. How many of them actually get a job that justifies their skills, ability and knowledge? Of course very few. The reason behind such a helpless state of affairs is that our education system focuses more on reciting and learning the text than identifying and developing the skills of students. The brilliance and intelligence of a student is measured in terms of percentage and grades and very little emphasis is given on the interest, skills and learning ability of a student.

The world-wide acclaimedscholars some of whom later turned great teachers like Chanakya, Aryabhatta, Mahavira, Savitribai Phule, Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Swami Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand and many more were born in India. What made them achieve their goal wasn't because of our education system but their ability to think independently and think freely. They were not spoon-fed with texts and contents of books. They were made to think rationally, imply their logic and reasoning to what they studied. However, the present times have created an education system where ranks, grades and percentage take a driver's seat, and learning and skills are relegated to background.

An area of concern is the system and procedure followed by colleges and universities for admission to higher studies. Most of the prestigious colleges come up with cut off lists with percentages as high as 100%. Is this sounding real? 100% marks in all subjects? Is it practically possible to score cent percent marks? And where do these leave students with say 70% or 65% marks? Are they below average? Or do they just don't deserve to be in a premium college of the country? There are whole lots of question that need to be looked into and be answered. The very idea of admission into a college or a university on the basis of percentage does not seem to be logical. Nobody can deny the fact that academic records alone are not the true

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measure of anybody's potential and ability. There is no shortage of people with good academic records cutting a sorry figure when it comes to displaying their intellect. So there should be a uniform system of entrance exam for admission to higher studies across all institutes in the country. This will give a fair chance to each and every student, and only those with a basic understanding of the subject along with sound logical and reasoning aptitude will get selected.

Also, we live in a country where people see education as the means of climbing the social and economic ladder and if they are able to do so it is proved that they are successful individuals. Thus, education is seen more as a duty than a necessity. A person who has received higher education but is without any job has to face bitter remarks as what has this qualification given you, you can't even feed yourself and who will marry you? That is why every now and then we hear painful news of unemployed youth committing suicide. And still having patriarchal dominance, the Indian rural society flings such bad remarks on girls receiving higher education: where is the need to get higher education when you have ultimately to do household chores and not to become a collector? Such gender-based ideology of education is required to be shown dark waters.

Our education system is prepared towards teaching and testing knowledge at every level as opposed to teaching skills. As the Chinese proverb says, "Give a man a fish and you feed him one day, teach him how to catch fish and you feed him for a lifetime" (Agarwal, 2009). It is true that if you teach a man a skill, you enable him for a lifetime. However, in our education system, knowledge is largely forgotten after the semester exam is over. Still, year after year Indian students focus on cramming information. The best crammers are rewarded by the system and those who try to be exceptionally innovative are given low scores. This is one of the fundamental flaws of our education system that it encourages only bookish knowledge.

Some changes must be brought in our education system with an immediate effect, not only to revive the image of our country as the originator and the storehouse of rich knowledge, but also to improve our academic standards.

The method in which students are marked is inappropriate. Is it justified that a student is evaluated only on the basis of his/her performance for the duration of three hours of the exam? If the center of grading and marking is shifted to classroom participation, project work, communication, leadership skills and extracurricular performance, only then will a genuine student shine out. This has been suggested time and again but the Indian education system has not implemented it uniformly throughout the country in all colleges and universities till date. Our education system rarely rewards what deserves highest academic accolades. "Any innovative deviance is discouraged. Risk-taking is always mocked" (Kulkarni, 2010). Our testing and the marking systems need to be built to recognize original contributions, in form of creativity, problem solving, valuable original research and thinking, and innovation. If we are able to do this successfully, the Indian education system can change overnight. Memorising is no learning and the biggest flaw in our education system is perhaps that it incentivizes memorizing above originality.

Teaching has always been regarded as a safe, well-paying, risk-free and low-pressure job. This is commonly said by any teacher, "Well, if you guys don't study it is entirely your loss; I will get my salary at the end of the month anyway." Thus, such a teacher does not care to deliver effectively in the classroom for he/she is sure of getting his/her monthly remuneration irrespective of the students' performance. Therefore, nowadays teaching profession has become the easy get-in for the incompetent. Thousands of terrible teachers all over India are wasting valuable time of young and brilliant children every day. It is high time to encourage a class of passionate teachers. The internet has created this possibility— the performance of a teacher now need not be restricted to a small classroom. Now the performance of a teacher can be opened up for the world to see. The better teacher will be more popular, and acquire more students. That's the way of the future. We need leaders, entrepreneurs in teaching positions, and not salaried people trying to hold on to their mantle.

A teacher is expected to cover the entire syllabus which is prescribed by a university. Since the examination is conducted by a university and the student performance is evaluated by external examiners, a teacher cannot afford to leave anything out. That leaves little time for discussion

and debate in the class. The American professors write their own syllabi, give their own tests and exams, and evaluate the students themselves. That gives them a lot of latitude in what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is evaluated. This system should be implemented in Indian education. One of the teachings of the Mahabharata is to develop one's unique quality. Speaking generally, teaching the student teaches the teacher— more so if the teacher tries to study the student. Shri Aurobindo had said "The teacher should be a guide (not a sage on stage but a guide on the side) and not an instructor and encourage the student to discover the answer for himself" (Pannikar & Nair, 2012).

India needs to embrace internet and technology if it has to teach all of its huge population, the majority of which is located in remote villages. Now that we have computers and internet, it makes sense to invest in technological infrastructure that will make access to knowledge easier than ever. Instead of focusing on outdated models of brick and mortar colleges and universities, we need to create educational delivery mechanisms that can actually take the wealth of human knowledge to the masses. The tools for this dissemination will be cheap smart-phones, tablets and computers with high speed internet connection. While all these are becoming more possible than ever before, there is lot of innovation yet to take place in this sphere.

Our country has the most number of engineering graduates in the world, but that certainly has not been translated into much technological innovation. Rather, we are busy running the call centers of the rest of the world— that is where our engineering skills end. The goal of our new education system should be to create entrepreneurs, innovators, artists, scientists, thinkers and writers who can establish the foundation of a knowledge-based economy rather than the low-quality service provider nation that we are turning into.

Until today, an institute of higher education in India is meant "to be operating on a not-for- profit basis" (Mohanty & Mohanty, 2011). This is discouraging for entrepreneurs and innovators who could have worked in these spaces. On the other hand, many people are using education institutions to hide their black money, and often earning a hefty income from education business through clever structuring and therefore bypassing the rule

with respect to not earning profit from recognized educational institutions. As a matter of fact, private equity companies have been investing in some education service provider companies which in turn provide services to not-for-profit educational institutions and earn enviable profits. Sometimes these institutes are so costly that they are outside the reach of most Indian students. There is an urgent need for effective de-regulation of Indian education sector so that there is infusion of sufficient capital and those who provide or create extraordinary educational products or services are adequately rewarded.

Our education system today encourages mediocrity, both in students and in teachers throughout the system. It is easy to survive as a mediocre student, or a mediocre teacher in an educational institution. No one shuts down a mediocre college or mediocre university. Hard work is always tough; the path to excellence is fraught with difficulties. Mediocrity is comfortable. Our education system will remain sub-standard or mediocre until we make it clear that it is not alright to be mediocre. If we want excellence, mediocrity cannot be tolerated. Mediocrity has to be discarded as an option.

Our education system is built on the presumption that if something is good for one student, it is good for all. Some students learn fast, some are comparatively slow. Some are visual learners, others are auditory learners, and still some others learn fast from experience. If one massive monolithic education system has to provide education to everyone, then there is no option but to assume that one size fits all. If however, we effectively decentralize education, and if the government does not obsessively control the syllabi and the method of instruction, the new and innovative courses geared towards serving various niches of learners, could successfully emerge. Central regulation kills choice, and stifles innovation too. As far as education is concerned, availability of choices, de-regulation, profitability, entrepreneurship and emergence of niche courses are all inter-connected.

It is too costly for the government to provide higher education to all the people in the country and to spend on technology and innovation related to the education system. The central government spends about 4% of budget expenditure on

education, compared to 40% on defence. Still, until today, at least on paper only non-profit organizations are allowed to run educational institutions apart from government institutions. Naturally, the good money, coming from honest investors who want to earn from honest but high impact businesses do not get into education sector. Rather, there are crooks, money launderers and politicians opening private educational institutions which extract money from the educational institution through creative structuring. The focus is on marketing rather than innovation or providing great educational service— one of the major examples of this being IIPM. Allowing profit making will encourage serious entrepreneurs, innovators and investors to take interest in the education sector. The government does not have enough money to provide higher education of reasonable quality to all of us, and it has no excuse to prevent private capital from coming into the educational sector.

Also, if we want to emerge as a "country built on a knowledge economy, driven by highly educated people, we need to make good education so universally available that reservation will lose its meaning" (Kaur & Suri, 2009). There is no reservation in online education because it scales. Today top universities worldwide are taking various courses online, and also one can easily attend a live class taught by a top professor of Harvard University online if one wants, no matter which country he/she belongs to. This is the future, this is the easy way to beat reservation and make it inconsequential.

The great philosopher Socrates has said "Education is not the filling of a vessel but the kindling of a flame" (Bhushan, 2009) and Swami Vivekananda has said "We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet. Education is the manifestation of perfection already present in man" (Bhushan , 2009). It would not be an exaggeration to say that unless there is perfection in education, such perfection cannot be drawn out. Real education should enable one to find out what is unique in him. That is what matters in practical life, not bookish knowledge. Even in our Shastras

it is given that the Sukshma (subjective-knowledge) is more important than the sthula (objective-knowledge). What a person does with a particular knowledge is more important than knowledge per se and to detect that, personal attention has to be given. Then it is possible to discover that person's Svadharma (purpose in life according to Shastras).

Thus, a conclusion is drawn that if the higher education in India is having lapses, then it is certainly not due to lack of demand for good education, or because a market for education does not exist. It is because of more intrinsic reasons. There are systemic faults that do not let our demand for good education translate into a great marketplace with excellent education services. Today education in our country has unfortunately become a business, and nobody is bothered about the real purpose of education and one ends up paying more in donation and not getting any real education. Whether it is education or anything else, unless there is a continuous and consistent monitoring mechanism, nobody shall be accountable and nothing shall have lasting success.

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