

An Exploration of Access to Higher Education in Rural Areas in India

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Abstract

Education enables an individual to look at society and its aspects with a wider perspective. Without education, people are unable to develop the basic sense required. Around three fourth of the country's population belong to the rural area. With literate and educated rural Indians, our country might emerge as a developed nation. Since being eligible for higher education is found to be the key factor in participation, it also explores the role of supply-side constraints by controlling for the distance to a secondary school. Econometric estimations for rural and urban areas indicate a vast rural-urban divide in the role of socio-religious affiliations. Eligibility seems to be the key factor in participation, and a better understanding of the constraints on school education is critical if participation in higher education is to be increased.

This paper explores the role of socio-religious affiliations in determining participation in higher education in Telangana State, and whether the importance of these affiliations changes over time. Access p of higher education to the rural youth is very essential in today's context towards the development.

Key Words: Access, Rural Youth, Higher Education, Development

I. Introduction

The efficacy of education in human development can never be understated. Education is fundamental to every constituent of the society irrespective of gender, physical, racial, economic, geographical, cultural, or linguistic differences. Education is a Nation's Strength. A developed nation is inevitably an educated nation. India as a developing nation has been systematically progressing on the educational front since its independence and has seen an appreciable surge in reaching out to all the classes of its society. The improvement on the country's economic front, the up scaling of communication technology and the advent of the internet, have vastly leveraged the promotion of education across all verticals. The accelerated growth of the educational sector in last decade is a sparkling testimony to this fact, with facts and figures showing an unprecedented improvement of education in India.

The 'Right to Education Act' which stipulates compulsory and free education to all children within the age groups of 6-14 years, has brought about a revolution in the education system of the country with statistics revealing a staggering enrolment in schools over the last four years. The educational movement has been receiving tremendous government support through comprehensive planning in its various five year plans. Additionally the active involvement of the private sector has begun to demonstrate significant reach and improvement in the Indian education system.

The involvement of private sector in higher education has seen drastic changes in the field. Today over 60% of higher education institutions in India are promoted by the private sector. This has accelerated establishment of institutes which have originated over the last decade making India home to the largest number of Higher Education institutions in the world, with student enrolments at the second highest.

While the focus of the government has largely been on school education, in the context of post secondary and higher education, consistent and quality growth however has become debatable. An overwhelming demographic divide still persists in the access to quality higher education with several communities still remaining under represented, contradicting the very objective of equity within the social growth of the country.

However the government has been making tremendous efforts to do away with this divide through several initiatives and by encouraging public private partnerships in promotion of quality higher education. The remarkable progress in the last five year plan i.e. the 11th five year plan (2007-2012) in the Gross Enrolment Ratios - GER testifies to the fact. The government in the current i.e. the 12th five year plan (2012-2017) has made ambitious plans and has proposed initiatives to ensure reach of quality higher education to every nook and corner of the country.

Though there are several formidable challenges that need to be addressed in promotion of higher education in India, the initiatives undertaken by the government, active PPPs, the role of the industry and

voluntary bodies and support from external agencies is certain to aid the realisation of these plans making higher education more accessible. **Fundamental challenges of access, equity and quality**

- **ACCESS** : Availability of suitable number of institutions across region to fulfill demand
- **EQUITY** : Equal opportunity for all sections of society to participate in higher education
- **QUALITY** : Provision of suitable infrastructure, trained faculty and effective pedagogy in higher education institutions aimed at delivering expected outcomes.

Access to Higher Education :

Access to education beyond higher secondary schooling is a mere 10% among the university-age population in India. This is the finding of a report "Intergenerational and Regional Differentials in Higher Education in India" authored by development economist, Abusaleh Shariff of the Delhi-based Centre for Research and Debates in Development Policy and Amit Sharma, research analyst of the National Council of Applied Economic Research.

The report says that a huge disparity exists — as far as access to higher education is concerned — across gender, socio-economic religious groups and geographical regions. The skew is most marked across regions. Thus, a dalit or Muslim in south India, though from the most disadvantaged among communities, would have better access to higher education than even upper caste Hindus in many other regions. Interestingly, people living in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal — designated as the north central region — and those in northeast India have the worst access to higher education. Those in southern India and in the northern region — consisting of Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chandigarh, Haryana and Delhi — are relatively better placed in this regard.

In the age group 22-35 years, over 15% in the northern region and 13% in the southern region have access to higher education. In the north-central region, the number is just 10% for men and 6% for women whereas in the northeast, only 8% men and 4% women have access to higher education

The report, brought out by the US-India Policy Institute in Washington, is based on data from the 64th round of NSSO survey 2007-08. It throws up quite a few other interesting facts. For instance, among communities, tribals and dalits fare worst with just 1.8% of them having any higher education. Muslims are almost as badly off, with just 2.1% able to go for further learning. Similarly, just 2% of the rural population is educated beyond higher secondary level, compared to 12% of the urban population and just 3% of women got a college education compared to 6% of men.

South India offers the best opportunities for socially inclusive access to higher education including technical education and education in English medium. For instance, the share of Hindu SC/ST in technical education in south India is about 22%, and the share of Muslims 25%. These were the lowest shares among all communities in south India. But this was higher than the share of most communities including Hindu OBCs and upper caste Hindus in most other regions. South India also has the highest proportion of higher education in the private sector at about 42%, followed by western India where it is 22%. The northeast has the least privatized higher education sector and is almost entirely dependent on government-run or aided institutions.

The report also compares India's low 10% access to higher education with China's 22% enrolment and the 28% enrolment in the US. Since the early 1990s, China's post-secondary enrolments grew from 5 million to 27 million, while India's expanded from 5 million to just 13 million, says the report, while emphasising that higher education has the potential to enhance productivity and economic value both at the individual and national levels.

"The government has to urgently address the geographical skew in the availability of higher education facilities in the two regions of north-east and north-central," says Shariff. "The central region, comprising Chhattisgarh, MP, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Odisha, too needs attention. There is so much talk about a Harvard in India. I say, give two hoots to Harvard. What we need are thousands of community colleges that can offer professional courses so that youngsters can improve their skills and become employable."

Issues in Furthering Access to Higher Education

With the urban and the rural divide having significantly narrowed due to the onset of technology, communication and better infrastructure over the last two decades, there has been an appreciable improvement in the reach of better higher education to several under-represented groups across the country. However the need of the hour is a provision of high quality education across all sectors to match the requirements of a growing Indian economy. The suffering of the under-represented communities has not been appreciably alleviated as unemployment, inflation, low income and lack of adequate access to quality education continue to plague them.

- **Poor Infrastructure** – This shortcoming is perhaps the chief of all in delivery of quality education. While focus on the urban segment has been heavy, the same is not replicated in most of the rural areas. Establishment

of quality higher education institutes in the rural sector has not been significant, which is a serious deterrent for the rural community in general.

- **Inadequate faculty** – The student teacher ratio on the whole is at a lamentable state. While it is still lower in the urban areas, the rural areas take the brunt of the scene with the ratios being at very high rate
- **Unqualified or untrained faculty** – Even as the woes of inadequate faculty remain, a major part of the ones who are present to impart higher education are woefully unequipped in terms of either qualifications or experience or proper training.
- **Inappropriate or over load in curriculum** – The curriculum of most higher education courses is very infrequently updated even as the world sees a continuously changing scenario in industry manpower requirements. This has caused a crass divide between the industry expectations and the college pass outs who are poorly equipped with the right technical, business or social skills to be employed.
- **Lack of financial resources** – Most under-represented communities face a lack of financial strength to pursue any reasonably high quality of education. While successive governments have declared financial aid for many economically weaker sections for higher education, many communities are denied the advantage due to complex processes.
- **Ineffective Monitoring** – Higher education requires constant monitoring from the regulatory bodies through periodic inspections and performance measurement methodologies. There are no appropriate parameters to measure performance indexes once faculty are employed and this has given rise to severe inconsistency in the delivery of quality education.
- **Social differences between classes** – This constraint has been historically a damaging element in healthy social relationships. While the upper classes look down upon the lower classes, the lower classes are demotivated from continuing their higher education. This divide is more rampant in the northern states of India by comparison with the south.
- **Poor government funding** – With government funding in higher education receding over the years, many institutes themselves suffer, barely managing to survive. In such a scenario employees are more focused on sustaining themselves rather than deliver quality education

Measures to Improve Access to Quality Education

The Indian government has made ambitious plans to achieve a threefold increase in terms of number of institutions and enrolments by the end of the current five year plan. While this does seem achievable, there are issues which must be retrospectively and holistically measured and diligently handled so that the results may fall within the projected framework. In addition the government must put in place an effective monitoring system to ensure foolproof results in its endeavour to make quality higher education within the reach of all and more so to the underrepresented communities.

Making a realistic financial plan – This is imperative for the government before setting any unrealistic goals as financial planning becomes the key factor in achievement of all objectives. Any mismatch between budgets and targets will lead to unsuccessful results.

Infrastructure Development – While urban infrastructure has definitely seen progress, the rural sector still lies in dismal neglect over a larger proportion. The government must ensure proper physical access to these communities and emphasize on construction of higher education institutions in closer proximity to villages. Further ample focus must be given to development of technology to enable education through Information Technology.

Provision of adequate trained and qualified faculty – Student Teacher ratio must be brought up to an ideal level and all faculty must possess adequate qualifications and training before taking up education. Periodical refresher training is an indubitable necessity to ensure adherence to performance standards. While updating curricula the faculty must be acquainted with the newer studies and technologies to keep them abreast and conduct proper delivery.

Eliminate Ethnic inequalities – Caste must be removed from focus and only economic backwardness must be made criteria for extending government support to all communities. Several individuals from the traditionally down trodden groups, even after having richly benefitted from government support continue to exploit the opportunities provided, preventing the real oppressed groups from any significant benefits.

Promote use of Internet and Communication Technology – Adequate emphasis must be placed on improvement of internet and communication technology as it enables easier access to information and educational content and facilitates better education than traditional methods.

Enable better funding for institutions – Government must provide sufficient autonomy and funding for all institutions with an effective monitoring mechanism to ensure appropriate infrastructure, facilities and aids to impart quality education.

Improvement in Financial resources – This can be a shot in the arm to the weaker sections as the promise of higher education becomes closer. Traditionally backward sections have shirked away from higher education owing to their inability to bear the costs of higher education. But with genuine and easily available government

financial aid, education becomes much more accessible across communities. Though there is ample funding on the government agenda, the complexities involved in obtaining finances makes them inaccessible to most lower groups.

Remove overlapping of authority - Regulatory bodies function across parameters often overlapping authority, affecting the delivery of quality education. Since education is a subject of both the central and the state governments, there are frequent conflicts in several areas of education. The government must resolve such complexities and ensure proper delegation of authority for smoother functioning.

Make curriculum industry oriented – The higher education system must provide for updating of curriculum over regular frequencies to help learning match industry requirement. This way employability skill would be better and so do the prospects.

Other measures - In addition to these, governments must encourage Public Private Partnerships in higher education and also involve the industry actively through comprehensive CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) activities. The role of civil society in widening access to higher education may also be an area of thrust. A comprehensive study on access to underrepresented communities may be conducted every alternate year and progress recorded for comparative references. Exhaustive studies also are required on higher education programmes of developed countries and their systems replicated to the Indian context.

II. Conclusion

India has historically been a nation divided on social, ethnic and economic fronts. Successive governments have attempted to analyse and overcome the divide but have not made much headway chiefly owing to political compulsions. With the onset of higher technology, easier access to communication and information technology, the divide has shown definitive signs of narrowing down even though only to a marginal extent. The government and the private sector will continue to play a key role in improving the reach of good quality education to all the corners of the country. Most of the under-represented communities today are able to access better education at elementary and higher levels. However the ancient system of social divide as a whole remains unshakably strong and continues to resist change howsoever economy or technology attempts to. Still it is appreciable that several policy initiatives undertaken by the government are continuing to demonstrate better efficacy and gradual success. The turn of the twenty first century has brought about a revolution in technology and with it have tremendous changes been made across the education system of the country. Though the community divide exists still and perhaps will continue to do so, it is shown that equity in higher education and a healthy economy is not at too far a distance.

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