

Case for Global Universities in India

*Girish Srivastava, Ph.D Student, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, New Delhi &
Dr Pooja Lakhanpal, Professor, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, New Delhi*

Abstract:

India's uniqueness rests on its great foundation, which was built by her ancient sages who relentlessly sought after the highest integral knowledge and perfection; as a result, her culture has been sustained, even through periods of decline, with surprising continuity since remote antiquity.

India's renaissance, which began in the last decades of the 19th century, has been marked by multisided awakening, creativity, renewal and reconstruction enabling the country to make valuable contributions in the services of her people and the peoples of the world. Our culture has always stood for universality and common fraternity of the entire human race, and our aspirations are reflected in the educational field in creating, strengthening and developing a national system that should be geared to the highest ideals of universal peace, unity and harmonyⁱ.

Education is a dialogue between the past, present and the future, so that the coming generations receive the accumulated lessons of the heritage and carry it forward. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, the foremost philosopher and sage of our times, "The past is our foundation, the present our material, the future our aim and summit. Each must have its due and natural place in a national system of education."ⁱⁱ The guiding principles of Sri Aurobindo's education philosophy was the awakening of the individual as a spiritual being. It should be related to life truth and self mastery by the child. Sri Aurobindo made a five-fold classification of human nature i.e. the physical, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual, corresponding to five aspects of education – physical education, vital education, mental education, psychic education and spiritual education.

The present paper aims at presenting a theme of creating new global universities in India to provide society with competent men and women trained in all professions who, as cultivated individuals, are inclined with a sense of social purpose and also to provide the right kind of leadership in all walks of life by helping individuals develop their potential.

Growth of Higher Education

The theme of higher knowledge and higher education was fashioned in India by the ancient Rishis and sages in the Vedic age, the date of which is uncertain but is supposed to be traceable to great antiquity.

The early Gurukul system of education flourished in the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, but a huge University came to be set up at Takshashila in the 6th Century B.C. Two other universities, namely, Nalanda and Vikramsila were established in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., respectively. ⁱⁱⁱNalanda University was one of the first universities in the world, founded in the 5th Century BC, and reported to have been visited by the Buddha during his lifetime.

The modern higher education system is only 160 years old, when the first three universities were set up in 1857 under the British Rule. Policy guidelines given by Macaulay and Wood's Despatch (1854) shaped the scope and the role of universities in India^{iv}. To begin with, colleges set up in India were affiliated to British universities^v. In 1857, for the first time, universities were set up in India. Existing colleges got affiliated to these universities.

Development after Independence

Addressing the graduates of the Allahabad University in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, said:

"A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race toward higher objectives. Universities are places of ideals and idealism. If the universities discharge their duties adequately, then, it is well with the nation and the people^{vi}"

This statement effectively initiated the formulation of the essential purpose of university education in independent India.

At Independence in 1947, India inherited a system of higher education which was not only small but also characterized by the persistence of large intra/inter-regional imbalances. Determined efforts were made to build a network of universities, and their affiliated colleges which provided tremendous outreach to a country of vast diversities in language as also in the prevailing standards of education at the lower levels. The feeder schools differentially impacted on the higher education system leading to significant qualitative imbalances within it. ^{vii}To combat the changing socio- economic needs of the country, Govt. of India announced a new National Policy on Education in 1986. Universalisation of primary education, vocationalisation of secondary education and specialisation of higher education were the main features of this policy.

When India became independent, it had only 20 universities and 500 colleges located in different parts of the country^{viii}. It enrolled around a hundred thousand students in higher education. Participation of

women was limited and those who graduated annually were no more than a couple of dozen or so^{ix}.

Universities in India have been the living repository of a long-cherished heritage — a heritage continually revitalized by the teachers and researchers by their contribution to and interaction with it. India, like other countries, visualizes that a new age is dawning, that will be characterized by unimaginable advances in knowledge and synthesis of knowledge, triggering major changes in the objectives, contents, and methods of higher education^x.

The higher education system in India has constantly striven to build universities as places of culture and of learning open to all and, above all, reinforcing the theme of learning throughout life. Participating in and contributing to major debates concerning the direction and future of society is seen as a major task, and a moral obligation as well, of the university system.

Case for creating new global universities in India:

The highest ranked university in the country is the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, founded by Jamsetji Tata over 100 years ago^{xi}. It was created to build the new India and has been a shining example of what a university can do to change and build a country. Although India had universities in the 19th century too, none of them rank today in the top 200 despite being torch-bearers for the colonised world at one point of time^{xii}.

Post independence, ^{xiii}the most important problems in the field of education before the national government were the expansion of facilities for mass compulsory elementary education, reform of the secondary and university educational systems, to develop vocational and technical education at various levels, to encourage women education and also to reorganize the structure of educational administration. With a view to fulfill all these objectives, the Central and State Governments have been endeavouring to give a concrete shape to various programmes under the Five-year Plans. ^{xiv}The new constitution adopted by India did not change the overall administrative policy of the country.

Since Independence, the government followed a policy of creating the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and other universities in the state sector, though actively discouraging universities in the private sector. Today, 71 years after Independence, barring the IISc, we do not have a truly world-class university which is based on research and creation of knowledge. Almost all of our universities have become teaching universities, which is not bad at all, producing a large number of educated graduates. However, the focus on original research, innovation and breakthroughs in science has been lost.

India, therefore, needs a new breed of universities to be set up to enable the country become a truly global power. For instance, the greatest strength of the US has been her universities. They are one of the best in the world, substantially in the private sector, are autonomous, are at the forefront of research and discovery, and are global in their reach. Moreover, these institutions also act as a global forum for exchange of ideas and information and for conducting collaborative research and development with several partnering nations and institutions around the world.

Vision and task ahead:

While the efforts of Government in initiating the process of selecting Universities to qualify for greater degree of autonomy is laudable, a more concerted efforts are required to put in place right policy for encouraging the creation of at least 10 new universities on a fast track basis which can aspire for global status over the next 25 years. To be truly autonomous, they need to be free of direct funding by the government, and free of all conditionalities except the pursuit of excellence, having faculty from all parts of the globe as also students. India has come out with the concept of ‘innovation universities’ which are largely sought to be built in the public sector. An equal number of universities should be set up in the private sector so that there is a liberal educational ecosystem.

Jamsetji Tata set up the IISc in response to the need for a new India. Our country today has large number of billionaires and some of them are truly global business leaders^{XV}. They too need to be invited to set up at least 10 universities in various fields, global in reach and aspiration.

Governance and Management

Present higher Education is the shared responsibility of both the Centre and the States. The coordination and determination of standards in Universities & Colleges is entrusted to the UGC and other statutory regulatory bodies^{XVI}. Proposed global universities in India need to have a robust framework of governance and management in terms of improved student access, strengthened research and postgraduate programmes, more equitable representation of different social groups, renewed curricula and adoption of new teaching and delivery methods, but in enhanced institutional management and strategic planning capacity as well^{XVII}. Appropriate steps and coordination with the Government would be required to be done not only to ensure greater autonomy and accountability but also to facilitate rapid changes in the very framework, directions and goals.

India recognizes that the new global scenario poses unprecedented challenges for the higher education system. India can no longer continue the model of general education as it has been persisting in for the large bulk of the student population^{XVIII}. Rather, it requires a major investment to make human resource productive by coupling the older general disciplines of humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and

commerce to their applications in the new economy and having adequate field based experience to enhance knowledge with skills and develop appropriate attitudes.

Proposed global universities should lay an emphasis on curriculum change; interdisciplinary courses gradually replacing discipline oriented learning, especially at the master's degree level; greater emphasis on field based learning experiences for students both in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes; more career oriented courses and response to local needs for human resource in specific work-related opportunities.

The university is required to be seen not only as a seat of learning and new knowledge through its research and extension functions but also as a focal point for the dissemination of information to the community through continuing education, extension education and through field outreach activities.

As universities abandon their isolationist existence and increasingly interact with other segments of society, there is a need for them to adopt a more professional management. This includes opting for a new type of leadership capable of interfacing with user and other groups in society, and at the same time, capable of providing academic and administrative leadership within a decentralized system of administration, and making increased use of information technology.

In conclusion

As we move towards a new synthesis, India realizes, like other nations of the world, that humanity stands today at the head of a new age of a large synthesis of knowledge, and that the East and the West have to collaborate in bringing about concerted action for universal upliftment, and lasting peace and unity. Frontiers of knowledge are, therefore, bound to expand unimaginably, and new researches will oblige humanities, sciences, technologies, and fine arts to arrive at new equations and new combinations.

India looks upon the future with realistic optimism, despite difficult challenges and world-wide crises through which humanity is passing today^{xix}. We feel that major efforts are required to cross over the present transitional period, during which negative forces will try to outweigh the positive forces. But considering the vast ethical and spiritual potentialities that lie really untapped, we can trust that humanity will overcome the crisis and emerge stronger to create a new world of harmony and unity. But in fulfilling this hope, education will have to play a crucial role. In the words of Dr.

S. Radhakrishnan, democracy depends for its very life on a high standard of general, vocational and professional education^{xx}. Considering also that future advances in research will affect the theme of higher knowledge centrally, high time that our nation strengthens the system of higher education and adopts strategies that will provide new dimensions to the delivery system that will help change society and prepare young people to shoulder the heavy responsibilities of a difficult but fascinating future.

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