# ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN INDIA: OBSTACLES AND PROMISING AVENUES

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Attaining higher education remains a challenge in the developing countries. In India, the recent Twelfth Five-Year-Plan (2012-2017) places a great emphasis on achieving higher enrolment rate in higher education and the target set by the government of India is of attaining about 18% Gross Enrolment Ratio before 2017. The recent Yashpal Committee Report on renovation and rejuvenation of higher education and the National Knowledge Commission reports gave strong recommendations for enormous increase in Higher Education Institutions countrywide in order to face the challenge of expected higher enrolments in the higher education and for reaching the less accessible groups of the population. Accordingly the Eleventh Five-Year-Plan has witnessed the creation of a number of central and state universities and other institutions in order to push more youth into enrolling into higher education.

## AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FIELD

Higher Education in India has experienced a quantum jump in the recent years, with a phenomenal increase in the number of institutions, such as universities and colleges. There is as well as an increase in the enrolment of students. This expansion has resulted in India having nearly 611 universities and over 31,324 colleges, with an enrolment of 12.9 million students. Similarly, the participation of private institutions witnessed a quantum leap, contributing to 63% of the total higher education institutions.

The enrolment also increased as systems of distance education witnessed positive and higher growth. The number of Distance Education institutions increased from a mere 10 establishments in 1975-76 to 144 institutions in 2007-2008, with an increase of student enrolment from 2.3% in 1975-76 to 22% in 2002-2003 at the higher education level. The conventional universities and Employers recognize the degrees awarded by distance education institutions. This resulted in a surge in higher education enrolment rate. A comparative study shows that enrolment of students in higher education in India in 2007 is 12.85% while it is 25% in China. This is cause for concern and demands urgent action.

**Table 1: Student Enrolment (2007)**

| COUNTRY | ENROLMENT IN (MILLIONS) |
|---|---|
| **India** | 12.85 |
| **USA** | 17.6 |
| **China** | 25.35 |
| **Russia** | 9.37 |
| **Brazil** | 4.57 |

However, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) which is at about 12% remained a major concern for India and the GERs of women and backward classes remained much lower than the national average. Therefore special cells are established in Universities/colleges to keep the institution aware of imbalances in opportunities for marginalized group and need for timely affirmative action.

## THE ROAD BLOCKS

In spite of the increase in number, many higher education institutions are crippled by either the lack of adequately trained and experienced faculty or the lack of adequate infrastructure. This is impeding the growth of higher education in the country. There is a need for systemic changes and for hurdle-free governance in order to face the challenges of reaching the majority of the students requiring higher education.

The Government of India made sincere efforts in order to improve the access to higher education but there are issues of quality and equity which still need to be addressed. Studies show that higher education rates are assumed to be highest among the BRIC countries with all the other countries having lower numbers of student teacher ratios (Brazil 13.6; Russia 11.0; China 13.5 during the year 2000). However, the majority of Indian institutions are suffering from a lack of adequate teaching staff in various categories as most of these institutions have large numbers of vacant teaching posts: 45% of professor positions, 51% of associate professor postings, and 53% among the assistant professor jobs. The shortage of teachers in India clearly affects the quality of education. Studies also reveal that the majority of the higher educational institutions are facing severe infrastructure deficiency with 48.76% universities and 68.58% of colleges falling into this category (AICTE 2003).

The few very well funded and world renowned institutions such as the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) do not fulfil the demands and dreams of students in the country as their selection procedures are very stringent and their intake is very low. This results in the loss of talented youth to foreign universities. These few "elite" professional institutions are also not very sensitive to the needs of the rural population and more particularly to the population who belongs to the lower socio-economic strata of the country and minorities.

## THE MARGINALIZED GROUPS

For some sections of the society, the rate of access to higher education is extraordinarily low. The biggest minority population (18%) – the Muslims—are the most educationally backward Minority in India. Only 3.6% of Muslims enrol in Higher education institutions, and only 0.4% get a diploma/certificate with technical qualifications. In premier colleges the Muslims represent only 2% of the admissions in the post graduate group. In *Institutes of National Repute* (IIT/IIM) the number of Muslims is very low, representing between 1.3—1.7% of the student population. It is essential to ensure the educational development of the country on the world map that the big chunk of this minority population is taken along on the ladder of Education—to avoid the continued educational backwardness of the country.

Another educationally disadvantaged group is the Scheduled Caste (SC) and the *Scheduled* Tribes (ST) for whom, despite the constitutional reservation policy, not much has been achieved since the independence of India.

**Table 2: Enrolment and GER (18-22 years)**

| | NSS 61st ROUND (2004-05) | | NSS 64th ROUND (2007-08) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **a) General and Reserved Categories** | | | | |
| **Groups** | **Enrolment (000)** | **GER (%)** | **Enrolment (000)** | **GER (%)** |
| **SC** | 1,898.5 | 8.72% | 2,485.5 | 11.54% |
| **ST** | 767 | 8.44% | 652 | 7.67% |
| **OBC** | 5,027.4 | 11.48% | 6,599.6 | 14.72% |
| **Others** | 7,787.2 | 22.52% | 86.6 | 26.64% |
| **Total** | **15,480.1** | **14.19%** | **18,623.7** | **17.21%** |
| **b) General and Minorities** | | | | |
| **Muslims** | 1,308.8 | 8.5% | 1,521.4 | 9.51% |
| **Non-Muslims** | 14,170.9 | 15.1% | 17,102.4 | 18.54% |
| **Total** | **15,479.7** | **14.19%** | **18,623.8** | **17.21%** |

Source: NSS 61st and 64th Round.

## VOCATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The changing nature of employability all over the world has necessitated the need for higher education programs able to generate employment. Vocational education and training is the need of the hour. A positive aspect regarding this need can be found in the demography of India. The young age of the Indian population, between the age groups of 15-64 years, results in a low dependency ratio and a substantial working population in comparison to other countries. But this potential must be used by ensuring that these age groups attain adequate education and appropriate skills in order to get employment. The majority of these belong to SC/ST / Muslim Minority and also to low socio-economic groups.

There is an effort being made to generate educational opportunities in higher education and more particularly in the vocational training programs for this energetic young population. This is done through short and medium-term training programs in order to achieve a enrolment rate of 50% in the vocational education sector of higher education. This is essential because even after achieving a hypothetical GER of 30%, there would be 150 million or more youth in India who would require vocational education. If trained adequately they could fulfill the needs of countries burdened by elderly populations like Brazil, Australia, Europe, USA, UK and others. The skilled population will be the biggest asset and the chief source of foreign funds flowing into India.

The most popular vocational training centres known as the Industrial training Institute (ITI) and polytechnics have been opened at sub district levels and in the past two decades they have grown seven fold in number from

1,080 institutions in 1982 to about 6,906 institutions in 2009. The ITIs represent 43% of the total capacity in vocational and training institutes in India and are easily accessible for rural populations too.

More vocation based programs in higher education are being envisaged, based on the requirements of the industrial sectors such as manufacturing and production, medical, paramedical and diagnostic services, hospitality and tourism services, media, communication and ICT services etc. These programs have high quality and competency standards under the National Vocational Educational Qualification Framework (NVEQF). This ensures that their standards are equivalent to those established by other countries. Efforts are made to integrate these vocational courses as an add-on diploma to be done while studying for a full time graduate or post graduate diploma in a regular University or as vocational subjects to be taken as part of a degree course.

Through the distance education mode, vocational courses are already getting popular in India. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) are offering a variety of Vocational education programs through its Distance Education Centres located across the country – mostly targeting the educationally backward blocks where minority population are located. The NIOS has a vocational course – HUNAR – for rural and economically backward Muslim girls where various skills are imparted by involving the community. This is taking place in the provinces of Bihar and Delhi. The skill based programmes of the National Open Schools are designed to enable the learners to pursue and complete their education and join the Higher Education thereafter.

## HIGHER EDUCATION – CHALLENGES AHEAD

Looking at the priorities of the country and demand for higher education, in the twelfth Five-Year-Plan period, efforts should be made for proper planning and implementation of higher education of India. Multi-modes of removing the economic divide should be made as the poorer sections of the society have much lower GER compared to others. Also the same kind of division exists among rural and urban groups. The coming years of 2013-2020 are very crucial for the country to equip its manpower with good quality higher education and with need based vocational courses.

Raising the GER in India would entail an additional enrolment of over 26 million in higher education institutions, and the hiring of one million teachers by 2020. A concerted strategy to retain the best talents for faculty positions and preparing secondary teachers needs to be formulated. It would also require changes in the strategies relating to open learning and technology enabled learning.

For increasing and enhancing access to Higher education, a national program *"Rashtriya Uchch Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)"* is planned that will strive to achieve 25% national level GER during the Twelfth Five-Year-Plan. However, it is up to the government to urgently plan strategies for higher education and implement them effectively without loosing time. While planning such programs, the demographic conditions and socio-economic status of the population, disadvantaged groups and minorities all need to be taken into account so that the programs can be well distributed among the people who need them the most. For instance if minorities are taken into account, the Muslims, who constitute one of the major minority groups within Jammu and Kashmir (67%); Assam (30.9%); West Bengal (25.2%); and Kerala (24.7%), need more access to such programs for their development.

The coordinated efforts by the higher education institutions established in the country and the institutions imparting distance education can bring about the desired change in the outlook of higher education in the coming years. This will enable the fulfillment of the objective of reaping the rich dividends of the demographic potential of India. With well planned vocational courses the skilled students will find more employment locally in order to fulfill the requirements of the industrial growth. This will in turn drive the growth of Indian economy forward and may result in attaining the much awaited double digit of economic growth. The skilled youth could get employment opportunities not only within India but in most of the countries abroad and thus it can meet the shortage of 56.5 million of man power due to the ageing of world economies. India and the world are eagerly awaiting the outcomes of the Twelfth Five-Year-Plan initiatives in Higher Education—which may put the country on the fast track of development.

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## L'ACCÈS DES GROUPES MARGINALISÉS AUX ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES EN INDE: OBSTACLES ET VOIES D'AVENIR

L'enseignement supérieur en Inde a explosé au cours des dernières années, enregistrant une augmentation phénoménale du nombre d'universités et de collèges, ainsi que du nombre d'inscriptions. Ainsi, l'Inde compte maintenant près de 611 universités et plus de 31 324 collèges, et un effectif de 12,9 millions d'étudiants inscrits. Fait à noter, les établissements privés représentent maintenant près de 63 % du total des établissements d'enseignement supérieur. De plus, les inscriptions ont aussi augmenté dans le système d'enseignement à distance qui a connu une croissance phénoménale. Ceci s'explique en partie du fait que les universités traditionnelles et les employeurs reconnaissent maintenant les diplômes émis par ces types d'établissements.

Toutefois, le taux brut d'inscription (environ 12 %) demeure un sujet de préoccupation majeur en Inde. En effet, le taux brut d'inscription des femmes et des classes arriérées est resté nettement inférieur à la moyenne nationale. Par conséquent, des unités d'intervention ont été mises sur pied, afin que les universités/collèges restent conscients de l'inégalité des chances entre groupes majoritaires et minoritaires et de la nécessité d'une action positive en temps opportun.

Cependant, même s'ils ont augmenté en nombre, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur sont paralysés soit par le manque d'enseignants qualifiés et expérimentés, soit par le manque d'infrastructures adéquates. Cela entrave la croissance de l'enseignement supérieur dans le pays. Il faudrait instaurer des changements systémiques et ce, sans obstacle politique, pour arriver à rejoindre tous les étudiants qui souhaitent faire des études supérieures.

Bien que les diplômés des écoles secondaires seniors ne fassent pas tous des études supérieures, les membres de certaines minorités affichent un taux particulièrement faible d'inscriptions dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Ainsi, les Musulmans, qui constituent la minorité la plus importante (18 % de la population indienne), enregistrent le retard scolaire le plus marqué, puisque seulement 3,6 % d'entre eux s'inscrivent aux études supérieures. Les Castes répertoriées (SC) et les tribus répertoriées (ST) sont d'autres groupes désavantagés car, en dépit de la politique de réservation constitutionnelle, elles n'ont pas réellement progressé au niveau scolaire depuis l'indépendance de l'Inde.

Il faut cependant noter que l'un des éléments positifs de la démographie indienne est le jeune âge de sa population. En effet, comparativement à d'autres pays, l'Inde bénéficie d'une importante population active, dont le taux de dépendance est faible. Mais pour profiter de ce potentiel, l'Inde doit veiller à éduquer adéquatement sa population et à l'aider à acquérir les compétences nécessaires pour accéder au marché du travail. Or, la majorité de ces jeunes appartiennent aux SC/ST, à la minorité musulmane ou à des groupes à statut socio-économique faible. Avec une formation adéquate, ils sauront satisfaire les besoins des pays vieillissants, comme le Brésil, l'Australie, l'Europe, les États-Unis, le Royaume-Uni et autres. La population qualifiée sera le plus grand atout et la principale source de fonds de l'Inde.

Afin de répondre à ce besoin, des centres de formation professionnelle connus sous le nom de *Industrial training Institutes* (ITI) et des écoles polytechniques ont été ouverts au niveau des sous-districts. Très populaires, ces centres de formation sont maintenant sept fois plus nombreux qu'ils ne l'étaient il y a 20 ans. On prévoit d'autres programmes professionnels en enseignement supérieur répondant aux normes de compétence et de qualité du *National Vocational Educational Qualification Framework* (NVEQF), qui assure leur acceptabilité ou leur équivalence aux normes établies par d'autres pays. On tente d'intégrer cette formation professionnelle, donnant droit à un diplôme additionnel, à des études à temps plein au deuxième ou troisième cycle dans une université régulière. Cette formation peut aussi être suivie dans le cadre d'un

cheminement de premier cycle. Les cours de formation professionnelle sont déjà populaires grâce à l'éducation à distance. L'Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) et le National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) offrent divers programmes professionnels grâce à leurs centres de formation à distance dispersés à travers le pays.

Les prochaines années (2013-2020) seront cruciales. En effet, le pays doit permettre à ses futurs travailleurs d'accéder à un enseignement supérieur de qualité ou à un programme de formation professionnelle. L'augmentation du taux brut d'inscription entraînerait une augmentation des effectifs de plus de 26 millions dans l'enseignement supérieur et de près d'un million d'enseignants d'ici 2020.

Pour accroître et améliorer l'accès à l'enseignement supérieur, un programme national, le « Rashtriya Uchch Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) », a été mis sur pied afin d'atteindre un taux d'inscription de 25 % au niveau national au cours du 12e plan quinquennal. Les jeunes travailleurs qualifiés pourraient obtenir des possibilités d'emploi non seulement en Inde, mais également dans la plupart des pays étrangers qui devront répondre à une pénurie de 56,5 millions de travailleurs, en raison du vieillissement des populations. L'Inde et le monde attendent avec impatience les retombées des initiatives du 12e plan quinquennal en matière d'enseignement supérieur, qui pourraient bien placer le pays sur la voie du développement rapide.