INDIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM - AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: Indian culture has always stood for universality and common fraternity of the entire human race, and our aspirations are reflected in the educational field which is based on the highest ideals of universal peace, unity and harmony.We maintain that education is a liberating force as also an evolutionary force.

Despite serious handicaps of means and resources, our country has built up during the last 60 years a very large system of education and has created a vast body of men and women equipped with a high order of scientific and technological abilities, robust humanist and philosophical thought and creativity. India has been able to construct one of the largest systems of higher education in the world and we aim to equip our young people so as to enable them to shoulder their responsibilities both as Indians and as citizens of the world.

Key Words:

Education, History, Governance and Management, Critical Issues

"Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man. 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."

- SwamyVivekanand.

Introduction :-

India's distinctiveness rests on its great foundations, which were built by her ancient sages who relentlessly sought after the highest integral knowledge and perfection.It is as a result of this that India's culture has sustained even through periods of decline since antiquity. Our culture has always stood for universality and common fraternity of the entire human race, and our aspirations are reflected in the educational field which is based on the highest ideals of universal peace, unity and harmony.

We maintain that education is a liberating force as also an evolutionary force. Education is a dialogue between the past, present and the future, so that 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 it's due and natural place in a national system of education."

Contemporary problems of environment, universal peace and international co-operation have added new dimensions and it becomes imperative for us to promote through education harmonious relationship between the individual, environment and cosmos.

Despite serious handicaps of means and resources, the country has built up during the last 60 years a very large system of education and has created a vast body of men and women equipped with a high order of scientific and technological abilities, robust humanist and philosophical thought and creativity.

India has been able to construct one of the largest systems of higher education in the world and we aim to equip our young people so as to enable them to shoulder their responsibilities both as Indians and as citizens of the world.

History:

India is set to forge a bright future and to contribute significantly to the higher goals of world peace, human unity and universal welfare even though it is riddled with explosion in the growth of population, a large illiterate population and problems of economic poverty affecting one-third of the people. Much credit for this goes to the ancient but ever-young spirit of the nation. India has a long history of organized education. We will now have a very brief view of the history of higher education in India.

Ancient times – The theme of higher knowledge and higher education was fashioned in India by the ancient rishis and sages in the Vedic Age. The Gurukul system of education flourished in the Vedic and Upnashidic periods. Huge universities such as Takshashila, Nalanda and Vikramshila were established in the 4th and 5th centuries respectively. Art, Architecture, Painting, Logic,Grammar, Philosophy, Astronomy, Literature, Buddhism, Hinduism, Arthashastra (Economics and Politics), Law and Medicine were among the subjects taught and each university specialized in a particular field of study.

Education under British Rule- British records show that indigenous education was widespread in the 18th century. The current system of education with its western style and content was introduced and funded by the British in the 19th century, following the recommendations by Macaulay and Wood's Dispatch (1854). In the beginning, colleges set up in India were affiliated to British Universities. In 1857, for the first time, universities were set up in India.

1857-1947- The period 1857 to 1947 was the period of slow development of institutions of higher education in India. They were set up mostly in administrative headquarters and port towns.

After Independence- After Independence, education became the responsibility of the states. The Central Government's only obligation was to co-ordinate in technical and higher education and specify standards. This continued till 1976, when education became a joint responsibility of the State and the Centre, through a constitutional amendment.

After 1976 - The Centre is represented by the Ministry of Human Resource Development's, Department of Education and together with the states, it is jointly responsible for the formulation of education policy and planning. The National Policy of Education (NPE) 1986, envisioned that free and compulsory education should be provided for all children up to 14 years of age.

Recent Developments- The Indian Education System is generally marks-based. However, some experiments have been made to do away with the marks-based system, which has led to cases of depression and suicides among students. The government is thinking of introducing new systems in the hope that it will help students to

move away from the cut-throat competition and rote-learning and will be able to focus on creative aspects and personality development.

Objectives :

"The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence."

- *Rabindranath Tagore*

Pursuit of integral knowledge and liberation, which has been a constant endeavour of Indian culture, is also the central objective of education. Education is visualized as an evolutionary force so that each individual is enabled to evolve from purely material consciousness towards superior planes of intellectual and spiritual consciousness. Education is also perceived as a bridge between the past, present and the future as a means by which the best of the heritage is transmitted to the new generations for its further progression.

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 of 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."

This statement very explicitly states the essential purpose of university education in independent India.

The specific objectives of higher education that are evolving in the present day are :

- To seek and cultivate new knowledge, to engage vigorously and fearlessly in the pursuit of truth and to interpret old knowledge and beliefs in the light of new needs and discoveries ;
- To provide the right kind of leadership in all walks of life by helping the individuals develop their potential ;
- To provide society with competent men and women trained in all professions who, as cultivated individuals, are inclined with a sense of social purpose ;
- To strive to promote equality and social justice and to reduce social and cultural differences through diffusion of education ;
- To foster in the teachers and students the attitudes and values needed for developing the 'good life' in individuals and society ;
- To bring the universities closer to the community through extension of knowledge and its applications for problem-solving ; and
- To promote synthesis of knowledge, with special emphasis on unity of scientific and spiritual pursuits that would revitalize our country's heritage and promote the ideal of the whole world as one united family.

Our objective in higher education is not only to promote equality and social justice, but also to provide the right kind of work ethos, professional expertise and leadership in all walks of life. Above all, the department of

higher education should foster in the society, integral development of values inherent in physical, emotional, rational, aesthetic, ethical and spiritual education.

Structure and System of Governance :

In order to implement these objectives, a complex structure and system of governance has been evolving. The structure of higher education consists of three years of education (after 12 years of school education) leading to a Bachelor's degree in Arts, Science and Commerce and four years in professional fields like Engineering and Medicine. This is followed by two years of study for a Master's degree; and three years at least beyond the Master's degree for a PhD degree which generally takes longer. There are also Postgraduate Diploma programmes open to graduates.Universities impart Postgraduate education and conduct and promote research in a variety of disciplines.

Most of the universities are "affiliating universities", which prescribe to the affiliated colleges the courses of study, hold examinations and award degrees, while undergraduate and to some extent postgraduate instruction is imparted by the colleges affiliated to them.

Governance and Management :

Significant progress has been made in recent years not only in the development and strengthening of higher education 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.

Involvement in decision-making by all key stakeholders of higher education institutions is recognized as imperative. To this end, a large measure of autonomy is being stimulated in the system to encourage freedom to select staff and students, determine curriculum and degree standards and to allocate funds ; while at the same time being accountable to the system.

Higher education in India is coordinated by several agencies. Let us briefly have a look at them :

University Grants Commission - In order to determine and maintain standards in universities, the University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in 1952 and was constituted as a statutory body under the Act of Parliament in 1956. In performing its basic functions, the UGC allocates and disburses grants placed at its disposal by the Central Government to the universities, after an assessment of their needs. The Commission provides development and maintenance grants to universities established by the Central Government and provides development grants to the other universities established by the State Governments.

The primary responsibility of the commission is to promote and coordinate university education in the country and to ensure that the standards are maintained in teaching, research and examination.

All-India Council of Technical Education - The All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) was set up in1948 as an advisory body to assist the Central Government in the planning and development of technical education at the post-secondary level. Education in Engineering and Technology, Architecture and Management is within the purview of the AICTE. In 1988, the AICTE was constituted as a statutory body under an Act of Parliament.

National Council for Teacher Education **-**The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) is designed to ensure planned and coordinated development of teacher education and determination and maintenance of its standards. The Council lays down norms for specified categories of courses and guidelines.

Other Councils-There are many other statutory bodies such as Medical Council of India (MCI), Central Council of Indian Medicine, theHomeopathy Central Council, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Indian Nursing Council, The Dental Council, the Bar Council of India, The Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), etc. There are also bodies at the State level, such as State Councils of Higher Educationthat were established recently.

Association of Indian Universities- There is yet another type of coordinating agency called Association of Indian Universities (AIU), which was earlier known as Inter-University Board of India. All the universities and other equivalent institutions of higher education are members of the AIU. The AIU has no executive powers, but plays an important role as an agency of dissemination of information and as an advisor both to the government and the UGC and universities.

National Accreditation and Assessment Council-In order to ensure a measure of accountability to evaluate the performance of institutions on the basis of objective criteria, a system of accreditation of institutions of higher learning has been under discussion. The UGC has taken the initiative and established a mechanism called NAAC as an autonomous council under the aegis of the UGC to carry out periodical assessment of universities and collegesin the country.

Critical Issues in the Indian Education System :

India's huge pool of young people might be considered its biggest strength. Government data suggests that only one out of every seven children born in India goes to college. What's more, the nation suffers from both a crippling quantity, as well as a quality, challenge when it comes to higher education.

There are certain drawbacks in our education system, which are the main cause for the set back to higher education in India.

Excellence and expansion: Quantity and quality in Indian higher education **-** The qualitative deficits in Indian higher education and the need for a major quantitative expansion represent two major challenges for India, each of which would require an exceptional effort; to tackle them both at once, as experts and the government agree is necessary, is a particularly formidable task.

Regulation and governance - Both the extent and the nature of the regulatory arrangements appear to inhibit both the reform of Indian higher education and the mobilization of additional (private) resources for its further development. The debate over new forms of governance, especially with regard to the twin issues of autonomy and accountability, is thus of critical importance for the future of the system.

Rote learning -Modern education in India is often criticized for being based on rote-learning. Emphasis is laid on passing exams with high percentage. Few institutes give importance to developing personality and creativity among students.

The privatization of higher education –Private initiatives and resources already play a major, if ambiguous, role in Indian higher education. However, a variety of factors appears to prevent the full utilization of this potential for the further quantitative as well as qualitative development of the system**.**

Staffing higher education-   Adequate staffing may well be the critical bottleneck in India's ambitious plans for expansion and excellence. To cope with it will require a concerted effort involving the academic culture, economic conditions, graduate training, and bringing back expatriate Indian scholars.

The two sides of studying abroad - Studying abroad, primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom, has played, and continues to play, a major role in expanding and enhancing the pool of qualified Indians. This large exodus of young talent has serious drawbacks. A significant portion of these students remain abroad after graduation. Their academic talents and experience is largely lost to the task of advancing higher education and research in India.

A related, but also controversial issue is the interest of a growing number of foreign universities to set up programs in India to tap into the growing demand for quality higher education. As India has entered an increasingly globalized higher education market, the economic and social ramifications of that market are felt more and more clearly. The degree to which, and the terms on which, India opens herself to that market will have a serious and lasting impact on the direction and pace of India's own development in higher education.

Vision and Tasks Ahead :

In this age of techno-scientific revolution, when the sheer quantity of knowledge and information is expanding exponentially, when the needs of a constantly growing and increasingly varied student population are burgeoning, the quality of training for teachers and the quality of teaching in higher education institutions demand top priority.

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.

Need for vast changes-Higher education has to undergo vast changes in respect of objectives, contents and methods. It will have to bear momentous responsibilities for generating new vistas of knowledge and wisdom, bolder forms of courage and heroism, unprecedented arts of harmony and beauty, unimaginable skills suited to developing technologies and crafts. It will also be required to set more exacting standards of excellence and perfection**.**

Coming of Information Age-The world is entering into an Information Age and developments in communication, information and technology will open up new and cost-effective approaches for providing the reach of higher education to the youth as well as to those who need continuous education for meeting the demands of explosion of information, fast-changing nature of occupations and lifelong education.

Determining New Objectives - One of the most difficult task ahead is to conceive certain new objectives of higher education. It will not be enough to promote specialized knowledge and skills of professional excellence: a deeper and subtler aim will be to develop abilities to think globally and to resolve emerging tensions between

different personalities. The objective of a complete education for a complete human being will need to be underlined as of highest importance.

Designing New Contents-Another major task will be to change the contents of higher education. Appropriate courses have to be designed as to achieve a proper blending of wide general knowledge and such specialization, which would have inbuilt facilities to renew relevant knowledge and skills at increasingly shorter intervals and even on a continuous basis.

Student-Centered Education and Dynamic Methods-Methods of higher education also have to be appropriate to the needs of learning to learn, learning to do, learning to be and learning to become. Methods of teaching through lectures will have to be subordinated to the methods that will lay stress on self-study, personal consultation between teachers and pupils and dynamic sessions of seminars and workshops. Methods of distance education will have to be employed on a vast scale.

Teachers : New Dimensions of their Role -Special emphasis on value-oriented education will impart a new dimension to the role of the teacher. For value orientation cannot be imparted without teacher's own value-orientation. Teacher's training programme should cater not only to the continuous development of professional skills but also continuous development of teachers' ethical and spiritual abilities. Incentives should be provided to teachers and researchers to make these professions more attractive for the younger generation.

Examination Reforms- Examination reforms, gradually shifting from the terminal, annual and semester examinations to regular and continuous assessment of student's performance in learning should be implemented

Industry and Academia Connection- Industry and Academia connect necessary to ensure curriculum and skills in line with requirements. Skill building is really very crucial to ensure employability of academia to understand and make sure good jobs (keeping in view knowledge + skills+ global professional skills = good jobs).

Public Private Partnership - PPP is most essential to bring in quality in the higher education system. Governments can ensure PPP through an appropriate policy. University Grants Commission and Ministry of HRD should play a major role in developing a purposeful interface between the Universities, Industries and National Research Laboratories (NRLs) as a step towards PPP. Funding to NRLs by the government should ensure the involvement of institutions of higher education engaged in research activities to facilitate availability of latest sophisticated equipment. To achieve excellence, we thus need to create a real partnership between government, educators and industry– Partnerships that can provide our high-tech industries with skilled workers who meet the standards of their industry.

Conclusion :

We should look towards the future with realistic optimism, despite difficult challenges and world-wide crises through which humanity is passing today. Major efforts are required by all of us to cross over the present transitional period. But considering the vast ethical and spiritual potentialities, we can trust that humanity will overcome the crisis and emerge stronger to create a new world of humanity and unity. In fulfilling this hope, education will have a crucial role. In the words of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar :

"I firmly believe in the efficacy of education as a panacea for our social evil."

We all need to pledge to strengthen the system of higher education and to adopt strategies that will provide new dimensions to the 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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