EMBRACING ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN RURAL COLLEGES: ADDRESSING SKILL DEFICITS IN THE NEW EDUCATION PARADIGM

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Abstract: The traditional 'hard-soft' education format, emphasizing theory-based hard skills, is becoming obsolete under the new paradigm of 'Soft-hard' skills combination. The Skill India initiative and the New Education Policy have led to a paradigm shift in India's education system, prioritizing soft skills like data fluency, communication, teamwork, and analytical skills over bookish hard skills. However, the contemporary syllabus completion drive in schools and colleges continues to focus on theoretical knowledge, neglecting practical skills. This paper argues that rural colleges must exhibit academic entrepreneurship to address skill deficits, plug the gaps, and strike a balance between soft and hard skills in content delivery.

This paper explores the challenges faced by rural colleges in addressing skill deficits and proposes strategies for academic entrepreneurship, including need-based program development, industry-academia collaboration, and faculty empowerment. It highlights the importance of rural colleges in addressing the country's skill deficits and promoting employability among graduates. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for a balanced approach to education, combining soft and hard skills to prepare students for the modern workforce.

Index terms - Academic Entrepreneurship, Rural Colleges, Skill Deficits, Soft Skills, Hard Skills, New Education Policy, Employability, Skill India, Liberal Collegiate Education, Higher Education, Curriculum Development.

1. Introduction

The colonial India's famous *(sic)* Viceroy John Macaulay and the modern Bharat's charismatic entrepreneurN R Narayanamurthy are perhaps two unique personalities who have shaken up the Indian education system.

Of course, it may be an odd comparison, yet they are remembered for setting a trend. The former was powerful enough to initiate the *supply-side* moves but the latter too is not a midget. The moves of Murthy and Indian Corporate world – 'IndiaInc' - mates at the *demand-side* changed the rules of the game not only in the corporate circles but even at the job scene.

Lord Macaulay introduced the modern college education in which landed gentry had privileged entry

intothe portals of colleges mainly based in cities. His police State had a very small measure of welfare content and hence both the ruralites and the less-privileged had limited access. Mandate was clear: English education must be for culturing the Babus (*read, ICS*) to beef up revenue collection and for rolling out the clerks meant for civil and accounting services. Those who were strong in 'bookish hard skills' – technical/subject skills that were imparted in classrooms – secured high percentages in degree-qualifying exams, sailed smoothly into the civil service and served or still serving till their superannuation. Largely these mandarins enjoy STD (Serve-Till-Death) benefits from State exchequer. The present day development machinery consisting of face-less, tongue-stitched, file-filling and paper-minded bureaucracy without requisite 'people skills' reminds us the Macaulay's legacy. Ironically, even after seven decades and odd years after independence, Macaulay's schema still remains under the university controlled higher education system, of course, with occasional cutting and pruning, throwing a blind eye on whatever is happening in labour market.

Narayanamurthy represents the new generation IT & BT entrepreneurs who placed India on the map of fast emerging economies. Mainly for these entrepreneurs, quite often, Information Technology (IT) and ITeS (ITenabled Services) are regarded as the *Viagra* for Indian economy. Internet technology-based business process outsourcing (BPO), the concept of global village and the wired economy have not only offered many openings for youth both at national and trans-national level, but at the same time changed the rubrics of employment as well. In fact, the ICT charisma changed scenario of the derogatory Hindu rate of growth (about 3%) of national economy to a rate of nearly double digit figure. Apart from it, the liberalization policy of 1990's opened the floodgates of business opportunities to the awakened Indian entrepreneurial minds leading to healthy rate of Start-ups, mergers and amalgamations, and acquisitions of corporate enterprises across the globe, scaling a new height of multi-billion dollars. Just within two decades, the demand for 'industry-ready' employable youth increased manifold from corporate world mainly in IT, manufacturing Banking, Insurance, Financial Services (BIFS), Aviation, Telecom, Retail, and Real Estates, and thus, reduced the attraction for civil service considerably. Furthermore, the terms of employment too changed drastically into 'gig economy': no space for permanent employment, no job security and no social security benefits like pension. High attrition rates are dissuading the employers against spending much on employee training and skill up-gradation. In turn they intend, the burden of training, to be shifted to schools & colleges. Hence, the prominence given to 'hard – soft' skills slowly transformed itself into a 'soft-hard' proposition. It is not an exaggeration to mention that the horde of 'right talented youth' – passing out of professional and general education colleges – not only dream about princely salary but even many of them pocketed it in a large measure by riding on the booming economy. Alas! There is a rider. Not all aspiring can become members of Ali-Baba's tribe (become rich by gaining continuous access to income and wealthin Unicorns/Start-ups but not in ancient caves!!); but only those who have mastered the soft skills and could chant 'open sesame' at every corporate calling.

At this juncture it is relevant to answer a few questions at two levels. At level one, the issues to be discussed will be: Is there any antiquity of the idea of soft skills? Are 'soft skills' Hard skills universally talked about or is it pronounced more in India? Can one acquire the soft skills through training and counseling? How far soft skills can be imparted? At level two: What makes rural college distinct from others? What are the challenges before the rural colleges as responsive service deliverers as well as the rural graduates/post graduates as the service recipients? Level one issues are analysed in the succeeding section and level two are elaborated in section three.

2. The Mystic of Soft skills and Hard Skills

Both practitioners and academicians have no consensus as to what constitute soft skills. If academicians prescribe those common skills like group discussion, case analysis, role play, pick and speak, debating, extempore speech, product launch, press meet (popularly mock press or stress-interview), word fusion and other out-of-the-box thinking skills as soft skills; the industry experts and consultants have brought altogether different skills like data fluency telephone and email etiquette, under the brand name corporate soft skills. For instance, Sarvesh Gulati, Chief of Softspan (India) Pvt Ltd, a consulting firm at New Delhi, grouped corporate soft skills as emotional intelligence, business communication skills, time management, leadership and team building, customer relationship management, stress management, negotiation skills, business and social etiquette including cross-cultural etiquettes. However, both concur that many of these skills are leadership skills which can be cultivated through coaching and training. In corporate circles, it is

common to hear: IQ (intelligence quotient) gets you hired but EQ (emotional quotient) gets you promoted. Soft skills are all about emotional quotient.

The English word 'soft' often fails to convey the depth and potential of the phrase soft skills. One can trace the origin of the phrase 'soft skills' to the US. Also known as attitudinal training, this gathered momentum in the early 1960's and 70's with many motivational gurus like Dale Carnegie and Zig Zigler. Wide acceptance of soft skills in India is a fairly recent phenomenon particularly with the advent of the IT and ITeS sectors. Globalisation of the industries and job scene has suddenly found wanting in the area of soft skills. Contemporary corporate bigwigs feel that if there is mismatch between hard skills and soft skills, it leads to lowering of productivity. Eventually it leads to fitment problems in multinational environment. Flourishing Multi-channel retailing changed rules of the game quite faster and shifted employment opportunities from urban conglomerates to sub-urban areas. Noting this trend, industry experts believe that soft skills can be developed with training, coaching and internship experience. If the gap is not substantial, then regular and identified gap areas need to be worked on, they emphasise. The attributes for learning soft skills are motivation, discipline and positive attitude to learn. One is never old to learn soft skills. Moreover,there is no fixity of soft skills; as society changes, soft skills do likewise.

3. The Analytical Framework

Former president A P J Abdul Kalam (2008) said that "Unemployability of the majority of Indian youth, which is a result of skill-deficits, is bigger crisis than unemployment itself". Citing the India Labour Report 2007, Dr Kalam said "53 percent of employed youth suffered some degree of skill deprivation, while only 8 per cent were unemployed. In all 57 per cent of India's youth suffered from some degree of 'unemployability'. Naturally the question arises: What is employability? The developed world view is that "employability skills are the attributes of employees, other than technical competence, that make them an asset to the employer" (Buck & Barrick, 1987: 29). These employability skills include reading, basic arithmetic and other basic skills, problem solving, decision making, and other higher-order thinking skills; and dependability, a positive attitude, cooperativeness, and other affective skills and traits. Online Wikipediadefines "Employability refers to a person's capability of gaining initial employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment if required". In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. However, in developing world context it may even possession of right technical/vocational skills and knowledge to handle a job. For instance, in India, about 90 per cent of country's college and school output did not have adequate practical knowledge for joining work. Only 7 per cent of the population in the 15 to 29 age group had received some form of vocational training. In this backdrop, let us turn back to core issue, how the rural colleges (Fig. 1) have to improve employability of students.

Figure 1: Stakeholders' Environment of Collegiate Education
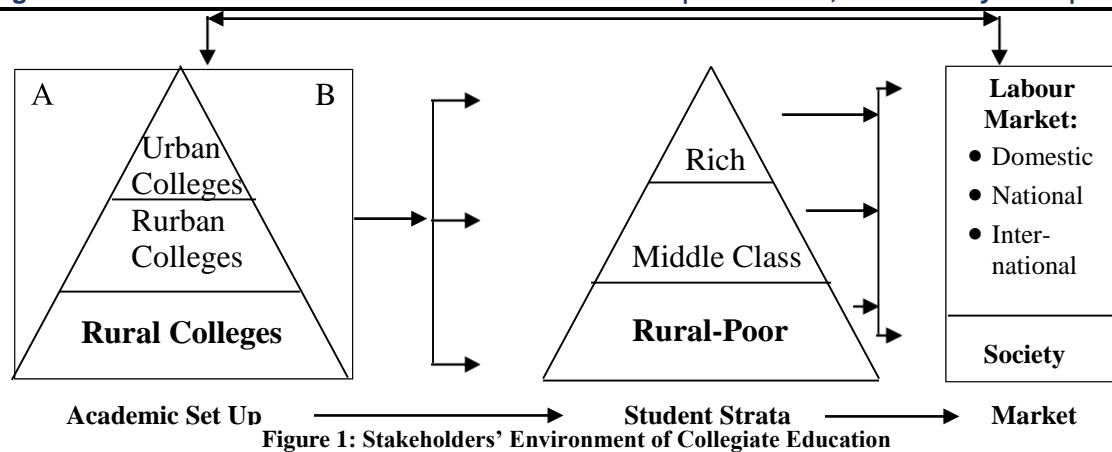
Notes: A: Represents the Government Regulatory Mechanism

B: Represents the University Designed Academic

The present university undergraduate/postgraduate general education system has three interdependent stakeholders:

(1) 'Academic set-up' comprising of colleges of different colours and shades like state owned, private-owned public funded and private funded; many of them staffed, or understaffed with/without exposure to handle both hard and soft skills. Rural colleges, growing in number of late; stay at the bottom of the pyramid; many of them have severe systemic deficiencies. Either the management is lacklusteror faculty is under-equipped or uninterested to deliver student needs.

(2) 'Student Strata' is similar to population pyramid of rich, middle class and the poor. Rich students are small in number but have the freedom of choice as to the course and the college. The students of middle class are large in number, of course, have fair degree of choice depending upon the connectivity with urban centres. The poor, though large in number, many of them fail to move up to the portals of even government colleges leave alone private colleges. Many students of the last two sub-groups have severe deficiencies of linguistic skills that make them unemployable when they come out of colleges.

(3) 'Labour market', the chief beneficiary, consists of government, corporate and other formal/informal sectors covering domestic, national and international postings. Under the new economic regime corporate sector employment is growing and the roleof government as biggest employer is shrinking. Presently, the concerns in labour market is sending impulses to the academic set up to fine tune the curriculum to lift the demographic dividend at theinternational level. To speak on the higher plane, it is the families of the students and the civil society that share the credits for creation of knowledge society through human resources development.

4. **Strategies for Developing Academic Entrepreneurship in Rural Colleges**

Academic entrepreneurship refers to the empowerment of academicians to design, develop and deliver need- based programmes to develop needed skill-sets. Educational institutions have to innovate like business entrepreneurs in the course content and delivery mechanism fostering global competencies among students leading to best practices which others can emulate. They have to stimulate the academic environment for promotion of quality in teaching-learning and research in higher education institutions. In the Indian conditions, risk element is lighter in academic field because they are the public service institutions existingto do well to society. Many of existing entrepreneurial educational institutions have their mission based on a moral absolute rather than an economic issue based on cost/benefit calculus. As explained in the framework, it may be easy for city or rurban colleges to be entrepreneurial in the introduction of newcourses on self-finance basis or impart soft skills/computer and allied skills needed for their wards. However, for rural colleges it is a different ballgame. The operational format of rural colleges is quite different to that of city or rurban colleges. This is because they are dealing with:

➢ Rural poor students (which is harder than working with the majority of rich). A typical rural student is a day-scholar, more comfortable in vernacular than English, rustic and less-polished in business etiquettes and computer skills, and the one who strives to manage two time zones – oneto be devoted for domestic

farming activities and the other for academic pursuits – differentiation between the two is less pragmatic.

➤ Co-education of youth (which is harder than working with unisex schools and colleges). Generally social mobility of girl students is less and hence, operational horizon is restricted than liberated.

➤ Students with limited exposure to enterprise culture (which is harder than working with youth of astrong enterprise culture).

➤ Rural population (which is harder than working with the urban population), in the context of cosmopolitan outlook to accept new courses and ability to share the cost of education in the days of self-financing courses.

➤ Geographical differentials (which are harder than the institutions that have close access to individuals and resources for instructional innovation and time sharing of experts) that sucks up their invaluable resources. The rural colleges can counter the locational disadvantages and vagaries of labour market if they adopt a strategy for developing academic entrepreneurship on campus. The designed educational strategy for 'balanced hard & soft-skill development' has three phases: stimulatory activities, support activities and sustaining activities covering both contributory as well as beneficiary stakeholders. Contributory stakeholders i.e. the rural colleges consisting of both management and faculty have to follow the watchword 'One cannot give something which one does not possess'. Hence, before taking up the below mentionedthree sets of activities, the rural colleges have to exhibit that they are entrepreneurial in nature. Beneficiary stakeholders – the students - must possess a reasonable level of entrepreneurial attributes.

4.1 The Stimulatory Activities: Assuming that the rural colleges have the needed creative energy to develop entrepreneurship among faculty members to train students in soft skills, they have to perform three sets of tasks - empower the faculty, engage the students, develop the system apparatus and enlighten the superiors. All the tasks are interconnected and each influencing the other.

➤ **Empowerment of faculty**: As the fad for computer-allied and soft skills development is of recent origin, many of the faculty members may not have the awareness of its width and depth. First challenge is to ensure the empanelment of core faculty members for undergoing training conducted by industries or other leading colleges. For instance, Infosys Technologies, Bangalore used toconduct training courses for faculty members at its development centre at Mysore. Likewise, a few city-based colleges too have taken this issue for empowerment of its faculty. Secondly, preparationof training module, provision of basic teaching aid and literature to pass codified knowledge to targetaudience.

➤ **Engagement of students**: For many rural students the concept of soft skills is too alien. In such cases the core faculty must take care of two issues: creation and omission of a set of circumstances inwhich rural students work on new activities or enters a new experience, circumstances the existences of which reduces one's perception of risk or the lack of which increases it beyond one's threshold ofan acceptable level. For instance, if rural students are asked to participate in Group Discussion (GD) or Extempore Speak, they hesitate mainly for lack of English skills. Conducive atmosphere is to be created wherein peers and teachers are sympathetic to their grammatical errors. Many students will come out of the shell and acquire higher order soft skills when encouraging conditions exist on campus. Similarly, resistance to work beyond structured class hours and to bear a „part-of-cost" for soft skills enrichment may be the other issues to be sorted out.

➤ **Develop system apparatus**: Development of Computer and Career Coaching Centre at college level requires foresight and collaboration with corporate giants for funding. As per section 135 of the Companies Act 2013, the CSR provision is applicable to companies which fulfil any of the followingcriteria during the immediately preceding financial year:

• Companies having net worth of rupees five hundred crore or more, or

• Companies having turnover of rupees one thousand crore or more, or

• Companies having a net profit of rupees five crore or more.
  These companies are required to spend at least 2% of their three-year annual profit towards CSR activities in a financial year. Given this background, corporate enterprises have to spend on development of infrastructure needed – high-speed internet-enabled computer lab, updated library with access to e-resources - for tenure of at-least five or more years on the identified rural colleges.

> **Enlightenment of superiors**: Development of a soft-skill delivery system involves cost both – financial and non-financial. Rural colleges can hardly attain break-even in these innovative teaching initiatives, unless the college management fund them on the lines of social investment rather than pure business investment. For instance, establishment of English Laboratory with minimum of a dozen computers plus software's, and experts to handle the phonetics is prohibitive unless funders arephilanthropic. Similar is the case of coaching for career excellence in BIFS.

4.2 Support activities: The support activities that will arise in the second phase mainly consist of stabilising initiatives on employability skills conducted on campus.

> **Establishment of ownership:** Upgradation of delivery skills and maintenance pf trainer effectiveness requires 'ownership' among core faculty. The initiation zeal may dry up if there are jerks in the systemic management.

> **Extension of student-centric learning:** Beyond identifying and developing employable skills, it is also critical to hone such skills on regular basis. The individuals who underwent skill training must update them with additional and advanced inputs on regular basis.

4.3 Sustaining activities: Major problems at this stage are related to sustenance of employability skills growth system developed over the years.

> **Establishmont of norms and reforms:** Maintenance of sustained interest in skills enrichmentamong students needs re-calibration both at faculty and management level. Establishment of norms and reforms (if needed) is the pre-conditions for running skill development programmes on continuous basis. For instance, if a student joins a skill development programme in the first year, by the time he/she reaches final year s/he might have attained a decent level of command over basic skills. Hence, in the final years it is the delivery of higher-order skills must receive prominence.

> **Development of corpus:** In the long run the strategy for career skills development will succeed if the alumnus joins hands with *alma-mater* in the creation of support system. A corpus can bedeveloped through the donations received from well settled former beneficiaries and philanthropists. Alumni can also share their industry experience as guest faculty.

5. Conclusion

Macaulay might never dreamt that the Queen's language with which he planned to destroy the Indian-ness might one day be used as a weapon-in-disguise against Brits and their ilk to rob millions of jobs in their madcraze for cutting cost and retaining competitiveness. Credit will go to the pool of young Indians and entrepreneurial minds for making it happen. To accentuate this process the academia has to join the bandwagon by designing a suitable curriculum that would address the needs of the industry besides providing a strong knowledge-base to students. Both the governments – central and state, and the university concerned must step in with a clear policy format backed with requisite funds. Indian Corporate world too must join hands with education sector to spend the statute fixed Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds to empower and up-skill the rural-lads. The process, at end of the day, should produce sizable number of employable from rural colleges as well; thereby help the industry to cut down 'on job training time'. Expectation of the society is that the rural colleges that have a developed academic system need less time to fine-tune the efforts and live up to, and exceed expectations. Those who doesn't, this is the right time to develop one. Let everyone in the education system – urban or rural – strive for the creation of world order where India shines by defeating the tides of economic patriotism of the West.

This paper has argued that rural colleges must embrace academic entrepreneurship to address the skill deficits in the new education paradigm. The traditional "hard-soft" education format is no longer sufficient, and rural colleges must prioritize soft skills like data fluency, communication, teamwork, and analytical skills to prepare students for the modern workforce. By exhibiting academic entrepreneurship, rural colleges can plug the gaps in skill development, promote employability among graduates, and contribute to the country's economic growth.

6. Suggestions

➤ Need-based program development: Rural colleges must develop programs that cater to the needs of the industry and the local community.

➤ Industry-academia collaboration: Rural colleges must collaborate with industries to provide students with practical skills and exposure.

➤ Faculty empowerment: Rural colleges must empower faculty members to develop innovative curricula and pedagogies.

➤ Skill development centers: Rural colleges must establish skill development centers to provide students with hands-on training.

➤ Mentorship programs: Rural colleges must establish mentorship programs that connect students with industry professionals.

➤ Curriculum reform: Rural colleges must reform their curricula to include soft skills and practical applications.

➤ Resource development: Rural colleges must develop resources such as libraries, laboratories, and infrastructure to support skill development.

➤ Community engagement: Rural colleges must engage with the local community to understand their needs and develop programs accordingly.

By implementing these suggestions, rural colleges can embrace academic entrepreneurship, address skill deficits, and prepare students for the modern workforce.

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