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DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: AN ASSESSMENT

Dr. Debasish Paul

Associate Professor & Head, Department of Education,
Govt. Kamalanagar College, Mizoram.



ABSTRACT:

Higher education in north-east India made its appearance in the educational map of India only towards the beginning of the twentieth century. The seven sister states, along with the cousin sister, had about 17 colleges at the time of India's independence in 1947. The number of higher educational institutions both at the college and university level grew substantially in the course of time to match somehow with the total population of the region but failed quite far to cover proportionate geographical area. Besides, one of the serious problems the region is facing is the

inadequate growth of science and commerce education. Also, the organization and management of the existing higher educational institutions in the region are in very dismal shape. The present infrastructure and superstructure of the educational institutions fall far short of creating as well nurturing quality and creativity in the manpower produced in these institutions and as a result, the region is falling in standard both nationally as well as internationally. This seriously demands an assessment of the scenario of higher education in north-east India. If India means to be a global player in the field of higher education and have an impact, it's time we re-look, review and re-plan alternatively. The relevance and purpose of the establishment of higher education institutions in the region need to be rationalized from the perspective of economic productivity, manpower planning and other regional needs. It is to be redesigned and reorganized, keeping in parity with the international needs and demands, especially demands of the south-Asian and south-east Asian countries. Thus, the present study entitled, "Development of Higher Education in North-East India: An Assessment of Status and Relevance" is designed with a view to examine the existing system and structure along with its curriculum planning and its implication in present global scenario. The paper shall discuss the relevance of the present higher education scenario in north-east India and examine the need-based curriculum for higher education and finally, its implementation for removing the horizontal and vertical barriers and to improve the quality higher education in India in general and northeast India in particular.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, North East India, Science Education, Commerce Education.

INTRODUCTION

The higher education system of India ushered into a new era with the attainment

of its Independence in 1947. Great hopes were aroused while people felt the need for revolutionary changes in education. The educationists and the planners of education of Independent India recognized the interdependence of education and development. Education was considered as a means of socio-

economic development and hence the need for a literate workforce was also considered essential. Overall, considerable emphasis was placed on the spread of higher education. A major shift in the education policy from education for the class to education for the mass was emphasized.

Considering the significance of higher education in nation-building, particularly university education, the Government of India set up the University Education Commission under the Chairmanship of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan to suggest measures for the improvement and extension that may be desirable to suit the present and future requirements of the country. Despite the recommendations of the Commission (1948) the education system got the space to expand thoughtlessly for many years with no serious attempt to bring about any qualitative change. During the late 1960s the educational policies were critically questioned and the demands for fundamental changes were widely expressed. Under such circumstances, the Government of India appointed the Education Commission (1964-66) under the chairmanship of Dr. D.S. Kothari. The recommendations of this Commission influenced the higher education policies of the Government and this resulted in the formulation of the National Policy of Higher Education 1968, Draft Policy of Higher Education 1978 and others.

The importance of education as an instrument of change and progress has been underlined by various educational experts, committees and commissions in India. It was also recommended that framers of educational policy should try to relate it (education) to the life, needs and aspirations of the people and thereby make it a powerful instrument of social, economic and cultural transformation necessary for the realization of the national goals (Education Commission, 1964-66). India's National Policy on Education, 1986 (revised in 1992) states that "higher education provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the critical, social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. It contributes to national development through dissemination of specialized knowledge and skills."

Since independence, Indian higher education has undergone a remarkable transformation marked by the rise of institutions of various levels, stakeholders and teachers. Today India's higher education system is the third largest in terms of student enrolment next to China and USA. There has been an increase of 11.5 times in universities, 12.35 times in college, 60.21 times in student enrolment and 2.5 times in teachers since independence.

II

Although the British annexation of Assam (Brahmaputra Valley) began with the Treaty of Yandobo in 1826 but the hilly areas of the north-east frontier could not be brought under effective British rule till the end of the 19th century. In the hilly regions of the north-east, education was imparted mostly through the indigenous institutions. But with the declaration of the charter Act of 1813 the Missionaries entered India and began their educational and proselytizing activities freely. This marked the beginning of modern education in the whole region.

The first missionary group to arrive in the region was the American Baptist Mission. The name of David Scott, Adam White, Mr. Roc, Rev. Nathan Brown, Oliver Cutter, Jenkins, Rev. Mills Bronson can be well mentioned. The relatively higher literacy rate than the rest of India that we see today in the region would not have been possible without the hard and painstaking labour of the Christian missionaries. However, it is worth mention here that the beginning of higher education in the region goes with the establishment of a college, known as Murari Chand College, established in the year 1892 by Girish Chandra Roy in the Surma Valley at Sylhet (now in Bangladesh). Afterward, Sir Henry J.S. Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, took the initiative to set up a college at Gauhati. This college, later on, came to be known as the Cotton College, established in 20th June 1900. Thus, began the journey of higher education in the then Assam region with only two colleges until 1900 AD.

At the beginning of 20th century, collegiate education began to develop. The first college in Shillong was St. Edmunds College, which was established in 1924 followed by J.B. College, Jorhat; Lady Keane College, Shillong (1934); Gurucharan College, Silchar (1935) and St. Merry's College, Shillong (1937). Until 1937, there were 8 colleges including the one in Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and of those 4 were in Shillong.

Prior to independence there was no college in Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur while Tripura had only one college. The first college in Mizoram was established in 1958 called

the Pachunga College at Aizwal. Nagaland had its first college called Fazi Ali College at Mokokchung in 1959 while in Arunachal Pradesh, it was J.N. College at Pasighat established in 1964. Gauhati University is the first university in the region established in 1948.

Until 1973 there were only two universities (Gauhati and Dibrugarh) in the entire region. In 1973 NEHU was established as a Central University to fulfill the wish and aspirations of the hill tribal population of the north-east region. The jurisdiction of the university extended up to the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram.

Despite a late start, higher education in North-East India overgrew after the Independence. Today the region has traditional public universities offering teaching, research and affiliation to general education colleges. The university network in the region consists of 1) the North-Eastern Hill University in Meghalaya, 2) the University of Gauhati, Dibrugarh University, Tezpur University and Assam University in Assam, 3) the Tripura University in Tripura, 4) the Rajiv Gandhi University in Arunachal Pradesh, 5) Nagaland University in Nagaland, 6) Manipur University in Manipur and 7) Mizoram University in Mizoram. Besides, the cousin sister Sikkim too, has a central university in the name of the state. While the number of colleges affiliated to these universities is about 546, this signifies that the number of universities and colleges available in the region is enough and has a better proportion than the rest of the country.

However, the question now appears that: Whether the quantitative expansion in higher education has brought any qualitative improvement in the region? Whether practicing the same curriculum or the same course of study in all the institutes have brought any desired result or helping to achieve the goal of higher education in the region? Whether the higher education in North-East India is compatible enough to face the challenge of the globalization? The present study is an attempt to answer some of these questions. Before getting into the issue of the practice of higher education in North-East, a brief survey is carried out to examine how far the issue has been researched.

III

Due to delayed start research in higher education in North East are not in plenty. Some important research works carried out on the practice of higher education in this region are as follows: Goswami, D.H. (1980) conducted a study on University Administration in North-East India. The main purpose of the research was to study the development of higher education and important aspects relating to university administration in North-East India. Necessary data were collected from various sources. The opinions and conclusions stemmed directly from the needs and demands of the authorities of the university, their students, teachers and other employees. The study revealed that, till the turn of the first half of the 20th century, the extent and quality of education in the North-East region of India was woeful to say the least. But after prolonged endeavors three universities came into existence. From the latter half of the century, education in this region made quantitative progress but unfortunately qualitatively it was weak.

With increasing enrolment and the expanding scope of educational activities coupled with decreasing resource availability for the educational sector, the problem of finance has become increasingly formidable in all sectors. The studies for financing for higher education during the 1970s were largely case studies. A study of higher education finances in the newly created states of Manipur since 1949 clearly shows that the problems of educational finance, which have been observed since 1949 in other parts of the country, are also observed in the case of Manipur. There is an unplanned growth of institutional imbalances in the course of expansion improper building system, non-availability of the physical resources necessary for institutions of higher education, etc. while the expenditure of higher education in Manipur increased. The UGC's contribution to the development of colleges was only marginal. By and large, the picture of higher education finances in Manipur presents a good idea of the crisis that the higher educational sector is facing in India.

Kumar B.B. (1994) highlighted the causes of the slow growth of higher education in the pre-independence period. He pointed out the growth and developments after independence. Though it has

some positive and negative aspects, most of the universities have failed to achieve the objectives of higher education; it failed to strengthen new social order based on new values and a new personality.

Barpujari, S.K. (1994), in his article "Growth and Development of Higher Education in North East India" discussed the gradual development of higher education in north-east India and the role played by the missionaries and private agencies in the development of education in the hills and plains of north-east India.

Bhattacharjee, J.B. (1994) in his article "A Lacunna in the university system in north-east India" stressed upon the need of establishment of a non-traditional university in north-east India of this type of university so that it can cater to the requirements and aspirations of the people of the north-east, which is a resource-rich but land-locked backward region. He suggested some area of studies which can be incorporated in the curriculum of the universities. A center or institute of urban growth and urban planning can be an important component of the university as the process of urbanization is very fast and haphazard in this region.

Biswas, N.B. (1994) in his "Higher Education in Arunachal Pradesh - An Analytical Study" pointed out that the higher education system has an important role in the development of traditional society like Arunachal Pradesh. The higher education model, which is practiced in other universities, cannot be transplanted directly in the north-eastern states. The resources and environment demand a new approach to higher education. The curriculum for higher education should be redesigned, while the evaluation system needs to be examined to bring about qualitative improvement.

Patton Anthony (1992) conducted a study on "Financing of Higher Education in North-East Region - A Study in Grants-in-aid". An attempt was made to study the growth and development of higher education and non-plan and plan expenditure of UGC and the pattern of grants in aid granted by the UGC to universities and the pattern of expenditure and per-pupil expenditure in general.

Saha, Subhas Chandra, (2002) stressed on the functioning of the institutions of North-East India and identified their objectives. Most of the students lack the exposure of modern educational opportunities at the primary and secondary levels. So, these weaknesses should be identified and rectified. Besides, the institutions in this region face problems like poor communication, inter-state air links and electronic communication channels. He argued that Total Quality Management in higher education planning and administration could be evolved after identifying the weakness and inadequacies that have grown over the years. The admission procedure and curriculum should be redesigned according to the situation.

Prof. Umesh Chandra Sharma (1991) urged for the need for redesigning courses, the introduction of modern technology and vocationalization of courses to reduce the substantial number of students from collegiate education.

Saikia, Siddhartha (1992) studied on "Growth of Higher Education in Assam and its Impact on the Socio-Economic Life of the Assamese people" reveal that there was an enormous expansion of collegiate education in Assam. Colleges have sprung up even in the remotest corner of the rural areas. The sudden growth in enrolment is due to the conversion of high school into the higher secondary course is taught both in the colleges and in the H.S. Schools.

The thrust in these studies is to review the progress with the help of historical documents and examine the development in the contemporary period. One of the common findings that emerge from these studies is that the progress of the development of higher education has been much faster after independence and the reorganization of the state. Some studies tend to reveal the general weakness of the curricular in affiliated colleges; some examined the relationship of the higher education system with the rest of the society. The issue of over-expansion of higher education is often mentioned but a scientific and comparative analysis of the size of the system; its regional distribution and its relationship with societal needs have not attracted many.

Based on the aforesaid analysis and the backdrop, one can judge the principal issues of higher education and how the higher education system in North-East is responding to that. Coupled with this is the issue of the changing demand for the quality of human resources to cope up with this challenge.

IV

There are about twelve universities in North-East India. The total population in the region is about three cores eighty lacks, which spread over the eight states. Out of these twelve universities, only two universities are managed by the state government, while the rest are central universities. The numbers of students in these universities are approximately fifteen thousand. Thus, it appears that only for one thousand students at the university level there is on university for them. Most of the universities have been offering similar types of curriculum and of similar types of courses. The research studies reviewed above reveals the facts no scholar examined the issues of cost-benefit analyses of the finance of higher education and the student-teacher ratio. Nor any study was carried out to examine the mechanism of the management of higher education in North-East India.

The available literature on higher education in North-East India and documents such as Annual Reports of Universities, etc. reveal the following observations:

1. The number of universities and institutions of higher learning is very high in relation to the total population of the region.
2. Further, the per-capital expenditure in higher education with regard to enrolment is also high.
3. The multiplication of the same or similar types of course of study does not help much to bring the intended result. Besides, lopsided development with an emphasis on liberal higher education complicated the problem of employability of the youth in the region.
4. The quality of manpower produced in the institute of higher education in this region can hardly compete with the global market. The modern proposition is that the nation that cannot stand in science and technology cannot prevail but perish.

Looking into this proposition, it is fair to say that the proposal of higher education is to be made complementary and competitive with cooperation. Accordingly, it is suggested to develop a complementary higher education procedure for North-East India, taking it as an integrated unit of the country. The following suggestions may be taken into consideration to make the higher education in North East more effective, relevant and fulfilling for the hope and aspirations of the people:

1. Make at least one university residential in a state.
2. Instead of implanting the same curriculum and courses in different universities separately, the more modern innovative courses and curriculum be introduced.
3. New courses are to be introduced in the universities by looking into the demands of South-Eastern Asia's countries, especially countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, China, etc. The new courses which are to be introduced in one university should not be repeated in other universities in the region.
4. A common pull is to be developed to exchange the teaching faculties across the region for the purpose of implementing the new curriculum.
5. Further, it is observed that each state of the region has an open university and they are established without considering the number of stakeholders to be benefitted from them. Therefore, it is suggested that only one open university is sufficient to cater to the needs of higher education in the region as a complementary effort to the formal traditional university system.
6. It is also seen that every university has an academic staff college for the orientation and refresher of the teachers, which is both expensive and less useful. On the contrary, a single unit of academic, administrative training institute, along with research facilities, can be established for the purpose. The center for ethnic studies, cultural studies, language and linguistic studies, art craft and architectural studies, folklore and performing art studies may be created by the Central Government at the regional level only.
7. Similarly, the research and development in the field of science and technology may be established regionally instead of in each university so that the common pull of resources can be utilized by the people across the region.

These complementary approaches may be adopted in this remote and isolated region of India to make it self-sustaining. With all its ifs and buts, higher education in the North East has its own strength.

The struggle of the average middle-class families for the higher education of their young ones is remarkable. Higher education is a priority for them. In fact, it is these people who are helping Higher Education in this region to sustain and develop its identity. No economy, howsoever developed, no state howsoever so advanced should commit the mistake of superimposing education, particularly higher education. Rather, there is a need to realize inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, inter-domain, holistic higher education for harmonious living.

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