HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Access, Equity, Quality

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1. **Introduction**

The efficacy of education in human development can never be understated. Education is fundamental to every constituent of the society irrespective of gender, physical, racial, economic, geographical, cultural, or linguistic differences. Education is a Nation’s Strength. A developed nation is inevitably an educated nation.

India as a developing nation has been systematically progressing on the educational front since its independence and has seen an appreciable surge in reaching out to all the classes of its society. The improvement on the country’s economic front, the up scaling of communication technology and the advent of the internet, have vastly leveraged the promotion of education across all verticals. The accelerated growth of the educational sector in last decade is a sparkling testimony to this fact, with facts and figures showing an unprecedented improvement of education in India.

The 'Right to Education Act' which stipulates compulsory and free education to all children within the age groups of 6-14 years, has brought about a revolution in the education system of the country with statistics revealing a staggering enrolment in schools over the last four years. The educational movement has been receiving tremendous government support through comprehensive planning in its various five year plans. Additionally the active involvement of the private sector has begun to demonstrate significant reach and improvement in the Indian education system.

The involvement of private sector in higher education has seen drastic changes in the field. Today over 60% of higher education institutions in India are promoted by the private sector. This has accelerated establishment of institutes which have originated over the last decade making India home to the largest number of Higher Education institutions in the world, with student enrolments at the second highest.

While the focus of the government has largely been on school education, in the context of post secondary and higher education, consistent and quality growth however has become debatable. An overwhelming demographic divide still persists in the access to quality higher education with several communities still remaining under represented, contradicting the very objective of equity within the social growth of the country.

However the government has been making tremendous efforts to do away with this divide through several initiatives and by encouraging public private partnerships in promotion of quality higher education. The remarkable progress in the last five year plan i.e. the 11th five year plan (2007-2012) in the Gross Enrolment Ratios - GER testifies to the fact. The government in the current i.e. the 12th five year plan (2012-2017) has made ambitious plans and has proposed initiatives to ensure reach of quality higher education to every nook and corner of the country. Though there are several formidable challenges that need to be addressed in promotion of higher education in India, the

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1 **Limitations** - The current study bears certain inadequacies in appropriate portrayal of its theme owing to unavailability of precise and updated information. The study moderately borrows from existing data and material available to the author, where sometimes the accuracy of the source is in question. The figures represented in the study at times are from unclear sources. Further the parameters of the length of the study constrain the author from offering a more expansive view.
initiatives undertaken by the government, active PPPs, the role of the industry and voluntary bodies and support from external agencies is certain to aid the realisation of these plans making higher education more accessible.
2. An Overview of Higher Education in India

India’s higher education system stands third in size in the world after the US and China with nearly 26 million students in over 45,000 institutions in the country. In the last decade the country has witnessed a particularly high growth rate in student enrolment at a CAGR of 10.8% and institutions at 9%. The University Grants Commission (UGC) which enforces its standards is the main governing body at the tertiary level and advises the government, coordinating between the centre and the state. Accreditation for higher learning is monitored by twelve autonomous bodies established by the UGC.

Indian higher education has been progressing at a fast pace adding over 20,000 colleges and about 8 million students between the ten year period 2001 - 2011. As of 2011, Indian higher education system is spread over 42 central universities, 275 state universities, 130 deemed universities and 90 private universities. Additionally 5 institutions were established functioning under the State Act, along with 33 Institutes of National Importance. Nearly 33,000 institutions function as Government and Private Degree Colleges which also include 1800 exclusive women’s colleges.

Today the number of private higher education institutions stands at 64% and enrolments at 59% from the total number of institutions and enrolments in the country. This is a significant jump from the statistics of the decade before where private institutions stood at 43% enrolments at 33% and is an obvious index to an improving educational system through private participation.

The current emphasis in Indian higher education has been mostly on science and technology. Distance learning and open education also are an essential feature of the Indian higher education system. Indira Gandhi National Open University run by the Indian government is attributed to be the largest university in the world by number of students with over 3.5 million students from across the globe. Premium institutions of India, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), National Institute of Technology (NITs) and Jawaharlal Nehru University have attained global acclamation for their high standard of education. About 8000 students are enrolled annually by the IITs and the alumni have made significant contributions to both the growth of the private sector and the public sectors of India.

While figures convey a positive picture of the growth of higher education, in terms of Gross Enrolment Ration – GER, India remains at a dismal 16% against the global average of 26%. Though the government has undertaken several initiatives for inclusion of all communities in its educational front its success has largely been questionable. Delivery of quality higher education has become a severe shortcoming in governance with several issues posing an overwhelming challenge.

At the end of the eleventh five year plan 2007-2012, India has achieved a Gross Enrolment Ration – GER 17.9% upward from 12.3% from the beginning of the plan period. The twelfth five year plan of the Indian government for 2012-1217 envisages several revolutionary initiatives to exponentially improve the quality and reach of higher education across the length and breadth of the country.
Statewise Higher Education Institutions

Total Number of Degree awarding Institutions = 634
Number of Colleges = 33,023

- Number of Degree awarding Institutions
- Number of Colleges

(Statistics as of 2012)
Growth of Higher Education: Universities/Colleges/Students enrolment/Teaching Staff: 1950-51 – 2010-11*

Type-wise Distribution of Degree awarding Universities / University Level Institutions: December, 2011
State-wise Number of Universities / University Level Institutions in the Country (as on December, 2011)

State-wise Number of Colleges 2010-11*

* Provisional
Vocational Education

Vocational education and training institutes (ITI/ITC) in India have substantially increased in number over the past two decades.

The capacity in ITI/ITC account for 43% of the total capacity in vocational education and training institutes in India.
3. A Brief Review of Under Represented Groups in India

Our country suffers from several inequalities in education and employment based on caste, ethnicity and even gender. Since the beginning of Indian history, its society has been plagued by the caste system and to date precious little has been achieved against any movement towards its elimination. Although strongly identified with Hinduism, the caste system has been carried over to other religions on the Indian subcontinent, including small groups of Muslims, Buddhists and Christians. The upper castes historically look down upon the lower castes involving them only in base jobs and this divide continues even now. The lower castes have always been under represented across all sectors forcing successive governments to take initiatives to bridge the divide in the form of reservations in education and employment to help them overcome their socially perceived backwardness.

The primary objective of the Indian reservation system is to increase the opportunities for enhanced social and educational status of the underprivileged communities and thus enable them to take their place in the mainstream of Indian society. This has resulted in the categorization of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, (ST/ST/OBCs). The central government stipulates a total reservation of 49.5% reservations for these communities which however varies from state to state with some states such as Tamil Nadu having as much as 69% reservations.

On a close scrutiny of general statistics of employment in India, one cannot fail to observe that in most instances the higher level positions which contain fewer numbers continue to be held by upper castes whereas at the lower end of the hierarchy where the numbers are large, it is inevitably the lower castes. In central government services, reservations for SCs and STs have been operational for a few decades, and this has resulted in a rise in SC representation in all four categories of central services. However, upper castes continue to disproportionately occupy the more prestigious Class I services, while SCs/STs/OBCs have been relegated to jobs lower in the hierarchy.

Furthermore, the cumulative percentage of SC/ST employees in Central government services continues to be below their percentage in the general population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>TOTAL EMPLOYEES</th>
<th>SC EMPLOYEES</th>
<th>% OF SC EMPLOYEES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>1155</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>1774</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>1491</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Associate</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade A, Non - Teaching</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade B, Non - Teaching</td>
<td>1525</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade C, Non - Teaching</td>
<td>9001</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade D, Non - Teaching</td>
<td>10635</td>
<td>2368</td>
<td>22.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Representation of Scheduled Castes in Education institutions.*

[Excludes Indira Gandhi National Open University, for which figures were not available]

*Source: National Commission for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes*
In the context of representation in higher education, enrolment from Muslims has not demonstrated a proportionate rise beyond undergraduate levels while they remain 14% of Indian population. As a point of reference, West Bengal which has a sizeable Muslim populace has only 10 out of 1,000 opting for postgraduate education in males and only 2 out of 1,000 in females. This is in stark contrast to Hindus with 30 in 1,000 males whereas it is 32 in 1,000 females.

**There exists a significant difference in the GER of urban and rural India**

- GERs in rural India have increased from 3.95% in 1983-84 to 7.5% in 2004-05 while in urban India GERs have increased from 17.68% to 23.79%
- Though GER in rural India has increased the gap between GERs in rural areas has only widened

Women from all communities in urban India have shown remarkable participation in higher education while those from rural areas still remain at a pitiable distance. Members who hail from physically handicapped sections, the socially destitute, and certain nomadic communities also are poorly represented in higher education in India.

**The GERs for females is very low especially in rural India**
While GERs for females has increased significantly there has been an increase in the disparity in GER for females in rural and urban areas by 6.38% from 1983 – 84 to 2004 – 05

The GERs for males also varies significantly between rural and urban India

While GERs for males has increased at a slower rate, there has been a decline in the disparity between GER in rural and urban areas from 1983–84 to 2004–05 by 0.68%

There is a significant difference in GERs of various communities

Source: UGC Higher Education in India 2008; 11th Five Year Plan Volume II * 2004-05

The GERs for SCs, STs and OBCs is very low as compared to the other communities in the Indian higher education segment
4. Role of the Indian Government and Private Sector in Higher Education

Indian Government

Higher Education in India at the undergraduate level and above is controlled and monitored by the University Grants Commission. Accreditation for higher learning is overseen by 12 autonomous institutions established by the University Grants Commission. Since the onset of Indian independence all the governments at the centre have been focusing heavily on education. Most five year plans, more significantly the last and the current i.e. the 11th and the 12th plans have made significant contributions and provisions for improving reach and quality of education across the country.

For many years it has been researched and found that one of the key causes of fewer enrolments in higher education is a shortcoming of financial strength across under represented masses. To overcome this overwhelming challenge the government has enabled several financial schemes through easy student loans, scholarships and financial schemes. A few states have embarked on fees reimbursement schemes at certain lower income levels. Over the last decade these schemes have vastly helped in improving enrolments significantly.

Though the government has been responsible for an impressive growth in the number of institutes and enrolment, several challenges such as low and inequitable access, dearth of quality faculty, inadequate infrastructure and low quality research, need to be addressed. Today, India’s prime concern is the creation of an employable workforce to harness its demographic dividend to the maximum extent. To attain this objective the country needs an education system which can deliver quality in terms of skilled and employment ready workforce, while focusing on world-class research and innovation.

The Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) confronts the challenges facing India’s higher education system and has proposed several initiatives to resolve them. These include increased funding for disadvantaged groups, imbibing cutting-edge technologies, faculty improvement programmes, improved governance and provision of incentives for advanced research. The Government has laid out plans to achieve enrollment of 35.9 million students in higher education institutions, targeting a GER of 25.2%, through these initiatives towards the end of the plan period. It also intends to improve the quality of the system significantly, while encouraging the co-existence of multifarious, research-centric, teaching and vocation-focused institutions.

Private Sector

The government of India has been actively promoting the participation of the private sector in promoting the reach of higher education. Over last two decades, a growing Indian economy has led to spectacular demand for educated and skilled labour. To match the manpower needs of an accelerating economy, private players have sprung up unstoppably to complement government education institutions. Over the past few decades, it has actually been the private sector that has been driving capacity-creation in Indian higher education. This has leveraged tremendous growth of
the education sector especially within the last fifteen years and has enabled India to become the third largest education system in the world. Today the share of the private sector in education institutions is around 64%, while enrolments are over 53% of the total education system in the country.

The private sector has tremendously eased the pressure on the government in provision of higher education. India’s spending on higher education is just 0.6% of the GDP (Ernst & Young-FICCI 2009) which is significantly less than the US, the UK or China’s spend on a per-student basis. In India a major part of the public expense is incurred on wages and maintenance through allocation to the UGC which is around 40%. Only meagre spending is done on curriculum development, research or technology. Very few institutions such as the IITs and the IIMs stand out as portals of excellence. This weakness on the government front has created opportunity for the private sector to become a formidable force in leveraging higher education.

Observing a spurt on private participation in higher education the Indian government over the last 15 years has been lowering its expenditure on the sector obliging most universities to choose self-financing options. This unfortunately have been seen as a money spinner for most state run universities who exploit the opportunity of earning financial resources by affiliating colleges without effectively monitoring quality. This has been so rampant in South India where some universities have affiliated around 800 to 900 colleges each.

Though institutes running general courses in Arts and Sciences have been traditionally in higher numbers, the last ten to fifteen years have seen a surge in the private sector in streams such as engineering, IT and communication technology, management education and vocational training. The volume of private institutes in pharmacy and engineering is nearly around 90 per cent. These figures demonstrate that private education is the norm rather than an exception and higher education through private players is now an irreversible trend in India.

The overwhelming participation of the private sector in higher education has given a fillip to the under-represented communities who now have better access to education. While the role of the private sector in Indian higher education is undeniable, it is also a painful trend with more and more venturing into the stream with the sole intention of profiteering by disregarding stipulative norms and severely compromising on quality on several fronts. This has adversely affected the delivery and sustenance of quality with the end result that most students are no better after their higher education than they were before. While the role of private participation in delivering higher education is quite appreciable, it behoves upon both the government and the individual players to comprehensively understand the responsibility they carry in shaping the direction of the country.
Percentage share of public and private institutions in professional courses (2006-07)
5. Issues in Furthering Access to Higher Education

With the urban and the rural divide having significantly narrowed due to the onset of technology, communication and better infrastructure over the last two decades, there has been an appreciable improvement in the reach of better higher education to several under-represented groups across the country. However the need of the hour is a provision of high quality education across all sectors to match the requirements of a growing Indian economy. The suffering of the under-represented communities has not been appreciably alleviated as unemployment, inflation, low income and lack of adequate access to quality education continue to plague them.

**Poor Infrastructure** – This shortcoming is perhaps the chief of all in delivery of quality education. While focus on the urban segment has been heavy, the same is not replicated in most of the rural areas. Establishment of quality higher education institutes in the rural sector has not been significant, which is a serious deterrent for the rural community in general.

**Inadequate faculty** – The student teacher ratio on the whole is at a lamentable state. While it is still lower in the urban areas, the rural areas take the brunt of the scene with the ratios being at very high rate.

![Student-Teacher Ratio (2000)]

**Unqualified or untrained faculty** - Even as the woes of inadequate faculty remain, a major part of the ones who are present to impart higher education are woefully unequipped in terms of either qualifications or experience or proper training.

**Inappropriate or over load in curriculum** – The curriculum of most higher education courses is very infrequently updated even as the world sees a continuously changing scenario in industry manpower requirements. This has caused a crass divide between the industry expectations and the college pass outs who are poorly equipped with the right technical, business or social skills to be employed.

**Lack of financial resources** – Most under-represented communities face a lack of financial strength to pursue any reasonably high quality of education. While successive governments have declared
financial aid for many economically weaker sections for higher education, many communities are denied the advantage due to complex processes.

Public expenditure on scholarships has been declining over the years

![Graph showing public expenditure on scholarships in Higher and Technical Education](image1)

However an extremely low percentage of graduates in India avail student loans (2005)

![Bar chart showing percentage of graduates availing student loans](image2)

Education loans in India have a very high rate of interest as compared internationally (2005)

![Comparison of interest rates for education loans](image3)
**Ineffective Monitoring** – Higher education requires constant monitoring from the regulatory bodies through periodic inspections and performance measurement methodologies. There are no appropriate parameters to measure performance indexes once faculty are employed and this has given rise to severe inconsistency in the delivery of quality education.

**Social differences between classes** – This constraint has been historically a damaging element in healthy social relationships. While the upper classes look down upon the lower classes, the lower classes are de-motivated from continuing their higher education. This divide is more rampant in the northern states of India by comparison with the south.

**Poor government funding** – With government funding in higher education receding over the years, many institutes themselves suffer, barely managing to survive. In such a scenario employees are more focused on sustaining themselves rather than deliver quality education.

**As compared to the central government, expenditure on higher education by state governments has increased at a slower pace**

![Graph showing expenditure on higher education by state governments](image)

**Total state government expenditure on higher education (INR billion)**
Fundamental challenges of access, equity and quality

**ACCESS**
Availability of suitable number of institutions across region to fulfill demand

**EQUITY**
Equal opportunity for all sections of society to participate in higher education

**QUALITY**
Provision of suitable infrastructure, trained faculty and effective pedagogy in higher education institutions aimed at delivering expected outcomes

India’s GER shows significant variability across regions:
- In the states in ranges from a low of 5.7 in Bihar to a high of 15.1 in uttaranchal
- In the union territories it ranges from a low of 1.9 in Daman Diu to a high of 33.2 in Delhi
Measures to Improve Access to Quality Education

The Indian government has made ambitious plans to achieve a threefold increase in terms of number of institutions and enrolments by the end of the current five year plan. While this does seem achievable, there are issues which must be retrospectively and holistically measured and diligently handled so that the results may fall within the projected framework. In addition the government must put in place an effective monitoring system to ensure foolproof results in its endeavour to make quality higher education within the reach of all and more so to the under-represented communities.

Making a realistic financial plan – This is imperative for the government before setting any unrealistic goals as financial planning becomes the key factor in achievement of all objectives. Any mismatch between budgets and targets will lead to unsuccessful results.

Infrastructure Development – While urban infrastructure has definitely seen progress, the rural sector still lies in dismal neglect over a larger proportion. The government must ensure proper physical access to these communities and emphasize on construction of higher education institutions in closer proximity to villages. Further ample focus must be given to development of technology to enable education through Information Technology.

Provision of adequate trained and qualified faculty – Student Teacher ratio must be brought up to an ideal level and all faculty must possess adequate qualifications and training before taking up education. Periodical refresher training is an indubitable necessity to ensure adherence to performance standards. While updating curricula the faculty must be acquainted with the newer studies and technologies to keep them abreast and conduct proper delivery.

Eliminate Ethnic inequalities – Caste must be removed from focus and only economic backwardness must be made criteria for extending government support to all communities. Several individuals from the traditionally down trodden groups, even after having richly benefitted from government support continue to exploit the opportunities provided, preventing the real oppressed groups from any significant benefits.

Promote use of Internet and Communication Technology – Adequate emphasis must be placed on improvement of internet and communication technology as it enables easier access to information and educational content and facilitates better education than traditional methods.

Enable better funding for institutions – Government must provide sufficient autonomy and funding for all institutions with an effective monitoring mechanism to ensure appropriate infrastructure, facilities and aids to impart quality education.

Improve financial schemes reach – This can be a shot in the arm to the weaker sections as the promise of higher education becomes closer. Traditionally backward sections have shirked away from higher education owing to their inability to bear the costs of higher education. But with genuine and easily available government financial aid, education becomes much more accessible
across communities. Though there is ample funding on the government agenda, the complexities involved in obtaining finances makes them inaccessible to most lower groups.

**Remove overlapping of authority** - Regulatory bodies function across parameters often overlapping authority, affecting the delivery of quality education. Since education is a subject of both the central and the state governments, there are frequent conflicts in several areas of education. The government must resolve such complexities and ensure proper delegation of authority for smoother functioning.

**Make curriculum industry oriented** – The higher education system must provide for updating of curriculum over regular frequencies to help learning match industry requirement. This way employability skill would be better and so do the prospects.

**Other measures** - In addition to these, governments must encourage Public Private Partnerships in higher education and also involve the industry actively through comprehensive CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) activities. The role of civil society in widening access to higher education may also be an area of thrust. A comprehensive study on access to under-represented communities may be conducted every alternate year and progress recorded for comparative references. Exhaustive studies also are required on higher education programmes of developed countries and their systems replicated to the Indian context.
6. Conclusion

India has historically been a nation divided on social, ethnic and economic fronts. Successive governments have attempted to analyse and overcome the divide but have not made much headway chiefly owing to political compulsions. With the onset of higher technology, easier access to communication and information technology, the divide has shown definitive signs of narrowing down even though only to a marginal extent. The government and the private sector will continue to play a key role in improving the reach of good quality education to all the corners of the country.

Most of the under-represented communities today are able to access better education at elementary and higher levels. However the ancient system of social divide as a whole remains unshakably strong and continues to resist change howsoever economy or technology attempts to. Still it is appreciable that several policy initiatives undertaken by the government are continuing to demonstrate better efficacy and gradual success. The turn of the twenty first century has brought about a revolution in technology and with it have tremendous changes been made across the education system of the country. Though the community divide exists still and perhaps will continue to do so, it is shown that equity in higher education and a healthy economy is not at too far a distance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game changers</th>
<th>Key challenges</th>
<th>Key recommendations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial Innovations</strong></td>
<td>Very low per capita spends on higher education leading to significant paucity of funds for expansion and quality enhancement. Inadequate exploration of alternative revenue streams by HEIs. Poor coverage of scholarships and student loan schemes to support needy students and enable tuition fee rationalisation.</td>
<td>Encourage private sector investment in education through the development of innovative PPP models. Introduce performance based funding by the Government. Rationalise tuition fees structures and support the same with the creation of a strong education financing mechanism. Build an enabling environment to generate alternate sources of revenue by HEIs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Innovative use of Information and Communication Technology</strong></td>
<td>Lack of ICT infrastructure in HEIs and low technology/people readiness. Poor quality of digital content, especially in regional languages.</td>
<td>Improve ICT infrastructure in HEIs through PPP models and incentivise adoption of ICT in pedagogy. Develop mechanisms for development and fee distribution of high quality content across languages. Improve connectivity across HEIs and create a national repository of digital content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reinvigorating</strong></td>
<td>Poor standard of research across Indian higher education institutes. Lack of qualified faculty, limited funding for research as well as poor linkages between academic institutions and industry/Government R&amp;D labs.</td>
<td>Incentivise research in universities, while creating an enabling environment in terms of lesser teaching hours for researchers, greater budgets and access to better infrastructure. Increase the number and quality of doctoral students through the launch of innovative programs, provision of attractive fellowships and enhanced industry collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thrust on Vocational Educational Training</strong></td>
<td>Low penetration of VET due to limited relevance and poor outcomes. Multiple regulatory bodies and lack of linkage of VET with the mainstream education system.</td>
<td>Improve oversight structure for VET, facilitating greater industry involvement and providing greater alignment with market needs. Facilitate mobility between VET and mainstream education through a system of credit transfer. Support private sector vocational education through accreditation and recognition mechanism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regulator’s Framework</strong></td>
<td>Multiplicity of regulators with overlapping roles Uneven entry barriers leading to a skewed development of the system Limited transparency, low autonomy and poor quality control systems.</td>
<td>Create a single independent agency for regulating higher education and simplify the regulatory framework. Reduce entry barriers for reputed players, by facilitating entry of high-quality foreign universities and private universities through the PPP mode. Improve transparency and disclosure in the system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>