

Rethinking, Reimagining Higher Education in Modern India: An Educator's Perspectives for Vikshit Bharat@2047

Preeti Priyam Sharma

Assistant professor of Sociology Third Floor, Academic Block, National Law University and Judicial Academy, Assam Barpeta Hajo Daulashal Road Amingaon, Guwahati-781031 Assam

Abstract:

The paper is a critique of the contemporary higher education system prevalent in India. A phenomenological stand-point of an educator has been adopted, an insider engaged within the system and observations made through the course of more than a decade, reflections juxtaposed vis a vis established truths and notions about the processes and goals of the higher education system in India. A philosophical outlook is also present in which the internal subjectivity of the author as a participant has been taken into consideration. The impetus on a holistic life and personality development approach is the conclusion drawn through the paper.

Keywords: higher education, phenomenology, lived-experience, holistic personality development, life-skills, employability skills, transaction analysis

INTRODUCTION

The goal of educational system should be to create wholesome human beings, strong, resilient and happy. Only strong, happy individuals who have discovered their true 'calling'¹ which ignites one's passion can achieve excellence in their chosen domain of productive work. It may seem like utopia in a country like India, populous and suffering from constraint of resources with its own issues of cultural lag and cultural leap. However, development must be inclusive in its spirit and character. The demographic dividend that India enjoys today needs to be utilized to its optimum potential and that can happen within an eco-system where 'inclusion' and 'accessibility' are the core principles. The human resource of a nation is its most valuable tool to achieve greatness. A nation is nothing more than its people and each individual experiencing balanced growth will lead to the development of a nation which experiences in its true form. (Countries like Japan, South Korea, Scandinavian countries have successfully operationalized this idea within their development process and have reaped the rich dividends for all to see.)

As an educator for more than a decade, certain observations have been made by the researcher (a stake holder to the process of youth development) about some of the components necessary in higher education systems today. It is not a conscious attempt to critique policy, but an educator's perspective on higher education systems in India. The term 'system' indicates the tremendous heterogeneity in terms of both quality and quantity and the differential levels of accessibility with the system. The process as it exists, the possible interventions that can make it more efficient to address the goal of 'Vikshit at 2047' are the goals of this paper.

In an 'elite' 'high quality' (as per general public's perception) institution of higher education, the entire component of the educational process is based on an idea of 'anticipatory socialization' for future 'productive roles' to be occupied society. This anticipatory socialization should be actually designed in consideration of a holistic perspective on life. Life is all about work-life balance.

Adult life constitutes a juggle between multiple competing roles and mastering the delicate art of balance lies at the root of achieving success, satisfaction both at the individual as well as social levels. Modernization process is fraught with its own complexities. One aspect is certain, the rising materialistic aspirations of the people is (both a culturally, legally, socially approved goal for the members of a society, the Indian context being the case under discussion) creating economic, social, political and legal responsibilities on families, the traditional socialization modes are undergoing rapid changes due to technological modernization (read: social media, gaming and smart phones addiction), personal and social disorganization, (read: relationship crisis, conflict and disharmony, a state of perpetual scarcity: both real and relative and demonstration effect based. Therefore, the nature of traditional socialization processes is undergoing change, the educational system has to contribute to manage the chaos it has brought forth and to navigate the confusion-laced process of transition that our society has been undergoing and it promises to continue for an indefinitely long time ahead. The attempt to create a deadline for our development goals (2047) is prudent, however it must be accompanied by suitable systems to enable and facilitate 1.4 billion people to move in that direction. This marks a call to action for all institutions and systems engaged in youth development.

The idea of gender-role socialization is an often-repeated idea yet it finds little consideration within the higher education system in India. But what is the truth and the path ahead? It is surprising how truth might exist in plain sight yet be obscured in terms of policy priorities. The role one plays within families (like for women: mothering which requires knowledge of culture, wisdom to navigate through complex social relationships and scenarios, cultural values and knowledge of nutrition, child bearing and raising experiences, exercise primary health care, household management systems, cross-cultural practices to problem-solving, etc.) Men, on the other hand (need heightened problem-solving skills like driving, plumbing, protector, basics of self-defense and combat, fitness, electrician's role, gardening, setting camps, chopping woods to name only a few) In retrospect, they can call be clubbed together (both the masculine and feminine roles and ways of knowing) as Life-skills. Activists like Saroj Nalini Dutt during the early part of the 20th century highlighted how women's education could solve this problem for families, why can't both men and women be trained for the same roles in the 21st century? Today men too want to be active participants to usher in family well-being and prosperity. The training if institutionalized within education systems, will make the rest more open minded about the roles they can play within their families. Fulfilling one's cultural roles and reciprocities are an inevitable necessity to lead wholesome lives. Today, men and women seem to struggle in their maintenance of work-life, professional soft skills, community social skills and citizenship value internalization, employability skills, knowledge about one's environment and ecology, healthy habit formation go a long in the development of good quality human resources within a society. Apart from life skills training (not gender roles anymore), communication skills, transactional analysis, cultural and civilizational awareness, legal awareness, finance management and relationship management, digital literacy and so forth.

The National Education Policy, 2020's focus on holistic education and revival of Indian Knowledge systems is a welcome approach as if we look at the globally as well as within India specifically although people struggle to lead wholesome quality lives in sustainable manner. We have great workers and

innovators, however reflexive modernization (Ulrick beck) requires that to go achieve optimum results out of our human resources while we still enjoy the ‘demographic dividend’. However, life is more than mere workplace orientation. A holistic approach to life and development on the part of the youth will aid corporations and nation as well as it will enhance the workers’ general life satisfaction and happiness which will translate into a better ecosystem for the economy. After the pandemic it is become very necessary to rethink existing systems of higher education.

Decolonization should lead a rethinking of this idea of holistic education –a system that enables students to perform efficiently in all aspects of life. Our traditional oriental wisdom talks about the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. The ability to be an understanding family member, committed citizen and dedicated community member, owner of a health body, mind and soul, one who is resourceful and empathetic with creative hobbies with the ability to deal with any emergency or crisis that modern life may throw at one has become an important mandate of modern higher education system. A better quality of life will automatically serve as a solution to the increasing alcoholism and drug addiction among youth within the country.

Question of access is often discussed but focus on specialization in the western sense of the term should not make us ignore the invaluable traditional perspectives on life where a person should be equipped to deal with all challenges of life instead of merely becoming a proficient professional. Indian School of Business has courses designed to understand and develop user empathy. Schools in Scandinavian countries have empathy and real-life problem-solving classes. The Netherlands has gardening classes for its students as a part of regular curriculum. The creative channelization of leisure has become a national need to battle problems that threaten to decay our valuable youth resources.

Higher education system in India needs to be rethought and reimagined in terms of accessibility to all stake holders and to equip students as future citizens to deal all life challenges effectively. Communication is not only a rational process; it is a personalized and empathetic process which depending on the situation one may need to apply transactional analysis for success. Not all situations require same type of communication. Often successful communication is not the technical aspect of language grammar and diction but more of an application of empathetic understanding of the context and audience. Such training is never given other than institutions like family and community. Higher education systems need to stay relevant to contemporary demands of reflexive modern society. Also in the light of changes happening within the traditional agencies of socialization, the educational systems need to fulfill the needs arising out of changing times.

Quoting Dorothy E Smith about experience of masculinist rationality at workplace and an extremely different motherhood experience at home rooted in affectivity, altruism, sense perception, sights, sounds, touch and love and navigating the two worlds with two radically different approaches within a single day is a challenge that no one trains anyone for. The real need of the hour is to develop a system of higher education which equips an individual to deal with multiple life roles that one is expected to play in society instead of the one productive economic role for which anticipatory socialization is generally done.

To develop effective communication skills, change management skills, leadership skills, team player skills, expectation management, basic financial literacy with regards to the structure of taxation and investment process (how to enhance one’s regular flow of wealth: training in this domain could enhance overall capital accumulation within the country) basic awareness of the important laws, rights, duties, enforcement procedures are important for a healthy and multi-cultural democratic system and efficient management of one’s income and wealth will contribute to development of financially responsible

individuals.

Citizenship values and community participation should not be limited to schools alone. In this regard, expanding the roles of National cadet Corps and National Service Scheme may lead to desirable outcomes. Regularly utilizing mandatory participation of students and other stakeholders in Swachh Bharat Abhiyan activities will help character building and humility will be cultivated. Sports is another area which should be adequately developed and provided for within all institutions of higher education. Ability to work within groups, cultivation of effective communication and leadership skills, being socially and financially responsible, understand one's family and community obligations, hobbies that develop healthy de-stressing mechanisms, yoga, meditation and exercise that will lead to holistic health, revival of Indian knowledge systems, basic knowledge of indigenous health and nutrition systems, ability to deal with pain, failure and stress, expectation management, apart from area of economic specialization can create the much needed wholesome individuals who can excel either as service professionals or as entrepreneurs. The self-motivated individuals who do not shy away from leadership or business/entrepreneurial opportunities as mentioned by late A.P.J Abdul Kalam's in his Ignited Minds may become a reality through this system of holistic higher education. The courage to pursue one's true calling and deal with one's own expectations, cultivation of the spirit of social responsibility may battle many social problems like drug abuse/addiction, alcoholism, disrespecting public resources and property, develop self-employment which may generate employment for others as well. The spirit of social and financial responsibility when teamed up with effective communication and leadership qualities will lead to the optimum utilization of the 'demographic dividend' that India is slated to enjoy till 2047. Youth led development is the only way forward, the untapped human resources of the most populous nation of the world are the most valuable potential that can lead to true development in all walks of life. This would require a paradigm shift in higher education systems and has already been visualized in the NEP 2020. The movement away from mere class-room oriented teaching-learning activity to 'on the job' training (already followed in many institutions and found to be effective), the skills to develop a good quality life with happiness is something youth today need most urgently. The ever-increasing cases of depression, gaming addiction development of the 'sense of entitlement' should give way to a sense of responsibility and confidence to navigate through the uncertainties in life. The present system of higher education in India finds itself lagging in such an understanding of balanced life instead of a unidimensional pursuit of economic empowerment / employment.

Anticipatory socialization should deal with a holistic life approach. Instead of being professional domain specific, a holistic life-approach will solve issues like depression, despair and addiction that youth today generally face. The economy-focused higher educational system needs a paradigm shift. Development should not focus on skill-development alone. A healthy mind exists within a healthy body is not a cliché but a deep truth. Physical and mental development, how to provide emotional care to self and others, skill development, ecological and cultural consciousness development are goals that education at all levels especially higher educational institutions need to address. An ideal citizen, a good human resource needs to be adept at: How to maintain effective relationships through use of transactional analysis, effective communication, and empathetic disposition, empathetic, resilient, in love with one's own self (self-love is the foundation for universal love) the importance of portfolio management, financial and social responsibility will not only lead to individual prosperity and but also contribute to nation's prosperity.

Basics of personal financial management, social responsibility towards community, society and environment, household management through life skills will make for independent and efficient

individuals. How to manage expectations, change, chaos (reality of full of chaos), emergency and disasters. It is not always necessary to rely on societal socialization patterns which are impacted by one's caste, class, religion and various other social contacts. Roscoe Pound's idea of social re-engineering can be achieved by restricting and redesigning the higher education policy.

The mere form of law or constitutional provisions are not adequate to achieve a massive transformation as envisioned in the Constitution of India. British Government led modernization processes carried out the colonial agenda of drain of wealth, educational systems, policies that uphold those colonial set of values, cannot be the solution for the challenges or needs of a Viksit Bharat. In order to achieve the constitutional ideals enshrined in the preamble, decolonization of higher education systems to produce not only competent professional who are employable (another area of specific focus, employability not only constitutes domain specific technical knowledge but also cultural frameworks, etiquette, networking, communication, leadership, composure, grace, team playing, abilities, innovation, courage, tactfulness, skills, sociability, work ethic which are equally important in determining success in the professional domain but also precious citizens who lead healthy, wholesome lives. The lost traditions of the Indian knowledge system that focused on overall personality development should be revived. It will be a good way to de-colonize the higher education systems.

Specific curriculums which cater to gender-specific roles like responsible pregnancy and motherhood. Vocational skills based on special needs assessment of individual students with disabilities, transgenders' orientation about rights and the support eco-system available. Oriental cultures and philosophies emphasize on the inter-connectedness of all-life forms, a deeper and empathetic understanding and sustainable approaches to higher education had long been advocated by eco-feminists. 'Vasudeiva Kutumbakam' is an idea within the rich Indian philosophical heritage if revived will automatically address issues of cultural lag and many other social problems.

Challenges: Revival of traditional knowledge systems should not be at the cost of the modern constitutional values which may have western origins yet are fundamental foundations for multicultural and super-diverse civilization/society i.e. India. Inclusion of different marginalized sections within the process of mainstream development is non-negotiable. Courses that enhance mental fortitude, forbearance and tolerance are the need of the hour, blending psychological, sociological, and yogic traditions to develop such multi-disciplinary courses which if made part of compulsory pedagogy will lead to capacity building of youth and also further the process of new job and knowledge creation processes. Blending home science, stress management, ayurveda and gardening -skills can enhance profession-based skill sets. Hence the need to reimagine the higher educational curriculum from life and market perspective is the need of the hour. Similarly, professions that demand sedentary life-style and working in high risk/high stress circumstances should involve mandatory training in stress management and yogic practices. The idea is not to merely make an entry within a profession but to sustain and thrive within it. This brings out the importance of strategic networking. There are some who are naturally gifted with networking skills or a support system to ensure success in their given field of endeavor. According to Durkheim the production relations that people find themselves within, also become their social relations. Therefore, institutional training for this vital skill for professional success cannot be overstated within contemporary contexts.

Inclusion and access are the forerunners of the process of establishing equity within the educational process. Thus, the development needs of the marginalized, the socially backward, the weak learners need to be addressed with special care so that institutions of higher education can also serve as centres of social inclusion and community centers as well. The public and private partnership lies within the road to true

inclusive development.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL INFLUENCES:

Qualitative research displays the desire to explore or describe phenomena. Qualitative research seeks the lived experience, the personal experiences, the understandings, the meanings, and the stories associated with the concepts present in our studies.¹

Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world. According to phenomenologists, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman humans experience the world through our senses. Through social interaction, meanings/labels are assigned to different bodies/minds. Through social interaction, meanings/labels are assigned to different bodies/minds. Disability is therefore constructed via social processes by which some bodies/minds are identified and categorized and treated as disabled.²

Albert Schutz incorporated Weber's concept of *verstehen* (subjective understanding). For Schutz, the meaning that the individual imparts to situations in everyday life is of prime importance, he puts the spotlight on the individual's own definition of the situation. Schutz says that in these situations, people are acting on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions about reality. They suspend doubts that things might be otherwise, and interaction proceeds on the assumption of the reciprocity of perspectives

According to Antony Giddens Routine saves actors from the anxiety of the unknown. Giddens has quoted nazi concentration camp experience to highlight the disastrous consequences of removal of routine, predictability and the Idea of control from people's lives.³

The concept of standpoint as developed by Dorothy E Smith has also helped the author develop understanding about the discrepancy between social scientific description and lived experience

Smith uses the notion of standpoint to emphasize that what one knows is affected by where one stands (one's subject position) in society. We begin from the world as we actually experience it, and what we know of the world and of the "other" is conditional on that location (Smith 1987).

Yet, Smith's argument is not that we cannot look at the world in any way other than from our given standpoint. Rather, her point is that:

1. no one can have complete, objective knowledge;
2. no two people have the same standpoint; and
3. one must not take the standpoint from which one speaks for granted. Instead, one must recognize it, be reflexive about it, and problematize it. One's situated, everyday experience should serve as a "point of entry" of investigation. The author has used her observations and experiences of the system as a point of engagement and critique to the system of higher education, put forward suggestions based on her stand point of life, community and systems of higher education.⁴

Through bifurcation of consciousness, Smith refers to a separation or split between the world as one experiences it and the dominant view to which one must adapt. Thus, the outsider's objective knowledge

¹ Neubauer BE, Witkop CT, Varpio L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspect Med Educ.*: 90-97. doi: 10.1007/s40037-019-0509-PMID: 30953335; PMCID: PMC6468135.

²<https://resources.nu.edu/researchtools/qualitativeresearchquestions#:~:text=Qualitative%20research%20seeks%20the%20lived,making%20assumptions%20about%20our%20sample>, accessed on 13.09.2024

³ Wallace, A. R., & Wolf, A. (1995). *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition* (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

⁴ Wallace And Wolf (1995)

and the insider's subjective understanding of a system has paved the way for the development of the 'lived-experience perspective'. The validity of these observations arises from the author's regular engagement with the higher educational system as an insider for more than a decade.

Lived experience perspective: A product of the contemporary higher educational system, the privilege of being educated in the mainstream as well as the margins in the country, and most importantly having gone through 'the full-spectrum of life challenges' that modern life can offer uniquely places the author to develop her own standpoint on life, development and freedom. An educator within a higher education system for more than a decade made the author competent to make the following specific observations about the ideal and real conditions within the system of higher education in India. Some of the observations have been shared as follows:

There are increasing cases of depression, despair and addiction among the students within higher educational institutions today. There is a greater number of students who struggle to cope with the challenges that life places before them. yet the educational system places no impetus on anticipatory socialization. While they are going through training and development, they find themselves coping with pressure relating to academic performance, relationships, addiction, abuse, and uncertainties about future roles (for which they lack proper coping mechanisms, they also lack life and survival skills.) Many are seen visiting therapists, coping with relationship issues, expectation management, struggle to adapt to multi-cultural environments and accepting and acknowledging diversity through their 'ethnocentric' mindsets. Their confusion, variety of ideologies they are curious about, things about the world they want to know (google doesn't place the knowledge within perspectives, educational institutions do. Yet they only produce professionally competent individuals who sometimes are not employable, cannot work within teams or take leadership, lack of knowledge of nutrition or nourishment, lack creative hobbies (a key to better stress management, dealing with crisis and failures of life), coping with failures is essential to developing resilience, and relationship management skills and mindset.

That makes me wonder what are we really trying to achieve? Education should make us change-ready, cope with the uncertainties and challenges of life, a wholesome life and productive life needs balance and equilibrium. The material and non-material aspects of life should be balanced and the same values and skills disseminated in favor of decolonization of the higher education systems (but not the principle of inclusion of all sections). The rich Indian cultural heritage and knowledge systems have always advocated a holistic approach to life. Be it yoga or any other principle is based on ideas of interconnectedness of life. Courses that harness the rich Indian cultural heritage like yoga, ayurveda, silk crafts, handicrafts, cultural diversity, spiritual heritage, tribal heritage, courses that highlight the plurality that India is, its rich civilizational history, the idea is to make the shift from tradition to modernity an organic and evolutionary process, the missing link within the India's modernization process which was abrupt and chaotic due to colonial agenda and interventions. Systems compatible with *gesellschaft* society was imposed arbitrarily over a *gemeinschaft* community. The gap of information and access has only continued to widen over centuries. The present education system if utilized with a vision compatible with the constitutional goals can address some of the key concerns of our society.

The credit systems within the higher education structures (read: Choice based credit system, this system has been developed to allow individuals freedom to choose the process of their growth, the process of self-expression and self-driven growth instead of rigid customized development paths without any consideration/ recognition of individual difference. Changes though slow are happening to make higher education a more creatively satisfying process for all its stakeholder. The pursuit of excellence does not

need to be a means to an end but an end in itself. The journey can be equally glorious like the destination) can be utilized to impart innovative courses, some of which should be a compulsory component of the specific degree, other can be aptitude and need-based. The stipulation of minimum credits for these life-skills to qualify for any degree apart from regular courses. Multi-disciplinary courses should also be a part of the degree curriculum. The core idea is transformation of a system not for the purposes of tokenism but real ones in response to present societal changes and in anticipation and preparedness of the future society one envisions to be a part of. Become the change you wish to see in the world around you is the idea put forward by Mahatma Gandhi himself. Higher education systems need to respond to the vision of the society that we want our youth to step into.