

Beyond the Degree: Higher Education as an Engine of Social Change in India – A Review with Reference to Karnataka

Dr. Ravindra Kumar A. Bhandari

Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology,
Government College (Autonomous), Kalaburgi

Abstract:

Higher education is widely regarded as one of the main instruments through which societies change: it produces skills and knowledge, opens routes of social mobility, and shapes values, citizenship and public life (Srinivas, 1966; Sen, 1999). This review examines how higher education contributes to social change in India, with particular reference to Karnataka. It traces the growth of the Indian higher education system, discusses its effects on social mobility, economic participation, gender relations and cultural values, and identifies the persisting problems of unequal access, uneven quality, commercialisation and graduate unemployment (Tilak, 2013; Varghese, 2015; Himanshu, 2011). The paper argues that higher education transforms society only when access is equitable, quality is assured and institutions are connected to local needs (Béteille, 2010; Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Keywords: Higher education, social change, social mobility, equity

Introduction:

Societies change through many forces, but education, and higher education in particular, has long been treated as a key driver of that change. Universities and colleges not only train people for occupations; they also transmit and question ideas, create new social groups and prepare citizens for public participation (Singh, 1973; Béteille, 2010). In India, where caste, class, gender and regional inequalities have shaped access to opportunity for centuries, higher education carries a special expectation: that it will widen opportunity and contribute to a more equal society (Ambedkar, 1979; Deshpande & Yadav, 2006).

Since independence, India has built one of the largest higher education systems in the world, and the pace of expansion has quickened in recent decades through the growth of private institutions (Agarwal, 2009; Varghese, 2015). Whether this expansion has actually produced social transformation is, however, debated. Critics point to concerns about quality, equity, commercialisation and the weak link between degrees and decent work (Tilak, 2008; Kapur & Mehta, 2004).

This paper reviews the literature on higher education and social change in India, giving attention to Karnataka, a state with a large and diverse higher education sector and marked regional differences in development (Government of Karnataka, 2006).

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of higher education in bringing about social change in India, with special reference

to social mobility, economic participation, gender relations and values.

2. To analyse the major challenges facing higher education in India and Karnataka, and to suggest policy measures that can strengthen its contribution to an equitable society.

Methodology:

This study is a qualitative, descriptive and analytical review based entirely on secondary sources, and it does not involve primary data collection (Kothari, 2004). The sources include books and articles by Indian scholars, peer-reviewed journal papers, reports of national education commissions and policy documents, official higher education statistics and Karnataka-specific publications where available.

Sources were selected for their relevance to the objectives, scholarly credibility and focus on the Indian context. The literature was read closely and organised under themes: the conceptual link between education and social change; the historical development of Indian higher education; its effects on mobility, work, gender and values; the Karnataka context; and challenges and policy responses. Findings were compared across sources to identify agreement, disagreement and gaps, and sociological ideas of social change and modernisation were used to interpret them (Srinivas, 1966; Singh, 1973). Recommendations were drawn from the patterns that emerged from this synthesis.

Conceptual Framework: Education and Social Change

Indian sociology has long examined how education interacts with social structure. Srinivas (1966) showed that social change in India takes forms such as Westernisation and Sanskritisation, in which new cultural models are adopted within existing social arrangements, and education has been a principal channel through which such models spread. Singh (1973) argued that modernisation in India is a process in which tradition and modern institutions influence each other rather than one simply replacing the other. Applied to higher education, this suggests that universities can introduce new knowledge and values while also reflecting existing hierarchies of caste, class and gender (Béteille, 2010).

Sen (1999) offers a complementary perspective by treating education as part of the expansion of human capabilities: it enlarges people's freedom to choose valued ways of living and to take part in social and political life. From this view, the social value of higher education lies not only in earnings but also in agency, voice and participation (Dreze & Sen, 2013). Ambedkar (1979) viewed education as a means of emancipation for groups historically denied it, a perspective that has shaped Indian debates on access and equity.

Development of Indian Higher Education

After independence, the University Education Commission of 1948–49 laid out the aims of university education for the new nation, and the Kothari Commission of 1964–66 linked education with national development and called for expansion and quality improvement (Government of India, 1949; Government of India, 1966). Later decades saw a rapid growth in colleges and universities, followed since the 1990s by a marked increase in private and self-financing institutions (Agarwal, 2009; Tilak, 2013).

Kapur and Mehta (2004) argue that this growth took place within a framework of heavy regulation and weak institutional governance, leading to problems of quality and autonomy. Varghese (2015) describes how massification has raised enrolment and brought in first-generation learners, while creating concerns about quality and unequal access across states and social groups. The National Knowledge Commission (2009) also stressed the need to expand access, improve quality and promote innovation. More recently,

the National Education Policy 2020 sets out a vision of multidisciplinary institutions, flexible curricula and a significant increase in higher education enrolment by 2035 (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Higher Education as an Agent of Social Change

Social Mobility and Equity

Higher education offers one of the main routes to upward mobility for historically disadvantaged groups. Constitutional provisions and reservation policies have opened institutions to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes, and scholars continue to debate how affirmative action can be designed to reach those who need it most (Deshpande & Yadav, 2006). At the same time, caste discrimination in labour markets persists even for educated persons, so a degree does not guarantee equal returns (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007). Higher education therefore promotes mobility but cannot by itself remove structural discrimination.

Economic Participation and Employment

Higher education is expected to supply skilled workers and support economic growth. However, analyses of Indian employment trends show that job growth has not matched the expansion of the economy, which leaves many educated youth underemployed or in insecure work (Himanshu, 2011). This mismatch between qualifications and available employment has become a central concern in policy discussions on employability and skills (Varghese, 2015; National Knowledge Commission, 2009).

Gender Relations

Women's participation in higher education has risen over time, and Chanana (2007) shows that globalisation and changing opportunities have influenced the subject choices of Indian women students. Social expectations about marriage, family and appropriate roles nevertheless continue to shape how far and in what fields women study (Chanana, 2001; Kingdon, 2002). Higher education thus supports changes in gender relations, but the extent of change depends on family and community attitudes as well as institutional access.

Values, Citizenship and Public Life

Universities are also spaces of debate, critical thinking and civic learning. Bêteille (2010) stresses that the quality of universities depends on academic freedom, autonomy and a culture of inquiry, which in turn shapes the intellectual life of society. Education that encourages questioning and reasoned dialogue contributes to democratic participation and to challenging social prejudice (Sen, 1999; Dreze & Sen, 2013).

The Karnataka Context

Karnataka has a large network of universities, colleges and technical institutions, and its capital is a well-known centre of science, technology and research. The state's human development report, however, documents uneven development outcomes across districts, which implies that access to higher education and its benefits differ between regions within the state (Government of Karnataka, 2006). Recognising regional backwardness, the Constitution was amended to provide special provisions for the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, including measures relating to education and public employment (Constitution of India, 1950, Article 371J).

Studies from Karnataka-based researchers on caste and labour markets show that educational attainment does not remove disadvantage in employment for marginalised groups (Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007). For a state with both a thriving urban knowledge economy and economically weaker rural and backward districts, higher education can reduce inequality only if first-generation learners from these areas can enter and complete degrees and find suitable work (Government of Karnataka, 2006; Varghese, 2015).

Challenges

- **Unequal access:** Participation differs by caste, gender, region and income, and first-generation students often face financial and social barriers (Thorat & Newman, 2010; Varghese, 2015).
- **Quality and autonomy:** Concerns about teaching quality, research culture and institutional governance remain central (Béteille, 2010; Kapur & Mehta, 2004).
- **Commercialisation:** Treating higher education as a tradable commodity risks weakening its role as a public good (Tilak, 2008; Tilak, 2013).
- **Employability gap:** Graduates frequently encounter weak labour-market prospects despite higher qualifications (Himanshu, 2011).
- **Gendered constraints:** Social norms continue to limit women's choices and completion (Chanana, 2001; Kingdon, 2002).
- **Regional disparities:** Within states such as Karnataka, backward districts lag in access and outcomes (Government of Karnataka, 2006).

Policy Directions and Recommendations

1. **Expand equitable access:** Strengthen public institutions in backward regions, widen scholarships and support for first-generation learners, and improve the design of affirmative action (Deshpande & Yadav, 2006; Varghese, 2015).
2. **Assure quality and autonomy:** Improve faculty recruitment, research support and institutional governance so that universities function as centres of inquiry (Béteille, 2010; Kapur & Mehta, 2004).
3. **Protect the public purpose of higher education:** Regulate private provision so that affordability and quality are maintained (Tilak, 2008; Tilak, 2013).
4. **Connect education with work:** Link curricula with skills, apprenticeships and local economic needs while preserving broad learning (National Knowledge Commission, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2020).
5. **Support women and marginalised learners:** Provide safe campuses, hostels and counselling, and address social barriers to continuing education (Chanana, 2001; Chanana, 2007).
6. **Implement NEP 2020 with attention to regional realities:** Adapt multidisciplinary and flexible learning reforms to the needs of states like Karnataka (Ministry of Education, 2020; Government of Karnataka, 2006).

Limitations of the Study

This review has several limitations. First, it relies only on secondary literature, so it provides no new empirical evidence on the effects of higher education (Kothari, 2004). Second, as a narrative review it does not follow a systematic search and screening protocol, so relevant studies may be missing. Third, the Karnataka-specific literature used here is limited, and the state's regional, caste and urban-rural diversity means that findings cannot be generalised to all institutions or districts. Fourth, higher education policy

and enrolment change quickly, and recent developments under the National Education Policy 2020 may not yet be fully reflected in published research. Finally, social change is a broad and contested concept that cannot be attributed to education alone. Future studies could use primary surveys or case studies of students and graduates in different Karnataka districts to address these gaps.

Conclusion

Higher education has real potential to change society: it creates skills, opens routes of mobility, supports women's participation and fosters critical citizenship (Sen, 1999; Chanana, 2007; Béteille, 2010). Yet the Indian evidence shows that this potential is only partly realised. Unequal access, uneven quality, commercialisation and a weak link between degrees and decent work limit its transformative effect (Tilak, 2013; Himanshu, 2011; Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Higher education can therefore act as an agent of social change only when it is accessible to all sections of society, academically strong and connected to the needs of local economies. For Karnataka, this means attending to regional disparities and ensuring that first-generation and marginalised learners can both enter and benefit from higher education (Government of Karnataka, 2006).

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