

“Harnessing the Indian mind: The challenges of education”

What can the mind do? It can think, it can question and it can reason. Everything we find around, everything manmade is a marvel of these attributes emanating from the human mind. It can appreciate the existential and yet, can unearth the hidden meanings associated with it.

It can paint. It can perceive colours. It can create the vocabulary of aesthetics. It can create languages and write poetry, but also invent the alphabet. Mind creates, innovates, moulds the world. It is the mind that has created sciences and their use. Innovation has taken humanity through the labyrinths of progress.

The progress we as a nation could make in the coming years raise questions of harnessing the Indian mind, and the streams into which the mind is getting channelized. It is at this juncture, that the importance of *quality education* comes into the picture. The wealth of India lies in her human resources. The potential however, can flower only when due attention is given to education.

Education like any other social phenomenon is a part of the social fabric reflecting the inherent inequalities existing in our society. In the case of the Indian education system, the socio-economic hierarchy of our society is mirrored in our educational system. There are a few elitist institutions while so many others lack basic infrastructure. To complicate matters international trade agreements put pressures of global competition and survival.

With 290 university-level institutions, 13,150 colleges, 88 lakh students, and 427,000 teachers, India has one of the world's largest higher education systems. Yet, the enormity of this structure pales if we consider that only 8% of the related age group avail themselves of higher education. This clearly indicates that even a slight increase in the demand for higher education would put enormous pressure on the existing system.

The challenges before the Indian higher education also include the regional disparity and a skewed growth of specialisation.

For example, the four Southern States and Maharashtra account for 32% of India's population, but in terms of institutions of higher learning 46% of total general education colleges and 60% of the professional institutions are situated here. The states of UP, MP and Bihar account for 34% of the population, but 23% of general colleges and only 14% of professional colleges. In India, the growth of new private institutions is characterised by a skewed pattern with a spurt of only engineering colleges and management institutes.

Education is not just another tradable service with profit as its primary motive. Education shapes the very process of economic and social development. The structure and growth of a country's education sector depends upon how the country's policy makers view higher education. Is it viewed as an essential service for developing human resources? Or is it viewed only as any other *trade generating* service responding to market demands? The answers to these fundamental questions would determine how the educational sector shapes up as a consequence of liberalisation.
