

SARDAR PATEL UNIVERSITY
Vallabh Vidyanagar

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Professor Ved Prakash
Chairman, University Grants Commission
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Her Excellency Smt. Kamala Beniwal Ji, the Hon'ble Governor of Gujarat and Chancellor of the Sardar Patel University; Prof. Harish Padh, Vice-Chancellor, Sardar Patel University; Esteemed members of the Senate; the Syndicate; the Academic Council; the faculties; the Boards of Studies; the Board of Post Graduate Studies and Research; Students, Members of the media, invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a matter of great privilege and honour for me to be present today in the land of Rashtra Pita Mahatma Gandhiji and Loh Purush Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

It is, indeed, a matter of great delight to be in the midst of talented and outstanding men and women who have worked no doubt with dedication and commitment undoubtedly to get this far. I take this opportunity to congratulate all the recipients of the degrees and awards, which they have earned for themselves through their untiring and persistent efforts.

The teachers, the parents and the non teaching staff of the University deserve equal appreciation for their

encouragement and support that they have provided to these young minds to reach this important destination in their journey.

I am pleased to learn that the alumnae of this University have occupied and even continue to occupy coveted positions in various fields of human endeavour. It is a great day for these young achievers as well as for the rest of us when we derive lessons from the past and resolve to meet future challenges.

The Sardar Patel University has many firsts to its credit. It is the first University in the State of Gujarat to volunteer itself for assessment and accreditation by the NAAC. It is, indeed, heartening to know that the University has been conferred a Four Star Rating. It is also the first University in Gujarat to present itself to the NAAC for re-accreditation. It is also the first University in Gujarat to be awarded EDUSAT by CEC. And, once again it the first University in Gujarat which has established and runs a Community Science Centre.

Friends, the vision of higher education in any country is to realize the human resource potential to its fullest with equity and inclusion. The challenges are many, diverse and conflicting but keeping in mind the audience, I would like to dwell upon the questions and concerns faced by the higher education system in India.

If we look at the history of India's higher education since early times, we find that Indian higher education system has a

long and complex history dating back to Ancient Vedic period. Initially, it was a system of transfer of knowledge and skills through oral and written traditions from one generation to another. Higher education was generally available to a selected few, especially those occupying the top positions in the social hierarchy, i.e. Brahmins and other upper castes.

It was during the colonial period that the European model of higher education in India was introduced. The pace of growth of higher education institutions was very slow during the period from 1857 until the country got independence in 1947. The country had a very small system of higher education at the time of independence with only 20 Universities and 500 colleges. Enrolment in these institutions was around a hundred thousand, and the participation of women was very limited. The system was highly elitist and there existed wide geographical disparity in the distribution of institutions. The thrust of development was mainly on liberal arts education and science education, but science education was given relatively low emphasis.

After independence, the higher education system witnessed a visible change from being an elite system to a system for masses. The policy of building a self-reliant economy called for faster expansion of the higher education system following the principles of distributive justice, equity and efficiency. The initial three decades witnessed expansion

of public-funded higher education institutions with an overriding consideration of the policy of protective discrimination to ensure access to the disadvantaged sections of society. The expansion in the higher education sector prior to early 1980s was mostly policy driven and funded by the government. Private sector participation in higher education was at its minimum and it was all with philanthropic motives. Till early 1980s, higher education in India had not shed all the characteristics of the colonial period it had.

From the mid-1980s, expansion was left to the market forces. Development of higher education in the 1990s was greatly influenced by neo-liberal policies that focused on making the economy. The structural reform programmes introduced in the early 1990s began to impact on the economy around mid-1990s and the country adopted the strategy of expanding its service sector. Availability of abundant cost effective manpower with college education attracted foreign firms and the Indian labor market slowly began to be integrated with the global market. The government and the aided universities and colleges were not in a position to respond to the increasing demand for professional and technical skills. The size of the middle class was also growing and the middle class households were willing to invest in professional and technical education because of their high market premium. As a result, a large number of private un-aided institutions

imparting professional and engineering courses were established, mostly in the southern and western parts of the country. Since then, the size of the private unaided higher education segment has increased tremendously mainly in the fields of engineering, medical, management, teacher education and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). At present, in the professional stream, more than 80% of institutions and enrolment are in the private un-aided sector. Private colleges provided more than 86% of the total engineering seats in the country. Thus the growth in higher education in India is largely market driven, and except science and technology and IT education, no policy planning effort seems to have been initiated during the last one decade for development of other segments of higher education.

The critical role of education in the knowledge economy is to keep pace with the ensuing changes in the international environment. India, one of the fastest growing economies in the world is committed to building a knowledge based society. Today, India has the largest system of higher education in the world in terms of the number of institutions with 611 degree awarding institutions and 33,324 colleges. It is the third largest system in terms of students' enrolment. Despite all this, the matter of great concern is that the proportion of Indians in tertiary education is now by far the lowest among the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China)

economies. Increasing access to higher education in India has been constrained by the low secondary education completion rate. In fact secondary education in the country has been virtually sandwiched between the high priority given to elementary education and the on-going debate on reduced role of the State in the development of tertiary education.

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Since the major shift in the economic policy in the early 1990s, when India implemented structural adjustment programmes and opened up its economy, it attempted to pursue the policy of 'leapfrogging'. It had to forgo the attempt to industrialize the nation and moved ahead with the use of IT strategies towards becoming a knowledge economy.

In the 1950s and 60s, while the institutions grew at the annual rate of 8.2 per cent, the gross enrolment grew at the annual rate of 12.54 per cent. In the recent past because of the privatization the annual growth had taken a reverse turn. In the last decade (2000-10), while the institutions have grown

at the annual rate of 9.3 per cent, the enrolment has at the annual rate of 6.25 per cent. There are about 18% students of the relevant age group are enrolled in higher education. Unless the internal efficiency of the school system, especially secondary and higher secondary, is improved, there will not be enough students for higher education. As the dropout rate in Class X and XII continue to be quite high, University teachers are expected to take the responsibility of helping the secondary sector with appropriate pedagogies to make learning easy and enriching.

Another glaring drawback that we see is that the growth of institutions and enrolment has been uneven across States. The socio-economically backward groups are also under represented. Participation of girls, particularly in technical and professional courses is also relatively low. Although the demand for higher education has been increasing by leaps and bounds, wide spatial variations are observed in the provisioning and participation levels across the states. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in the country ranges between as low as 4.7% in Nagaland to as high as 37.25% in the national Capital Territory of Delhi (MHRD 2006). There have been marked disparities among various socio-economic groups as far as participation in higher education is concerned. Though the participation of girls is increasing steadily over the years still the share of girls'

enrolment in the total enrolment is much lower. Participation of girls is relatively low in traditionally backward states like Bihar, Rajasthan, Orissa, Jharkhand, etc. Participation of the backward classes is still lagging behind in comparison to the general population. Although the participation rates of girls, SCs and STs are increasing over the years, social and gender disparities still remain the subjects of great concern. It may, however, be mentioned that the differential access and participation in higher education reflect the unequal access to school education in the country. Without appropriate policy interventions in the school education sector, particularly in secondary and senior secondary levels, it would be of little use to have interventions at the higher education level which positively discriminate the girls, SCs, STs, minorities and the other backward classes.

There is an urgent need to widen access to higher education which is of paramount significance. We have to enhance diversity on our campuses. It will be good to the society in general and children in particular. If we allow our children to grow with boys and girls from diverse social backgrounds, they will emerge as more stable and better citizens.

The higher education has witnessed a skewed growth in the recent past. On the whole around 84% of the enrolment is in the three disciplines namely arts (45%), science (20%)

and humanities (19%) and the remaining 16% in the professional courses such as education, engineering, technology, medicine, agriculture, veterinary sciences, law, etc. Enrolment in engineering and technology accounted for 7.5% of the total enrolment. Enrolment in discipline related to agriculture was only 0.6% and in veterinary science it was negligible i.e. only 0.16%. The balance in favour of the traditional courses makes it apparent that the country is still following the colonial legacy which emphasized on educating people for the white-collar jobs. Though large percentages of people are engaged in agriculture, the number of institutions and enrolment pertaining to agriculture is negligible. Since 2001, there has been spectacular increase in the number of private higher educational institutions and the enrolment in these institutions. The growth pattern between the period of 2001 and 2006 shows that, the number of private unaided institutions constituted 42.6% of the total number of higher education institutions that increased to 63.21% in 2005-06. Similarly, the share of enrolment in private unaided higher education has gone up from 32.89% in 2001-01 to 51.53% in 2005-06. For opening new institutions, redistributions of the disciplinary programmes need to be based on critical review of the manpower needs of the economy.

Historically, in India, State has primarily served as service provider and subsidizer of higher education. There

have been State-funded and State-owned institutions of higher education. The Education Commission in 1966 had recommended that six per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) be spent on education. We have not been able to realize the goal of 6% even after six decades of independence. There is clearly a need to invest a lot more in higher education. The State governments should provide more funds to the State universities. Over the years, sources of financing higher education have been diversified to cope with the declining trend in public expenditure. The overall tendency has been to shift the cost of higher education to the direct beneficiaries (students) and the users (employers). In India, reforms relating to mobilization of resources to reduced public expenditure have included promotion of distance learning, encouragement of private sector and cost-recovery methods. Cost-recovery implies a reduction in subsidies in higher education. Various revenue diversification measures included hike in student fees, student loan programs operated by commercial banks and privatization. Various revenue-raising measures have taken place in the form of raising tuition fee as a significant source of revenue. Nonetheless, it is evident that a large gap is likely to emerge between the resource requirements of the system and the availability of resources if the present trends in financing of higher education continue into the future. This may likely to jeopardize the efforts to make India competitive in the global market if it is not given due consideration on priority basis.

Although the country has diversified access to tertiary education allowing private institutions, bringing in distance education providers, introducing self financing courses in public institutions, permitting a few foreign providers to operate in the country, such strategies have limited impact in meeting the rising demand for tertiary education, particularly for disciplines which creates knowledge-intensive workers. The post-1980s phenomenon of expansion of non-university sector particularly polytechnics and industrial training institutions, largely managed by the private sector, have tried to meet the growing demand for training. At the same time there is also a growing concern for commercialization of private sector tertiary education which goes against the principle of equality of access. Allowing the private sector to supplement the efforts of the State to expand the higher education system in a way amounts to institutionalizing exclusion, particularly access to highly demanded disciplines. Although the effort of the State has been to protect the interest of the disadvantaged groups by introducing positive discrimination measures such as reservation policy, scholarships, student loans, etc., these have been largely supply side interventions. Creating enabling conditions for raising the demand for higher education by these socio-economically disadvantaged is a major concern.

Traditionally, maintenance of standards in higher education has been the responsibility of the central government. The central government has established as many

as 25 Professional Councils. Some of them are statutory bodies entrusted with the responsibility of laying down norms and standards in different areas of study and enforce them for the purpose of ensuring quality and maintaining standards. These Councils also serve as vital links between the central and state governments as also with the institutions of higher learning. In addition, the central government has also established two independent national level organizations namely the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) for accrediting institutions and programmes. The NAAC is mandated with the task of assessment and accreditation of Universities and colleges.

The whole idea behind this exercise is to empower the institutions to maximize their resources and capabilities by letting them know their strengths and inadequacies. Institutions need to be mobilized to come forward and allow them to peer group review carried out by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA).

We need to broaden curricular provisions and come out of the straight-jacketed system. We must make options available to study. We need to improve the quality of course curriculum. We need to forge linkages among institutions nationally and internationally. Reforms in teaching/learning methodologies have become centre-stage in any education

system as a cardinal step towards quality. Curriculum updation in different domains of knowledge in higher education is significant to apprise young learners of the new ideas that have emerged in their subject disciplines and in weeding out obsolescence from the curriculum to ensure its continued relevance.

In our culturally plural society, education should foster universal and eternal values, oriented towards the unity and integration of our people. Such value education should help eliminate obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition and fatalism. Apart from this combative role, value education has a profound positive content, based on our heritage and universal goals and perceptions. There is an urgent need for every institution to revisit its charter and ensure teachers and students engage in scholarly discussions on a range of wider issues of historical and contemporary significance apart from study of specific disciplines. Ethics must be the foundation of the entire structure of higher education. If we are not teaching ethics and if we are not imbibing eternal values, we will not be able to succeed.

The Radhakrishnan Report of 1948 rightly pointed out that the status of the teacher reflects the socio-cultural ethos of a society; it is said that no people can rise above the level of its teachers. The Government and the community should endeavour to create conditions which will help motivate and inspire teachers on constructive and creative lines. Teachers

should have the freedom to innovate, to devise appropriate methods of communication and activities relevant to the needs and concerns of the community. The preparation of teachers for all levels of school education should be the responsibility of institutions of higher education. This was advocated by the Education Commission (1964-66) as well. For historical reasons, the involvement of the universities and school level teacher education has remained confined to secondary and senior secondary level only.

Good quality higher education still remains elite in nature as it is still not accessible by a large bulk of eligible population. This is primarily attributed to the policy shift in the mid 1980s by forestalling the growth of public institutions and leaving a wide open market to private institutions offering courses of study that have high market premium. Government should realize the limitations of the private sector and strengthen higher education in areas which are very vital in improving nation's competitiveness through fundamental research. Besides, austerity measures in higher education have taken a heavy toll on the quality of higher education. These trends in funding should be reversed and public funding for higher education should be substantially increased. India, like other developing nations, may have to overcome the access, equity, quality, governance and funding problems. In fact the pace of addressing these issues would largely determine the effective participation of universities in the process of creating

knowledge based society, besides raising country's economic capacity.

In today's ICT age, technology-mediated teaching and learning is the need of the day. It is not that we need to engage with technology, it is more so whether we can afford to postpone utilization of technology in our day-to-day classrooms. It can be profitable to learn from the e-learning and virtual classroom initiatives in the US university system so that a similar movement is examined for initiation in our country on a wider scale. We should strive towards empowering every child with education. People have to come forward and teach poor children to improve literacy rate. As the size of the middle class is swelling, the demand for higher education is increasing fast. This should not lead to floating of all kinds of third rate institutions.

There exists a peculiar situation in our country. While on the one hand we have a large number of unemployed graduates on the other hand we have a severe shortage of skilled workforce. Those of us engaged in higher education must be sensitive to those 75 per cent of our fellow citizens who are living in villages under hard conditions. We can't afford to grow in isolation. If our mega cities grow and the smaller cities and villages languish in scarcity, it will be a meaningless growth.

It is evident from the present arrangement that there are multiple regulatory bodies which seem to be suffering from

the problems of coordination and overlapping jurisdiction. While each regulatory body has been playing a useful role, it is the absence of an overarching instrument for coordination which is causing trouble.

We must constantly reform through our commitment to achieve excellence in teaching, research, and engagement. This requires four things - national conviction, sustained political will, substantial amount of resources and capacity development.

Before I close, I would like to exhort our young graduates to stay put as lifelong learners, see inspiring dreams and learn the art of providing a healthy response to the rough patches in life. These are the real Mantras that will help our youth achieve a series of successes besides bringing in laurels to them, to their families and to their institutions.

Let me at the end once again thank the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Harish Padh, his team and other colleagues for having given me this opportunity. I am sure and confident that this University has a bright future and can play an important role in meeting challenges of human development.

With these words, I once again congratulate all the students who have earned degrees, medals and prizes and wish all of them all the very best.

Thank you !

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