

An Insider's View on Challenges in Higher Education

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How did China, the only other country comparable to India, get so much right in education despite facing challenges as great as the ones India confronted at the time of its independence?

If a commentator had been asked in 1950 to hazard a guess on which of the two countries – equally poor at that point of time – was more likely to succeed, he or she would very likely have picked India. The latter had better political and administrative institutions, and superior industrial capabilities, even producing more steel than China. More to the point, India had a more robust higher education system with some top-notch institutions already in existence for decades.

Today, China has practically beaten hunger, and all but eliminated illiteracy. It produces more steel than any other country in the world and is on course to emerge as the world's largest economy. On the higher education front, China has many more emerging world-class institutions than India and not all of them scientific and technological. (What is not so well known is that the Chinese may surprise the world in the humanities too.)

Sadly, India continues to have the world's largest number of illiterates and malnourished. From the primary level upwards, India's educational system, and higher education especially, is in a state of perpetual, and often destructive, reinvention. Given

Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future by Pawan Agarwal (*New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2009; pp 488, Rs 895.*)

India's starting advantage, the failure in higher education is particularly deplorable.

How did India get to this state when China, without even the advantage of an international language such as English, streaked past with universities and higher education institutions that will surely rank amongst the best in the world in the next few years? All this cannot be simply explained away by China's totalitarian regime being better placed to get things done in shorter time frames compared to a pluralistic democracy or the many pressures – ethnic, religious and regional – that India is heir to. In understanding China's success, we must avoid facile explanations that grow hollow with repetition because these pressures are realities for China too.

Fundamental to China's technological, scientific and economic prowess is the manner in which it has managed to make a difference through education. At the base level, China has pulled way ahead of India in literacy. In the critical area of higher education, the China-India gap is only widening.

To understand why, consider how India has handled higher education. We can do no better than begin our enquiry with Pawan Agarwal's detailed and factual

overview. Agarwal's book is an indictment of the existing Indian higher education system and a reiteration of the urgent need to reform it.

Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future is rooted in data, each bit carefully selected to illuminate the higher education scene, rather than justify any one particular viewpoint. As director in the department of higher education in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Agarwal had a ringside view of the arena. During his tenure, he not only contributed to higher education policy-making but also oversaw implementation across India.

Agarwal's book explains in stark detail how much catching up remains. India lacks a critical mass in higher education. A gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 11% compares poorly to China's 20%, Korea's 91% and the United States' (us) 83%. While the regulatory mechanisms are many and cumbersome, the University Grants Commission (UGC) as well as the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) have not done their jobs well enough. Every state has a licence to tinker with education, since constitutionally education is a subject on the concurrent list.

Meanwhile, China has more than twice as many students in higher education as India – 23 million plus. Unlike the developed countries and now China, government research projects do not support Indian universities in any significant way. With 708 researchers per million, China has six times India's research manpower. At its current rate, China will catch up with developed countries like Japan and the us. For India, the challenge seems overwhelming. This should be a matter of great concern especially since it affects

everything from agriculture to defence and climate change.

Agarwal explains in substantial detail how India's higher education system works. India has arguably one of the least enabling environments in higher education and has always shied away from the fundamental reforms necessary to make it competitive. India has nothing like the Bologna process, which has vastly improved faculty and student mobility and contributed to excellence in higher education in Europe. Faculty salary structures and career advancement systems are primitive. They rarely reward the outstanding and almost never dispense with the mediocre. Students cannot move between institutions carrying credits for completed coursework with the ease with which they do so in the us or Europe and now even in China. Decision-making systems are painfully slow and often too late, with none of the nimbleness that is transforming higher education in east Asia. India has nothing comparable to the state support for education in China and even Pakistan.

The book discusses how systems of accreditation and funding are organised in India. The reader also gains an in-depth understanding of the institutions which manage accreditation and funding – the UGC, the AICTE and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). The accreditation system is overburdened and funding has yet to find the balance between performance and reward.

India is also haemorrhaging talent. In absolute numbers, more Indians go abroad for higher education than any other nationality, including the Chinese. (The numbers opting for an overseas education in China peaked some years ago and is now falling.) Agarwal has much to say about globalisation and growing private participation in higher education. This is a bright spot in an otherwise bleak higher education scene, though the fact that Indians spend over Rs 7,000 crore on coaching classes – a third of the total national higher education budget – is worrying, since in many ways, such expenditure constitutes an indictment of formal systems.

A full chapter of the book is devoted to issues of accessibility and equity. While

Agarwal does not challenge quota-based reservations, he argues that there is a strong case for “better policy design in affirmative action” (p 63) and that “affirmative action should be based on providing equality and opportunity for higher education to all, based on merit and work towards a non-divisive casteless society” (p 62). Affordability is another issue that Agarwal speaks to: “Despite affirmative action, the students from poor families will continue to be deprived of educational opportunities due to rising costs of education at all levels” (p 62).

Agarwal's book highlights the many barriers in the way of rationalising our higher education system, especially in determining which areas in higher education need focus – to match emerging employment opportunities and for the country to remain competitive. Two developments revolutionising higher education are information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the setting up of offshore campuses; neither is missed by Agarwal. The book offers a comprehensive account of the higher education system in the us, perhaps the most enabling in the world.

Wide-ranging as the book is, there are still a few gaps. The first is the near absence of a discussion on the social sciences. Higher education is not all about technology, science, management or law. The best universities in the world have vibrant social science and humanities departments that contribute tremendously to humanity's understanding of the world. But then, why blame the author when there is little discussion of the humanities and social sciences even among policy-makers or in public debates.

The second shortcoming of the book is the absence of a discussion on issues of higher education administration. From this author's own experience as registrar of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bangalore over six years, it is evident that an administrative system that lacks accountability can be crippling to the best of institutions. I can state with some authority that all of India's higher educational institutions have very poor administrative systems with a virtual absence of human resource development (HRD) function. As investments are made in the setting up of new higher educational

institutions, neglecting the administrative aspects will prove counterproductive. New and leaner systems of institutional management are needed, with efficiencies built around outsourcing and contract work. But these seem to be non-issues with the government and worse, the institutions themselves.

A third shortcoming in Agarwal's book is that it does not go into the reasons why so many universities with a reputation for excellence, such as Allahabad, Andhra and Mysore, have been allowed to deteriorate. It is important to understand the reasons for such a decline when elsewhere, especially in UK and the US, venerable institutions like Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard continue to be among the very best in the world.

Though the book is nearly 500 pages, it is not long for a vast and incredibly complex topic. To put this volume together, Agarwal needed to distance himself from years of hands-on work as in charge of higher education in the government of India, and later in the UGC. Fortunately he could do so through a Fulbright scholarship in the US, soon after completion of his tenure in the Ministry of Human Resource Development. This enabled him to draw on his experiences, look at global practices and evolve the understanding that this book so well reflects. This “distancing” has resulted in a book that despite its few shortcomings, is the definitive work on the subject.

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