

MCB Memorial Oration, 2009
The 16th of November, '09
School of Management Sciences
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

By

Mr H N Das, (IAS, Retired)
Former Chief Secretary, Govt. of Assam

**ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION
THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION**

Revolutionary changes are being introduced in India's system of higher education in the next few years. In his 2009-10 Budget Speech delivered on July 6, 2009 the Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee said that "the demographic advantage India has in terms of a large percentage of young population needs to be converted into a dynamic economic advantage by providing them the right education and skills". He, therefore, increased fund allocations under each head of the Education Budget and provided funds for quite a number of new institutions including Universities, IITs, NITs and IIMs. The overall allocation for education has been enhanced by Rs. 2000 crores over the Ad Interim Budget passed before the General Elections.

Earlier, the Economic Survey, 2008-09, had noted that a suitable follow-up legislation is necessary to give effect to the 86th Constitutional Amendment which had led to insertion of a new article 21-A in Part III of the Constitution that made Free and Compulsory Education to all children of 6 to 14 years of age a Fundamental Right. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill, 2009 has now been passed by the Lok Sabha. The Survey also noted that "there has been significant growth in higher education during the academic year 2006-07". After giving the details of such growth it remarked that "further reforms are needed in the education sector where both the Central and State Governments are involved". Moreover, the Survey advised that "Government's higher education funds should be focused on promoting scientific and technical education and encouraging R&D in all subjects". The Survey, therefore, gave very clear indications about substantial changes in the field of education. Earlier, the Human Development Report, 2001 reached almost the same conclusion when it said that "the 20th century's unprecedented gains in advancing human development and eradicating poverty came largely from technological breakthroughs". It is this type of breakthroughs that we must pursue in order to ensure that economic growth can take place.

However, the revolutionary changes referred to at the beginning of this article will come mainly from the implementation of the recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission(NKC). NKC prefaced its recommendations on higher education with the following important remark : "There can be no doubt that higher education has made a significant contribution to economic development, social progress and political democracy in independent India. It is a source of dynamism for the economy. It has

created social opportunities for people. It has fostered the vibrant democracy in our polity. It has provided a beginning for creation of a knowledge society”.

In fact, NKC submitted a total of around 300 recommendations on 27 subjects during the three years of its existence (2006-09). Many of these recommendations have been included in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12). The others are also being implemented by the Government of India(GOI). Both NKC and the Plan “places high priority on education as a central instrument for achieving rapid and inclusive growth with specific emphasis on expansion, excellence, and equality.” A fund allocation of nearly Rs. 2,74,222 crores is proposed for education in the Eleventh Plan which will be a four-fold increase over the Tenth Plan. In the case of higher education the allocation will be Rs.75,102 crores which will be a 472.76 percent and almost a six-fold increase over the Tenth Plan realization. Education’s share in the total Plan will increase from 7.7 per cent to 20 percent “representing a credible progress towards the target of 6 per cent of GDP.” NKC’s Report rightly emphasized that “the education agenda outlined in the Eleventh Plan is a critical step towards realizing the objective of an equitable society. It is also fundamental to our continuing growth, employment generation, infrastructure development and other development priorities.”

NKC, therefore, concluded that “higher education needs a systematic overhaul, so that India can educate much larger numbers without diluting academic standards.” According to NKC “the objectives of reform and change in our higher education system must be expansion, excellence, and inclusion.” One of the major recommendations of NKC is to increase government support for higher education and to increase enrolment in colleges to 15 from the present 7 per cent. The number of universities is to be increased to 1500 from about 350 as at present. An Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education will be established. In addition, the creation of 50 National Universities has been proposed in order to bring about “ a fundamental paradigm shift in our understanding of quality and standards in higher education.” This will entail reforms and changes in all aspects of higher education.

Meanwhile, a Committee headed by Prof. Yash Pal has submitted its Report on “Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education in India.” It has recommended broadening the ambit of higher education. Another important recommendation concerns the establishment of a National Commission for Higher Education and Research. This will bring all higher education institutions, including those in engineering, medicine, agriculture and law within the purview of a single, all encompassing authority. The Committee believes that “there are no great universities in the world that do not simultaneously conduct world-class programmes in science, astronomy, management, languages, comparative literature, philosophy, psychology, information technology, law, political science, economics, agriculture and many other emerging disciplines. All the disciplines breed value into each other.” Later, on another occasion, Yash Pal expressed concern over the mushrooming engineering and management colleges which, according to him, had largely “ become business entities dispensing very poor quality education”. He diagnosed the malaise affecting the present structure of Indian education including the examination system, inequities and the absence of good and high level universities and came to the conclusion that the entire system had to be changed. In the same Conference on Higher Education, organized by the DAV College Forum, another eminent academician, GP Chopra, opined that “higher education in this country suffered from

many deficiencies such as inflexible academic structure which need to be revamped allowing for creativity and innovations”.

The above description of higher education in India reminded me of the World Development Report, 2007 (“Development and the Next Generation”) which had quoted a Brazilian “young person” as saying the following : “the teacher pretends to teach, the student pretends to learn, and the state pretends that it fulfills its role”. A casual observation of the state of affairs in the Indian Universities will convince that this can be equally applicable to our country as well.

If we look at the statistics the scene that emerges is one of sheer wastage of talent and also manpower generally. After passing the Plus-2 level only 12 per cent enter college in India while the world average is 27 percent and the American-European average is 50-70 percent. In India, therefore, “we need to talk about 88 percent at the bottom of the pyramid” according to Kapil Sibal, the Union HRD Minister. Education reform must be inclusive enough to take care of these drop outs.

In my personal view we have to address several aspects of the system of higher education in India simultaneously. These will include curriculam, syllabus, faculty, infrastructure of buildings, laboratories, libraries and other facilities beside the most important issue of finance. The solutions are indicated in NKC report and Yash Pal Committee report. It is now for the Central and the State Governments to act and act promptly. The changes proposed are really far reaching.

In the context of such revolutionary and tremendous changes, which are proposed in the country’s system of higher education in the next few years, it will be necessary for all concerned to be ready to absorb the changes and to benefit from these. It is good that the Assam Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi, has mentioned certain projects in this behalf in his Budget Speech for 2009-10. However, much more will have to be done in order to take full advantage of GOI’s fund allocations as mentioned earlier.

It may be recalled that in the United States of America the new President Barack Obama has laid maximum priority on education for reviving the country’s economy. The book entitled “Change We Can Believe In” categorically states that “ we must set ambitious goals for education that include advanced twenty-first-century skills, good character and informed citizenship. It’s time to make a historic commitment to education- a real commitment that will require new resourses and new reforms”. Obama has declared his objective to be “a world-class education for every American”. He also pledged to “make America the undisputed leader in science and technology” and to “make college affordable for everyone”. This commitment to education is discernible in his following statement: “I believe it’s time to lead a new era of mutual responsibility in education-one where we all come together for the sake of our children’s success”. The example set by Barack Obama for USA should be emulated by India. *(The writer was Chief Secretary, Assam during 1990-95)*