

Higher Education as “soft power”

Higher education has been receiving a lot of attention in the past three decades. Government after government has been talking of increasing GER (Gross Enrolment Ratio); there is a constant mention about increasing investment to x% of GDP by every government; dozens of new Institutions (IIT's, IIM's, IIIT's, NIT's, Central Universities) have been created. Private Institutions have grown to world-scale with VIT, Amity and SRM talking of 50,000+ students each in multiple campuses. There is talk (though no concrete action) of permitting foreign Universities to operate in India.

Many of these activities are often ad-hoc; while India took nearly 50 years to establish half a dozen IIT's and IIM's, double that number were hurriedly created in just a couple of years. Many of the Institutes are located in remote places that competent faculty members with options of global academic / research positions, find it unattractive. With no industry and peer institution connect and lack of infrastructure, many of the new Institutes suffer; in turn, though the brand IIT /IIM is globally recognised, the new Institutions are unable to attract the best students. Decision to open new Institutes is not matched with concomitant fund release or land allotment, that even physical infrastructure is often not in place. Thus, the opportunities created still are far short of what is needed.

The private institutions have managed to create large capacities, but have their own cup of woes; regulators tend to be 'not-so-kind' to private Institutions that they too are forced to move in “fits and starts”; in fact, “good” private Institutions struggle hard, while “unscrupulous” Institutions thrive, often hoodwinking the regulators, faculty and students!

The failure of government to create “higher quantity” of higher education opportunities and the private sector's inability to create “higher quality” higher education opportunities force many Indian students to seek opportunities outside India (USA, UK, Australia, Germany, Russia, for example)

Amidst all this chaos, bright students continue to excel in spite of such vagaries. Thanks to the spectacular growth of IT industry from just 100,000 to 200,000 by the turn of the century, today there is direct employment of 44,00,000 and an equally large indirect employment opportunity - created in the past two decades in just one industry segment - namely, IT. The success of high-tech (IT, Biotech, Auto, Pharma, for example) industries, India operations of MNC's and start-up companies demonstrate this.

Bollywood (Indian Cinema) and Cricket, Yoga, Spirituality and to a certain extent Indian classic music have been helping India for centuries to make a positive influence on the global citizens; tourism, particularly, medical tourism has started to be viewed in a similar manner in the recent past. All of them represent India's “soft power”. What is perhaps not realised is the fact that higher education offers enormous opportunities of “positive influence” and as such higher education indeed is a “soft power”, whose potential is yet to be realised.

Many influential Indians, our former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, for example, obtained their higher education in foreign countries (Cambridge University, in the case of Dr Manmohan Singh) several decades back; yet they continue to relish fond memories of their association in their formative years of professional career. Over the years such “connections” help; associating such Institutions and people many opportunities get created, scholarships for students, Chair professorships for faculty members (often with lots of prestige), and, research centres that form platforms for student & faculty group to undertake high-quality research, all leading to a cascading positive intellectual and scholarly influence that lead to sustainable thought leadership for the Nation, a true measure of “soft power”. Such a development indirectly leads to lots of wealth creation opportunities as well. Decision makers in the country often assisted by economic planners and financial analysts - often obsessed with RoI (Return of Investment) - tend to neglect this very important role that higher education can play.

India has created many “gurus” - Swami Vivekananda in the 19th century to Yoga exponent BKS Iyengar in the 20th Century; in the 21st Century let the “gurus” in higher education Institutes educate millions of “shishyas” from all over the planet, right in India. The scattered efforts by Culture Ministry (providing scholarships), UGC / MHRD, MEA even creating Institutes overseas must be synergised; regulators must look beyond “rules & regulations” and view this as “strategic opportunity”.

Let ten of thousands of Indian “gurus” in our Universities educate millions of “shishyas” from around the globe and realise the true of potential of the soft power of higher education.

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