



Book Discussion: Higher Education in India and China: Select Perspectives

Speakers: Prof. Sreemati Chakrabarti, Dr. G. Balatchandirane, Ms. Aishna Sharma

Chair: Patricia Uberoi

ICS Seminar Room

The Chair, Patricia Uberoi, began the session by explaining the various methodologies that scholars use as they engage with comparative studies and the difficulties associated with it, even when the cases being compared have a lot in common.

Professor Sreemati Chakrabarti, the editor of the volume *Higher Education in India and China: Select Perspectives* acknowledged at the very onset of the discussion, the drawbacks of the book. She declared that the volume lacked chapters on gender and caste inclusivity. She contextualised the book in an era of globalization, liberalization and a spurt in knowledge economies which subsequently resulted in an expansion and restructuring of the higher education systems in both China and India. She gave a brief overview of each of the chapters in the book, inviting the other speakers Ms. Aishna Sharma and Dr G. Balatchandirane to speak about their respective chapters.

The first chapter identifies four different phases in the development and restructuring of higher education in China. The first phase is rebuilding the system from the aftermaths of the cultural revolution. The second phase is that of recovery and reconstruction. The third phase is characterized by a stress on quantity and the fourth phase is characterized by a stress on quality. It also touches upon problems of unemployment among graduates, uneven development across provinces and discontinuation of education post high school.

The second chapter focuses on privatization of the education system at the higher education level. It identifies the specific courses taught in private universities, most of which are job oriented. It also discusses the tussle faced by the government which manifests in terms of its desire to promote higher education through greater privatization and simultaneously retain control over these institutions.

The third chapter focuses on internationalization of the education system through means of student and faculty exchange programs and the transfer of knowledge. Internationalization, in the chapter, has been linked to the wielding of soft power as well as some other commercial considerations.

The fourth chapter historicizes higher education in China in the form of political utility as defined by the ruling class as compared to the western notion of academic autonomy and freedom of thought. The chapter also mentions the effect of the government financially withdrawing from the sphere of higher education which has often resulted in faculty members engaging in fund raising activities themselves.

The next chapter discusses ethnic minorities in China and the various paradoxes and contradictions in the policy adopted by the state to make higher education more accessible. Despite the existence of quotas for minority communities in China, their presence is still low in higher education institutions. It particularly traces the change in policies adopted by universities towards member of the minority communities; from assimilation to accommodation, allowing courses to be offered in other languages which goes against the broader state agenda and policy towards ethnic minorities in the country.

The sixth chapter discusses the specific case of a Human Rights course being offered at the Beijing university. Although the course focuses on the legal aspects of human rights, not delving into specificities or the philosophy, it has resulted in the creation of awareness and space to discuss human rights in China. The speaker, Dr. Chakrabarti, however notes that this may not lead to the creation of a human rights culture in the country.

This was followed by Dr. Balachandirane discussing his chapter. He began by defining knowledge driven economies stating that higher education and advanced research were the prerequisites of such a system where the economy is engaged in production and consumption of knowledge. He places the discussion on higher education in the context of globalization and demographic dividend. He briefly discussed the importance of higher education in knowledge economies: creation of knowledge workers, generation of knowledge, providing access to new knowledge and facilitation of globalization. He continued to discuss vital statistics comparing how the two countries fared globally in terms of higher education where China's spending on education had significantly increased in the past few decades, while India's remained stagnant. Speaking about globalization he posits that it is not only the exchange of goods and finances, but also an exchange of people and ideas which subsequently resulted in a spurt in knowledge economies. He in this context, discussed the model Japan adopted in terms of the involvement of state in building human capital and growth rates it enjoyed. He drew parallels between the model followed by South Korea and Japan. He also talked about the demographic transition that both the nations were going through, identifying a time bound 'bulge' which meant a more economically active population. He identified higher education as a public good due to the huge amount of externality associated, making the state responsible for investing in it. He concluded by briefly discussing the findings and recommendations of the Gathering Storm Report that emphasises on the importance of state investment in higher education.

Ms Aishna Sharma discussed issues of access and quality of higher education in India post 1990s, in an era of greater privatization and liberalization. She bifurcates privatization into two phases: 1990-2010 and 2010 to the present day. The first phase is what she terms endogenous privatization characterized by performance indicators, job based courses, industry and private participation and funding. The second

phase is exogenous privatization characterized by allowing private investment in the sphere, raising and revising fee structures, voucher systems for students, ranking system for universities and graded autonomy. Key issues identified by her are questions of access due to an increase in fees, inaccessibility of education loans due to information asymmetry and collateral prerequisite. She also addresses a compromise in quality education due to the proliferation of private institute that do not adhere to laid down rules and norms, underpaid faculty, cut down on funds allocated for research and stress on journal publications that curtails academic freedom and changes the nature of research pursued by academics.

This was followed by a round of questions, comments and observation from the audience members. One of the significant questions asked pertained to lessons that India should learn from the Chinese experience with higher education, to which Dr Balatchandirane replied that increase in government investment in the sector and equitable access were major takeaways. Important observations that were brought to the fore were, reexamination of whether a comparative study is suitable to discuss the models adopted by the two countries, the advantage India has over China when it comes to greater academic freedom, the advantage China has over India with respect to offering quality higher education in the native language, the irrelevance of state control and lack of autonomy when it came to the natural sciences, common problems faced by both the nations in terms of creation of greater inequality as a result of greater investment in higher education and the issue of unemployment among graduates.

The Chair concluded the session with a few important closing remarks. She acknowledged that higher education could not be viewed in isolation, without focusing on primary and secondary education. She explained how it could be used as a mechanism to reproduce privilege. She also pointed out the dangers of leaving the decision of what should be studied to the pragmatic, utilitarian and opportunist forces of the market that seemed to be failing anyway.

About the Volume

The edited volume focuses on the higher education scene in India and China in the era of globalization. Both countries have witnessed drastic changes in their tertiary education sector in terms of expansion, privatization, governance, funding, equity issues, internalization and so forth. The chapters focus on the transformation that has taken place in the last three decades in India and China when they have attempted to boost and promote higher education to match their developmental efforts. The process of speedy growth has reaped benefits but has also led to negative consequences like disparity, unemployment and imbalance. The state, an important actor in the growth story of higher education, in both the cases, is still grappling to address these issues. The contributors include scholars from China and India.

Report prepared by Shristi Singh, Research Intern, ICS.

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