

## EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC CRISES

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Agarwal, P. (2009).** *Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications. 488 pp. ISBN 978-81-7829-941-9 (HB)

— Reviewed by Radhika Iyengar, Teachers College, Columbia University

*Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future* goes beyond explaining the traditional human capital theory which links education and skills to labor market outcomes. In addition to looking at the increase in enrollment in higher education across Indian states, the book investigates issues of equity and equality. Equity as it is better understood is the provision of equal opportunity and concerns with fairness in resource mobilization and allocation. Pawan Agarwal focuses on vertical equity issues in particular which relates to understanding how different treatment is provided to people with different characteristics so that the basic minimum threshold level can be reached by all. He looks at urban-rural disparities, inter-state variations, and gender differences against the backdrop of the national policy of providing quotas or reserving admission seats for the marginalized castes in the Indian higher education institutions. At the same time, he investigates the more mainstream demand and supply factors that have shaped higher education in India. The book presents trends and discussions on multiple dimensions such as privatization and regulatory mechanisms, financing and management as well as labor market links and their relation to the rest of the world.

In his forward note for this book, Phillip Altbach mentions that despite being such a big player in global higher education enrollments, no major research center for higher education, which limits our understanding of the “push” and “pull” factors that drive these trends. He notes that higher education as a subject is not taught in the Indian higher education system, unlike in China’s higher education system, which has an extensive network of higher education training and research institutions. Therefore, the book fills this existing gap by providing insights on higher education and its relation to the globalized world. There were over 160,000 Indian students studying abroad in 2005-06 with nearly half of them in the United States (Agarwal p.13). Countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Ireland have also opened their higher education sector to the Indian students, and the author mentions that in the main destination countries from 1999-2000 to 2005-06, the number of Indian students has more than tripled. Additionally, non-English speaking countries like Germany, France and Holland have started educational courses in English to attract Indian students. Although scholars of comparative studies are cognizant of this wave, very few systematic studies have been done to understand the economics of the Indian higher education and its global implications. This book brings to light the magnitude and urgent need to understand the reciprocities and the complexities of the Indian higher education system vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

India is one of the four fast growing developing countries commonly known as the BRIC economies. It is said to have the highest annual numbers of graduating engineers and doctors, yet it concurrently hosts the world’s largest population of adult illiterates. Agarwal explains this dichotomy by highlighting the role of the higher education in the development of the domestic and international workforce. Chapter 5 links the transition from higher education to the labor market in explaining skill shortages. Furthermore, he explains the coexistence of skill shortages alongside with rising graduate unemployment and underemployment. This is linked to the exponential rise in the private higher education sector that promises a “job guarantee” for recent graduates.

In comparative education studies, depending on the context and the level (higher education, primary education etc) the definition of what is considered “private” changes. The author’s careful articulation of public and private institutions based on ownership and financing abilities provides a framework to better understand the terminologies that are usually misunderstood in the comparative education field, like “public” versus “government” and “private” versus “non-government”. This section also includes the increasing spread of foreign education providers in India and their modes of delivery which ranges from having branch campuses, franchised programs, validated programs, distance or open learning etc.

With the number of small, private higher education institutions mushrooming in India, the next logical step is to look at the quality of higher education and the regulation of the sector. Pawan Agarwal explains the need to build new accountability systems using advancements in information and technology, for with the rise of the private institutions, “simply leaving the demand and supply factors to the market will not necessarily deliver outcomes for higher education that represent the best use of resources or that are just and socially optimal” (Agarwal p. 306). This section also provides a detailed regulatory framework based on the recommendations of the University Grants Commission, the apex national regulatory institution for higher education in India. The author includes a historical narrative of Indian Constitutional Acts and the Indian Supreme Court rulings that required establishment of regulatory bodies and defined their roles. Agarwal agrees that due to inadequacies in the legislative framework for private institutions, regulatory bodies more often adopted an ad hoc approach and acted as “controllers” rather than “facilitators”. But this did not prevent the private players from becoming an integral part of the Indian higher education system. The author manages to clear the myth that the policy and the regulatory framework have prevented private participation in higher education.

It is evident that the recent economic crises also adversely impacted the global higher education industry. The U.S. Council of Graduate Schools, basing its findings on a country-wide survey, reported that enrolment of first-time graduate students from India registered a massive 16-per cent decline in 2008-09 because of the financial meltdown. Therefore, given the current scenario, how much of a Keynesian approach should governments have towards high education? Can governments afford to fund higher education, especially in the developing world? Economists like Psacharopoulos estimated that across countries, the private returns on education are greater for primary education as compared to those for higher education. Therefore, the question still remains whether it is advisable for governments to invest in higher education. Although Agarwal does not incorporate these theoretical dimensions of education finance, he gets to the applied side by explaining the role of multiple stakeholders in the funding mechanisms and sustainability of Indian higher education system. He indicates that student loans are a fast expanding area in the Indian banking sector. However, Agarwal mentions that majority of the students who avail themselves of the loans are in professional degree programs (e.g. engineering, management etc.) and that the loans granted appear to be biased towards males. Since banks require security and charge a high risk premium, only few students can take advantage of such services. Student aid is another self-funding opportunity that is granted based either on merit or is targeted towards the marginalized. The author narrates that such scholarships are only a small amount and disbursement leakages prove to be a major hindrance in the system. The author is able to successfully highlight education financing issues, however, a comparative analysis with other countries may have helped to understand both the problems and the potentials solutions.

The book is helpful for scholars, practitioners and policy makers to comprehensively understand the current issues and trends of the Indian higher education systems. However, the arguments

of the book could be strengthened by the following. First, the author attempts to answer the question: is the Indian higher education reaching out to the marginal population? Besides presenting figures of the expanding numbers of higher education institutions and student enrollment, including relevant theoretical aspects would be helpful to augment the argument. For instance, explaining how some of the policy measures of the Government of India intend to put into practice Rawls Second Principle of Justice, which aims at providing the greatest benefit to the least advantaged. This utilitarian concept improves the community's social welfare and is the underlying principle of the reservation policy that is discussed in the book. In other words, it would be helpful to highlight the theoretical aspects of the trends and policy decisions that the book describes. Second, in a similar vein, the author notes that in relative terms, public spending on higher education is not low (estimated at 1% of GDP) considering that India is a developing country; however, in absolute terms it is far less than is necessary cover the existing needs. It would be helpful to link this resources-versus-needs dilemma to the classic debate in economics of resource allocation efficiency which is concerned with obtaining maximum performance of the educational system given the available resources. Lastly, the author makes the argument that Indian higher education has a world presence, especially in a globalized context. Therefore, I believe that in understanding problems of the Indian higher education system, we would gain a great deal more by comparing and understanding similar issues in other countries.

One of the main strengths of the book is that it situates the Indian higher education in the context of "vertical" and "horizontal" linkages both domestically and across the globe. In other words, we get a sense of the demand and supply factors that have shaped higher education from multiple perspectives such as from the socio-economic standpoint, the political aspects, demographic advantages, historical trends as well as from the governance policy formation and implementation aspects. The analysis could also have been strengthened by not only looking at mainstream courses like engineering and technology, architecture, pharmacy, business administration etc, but also incorporating recently established courses on Gandhian Studies, Human Rights and Peace Education. Nevertheless, the book gives a chance to the readers to understand why the Indian higher education is often referred to as "a sick child" or a "quiet crisis" (p. xxiv). In today's globalized world, the book showcases the Indian higher education system, subtly making us aware of its gigantic presence and its power to influence education systems elsewhere. The book highlights the need to learn about the reciprocal relationships between educational structures around the world using a comparative lens.