



HIGHER EDUCATION FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Education has proved to be the engine of social, economic and cultural transformation of a society and there is no alternative or substitute to it. As well it is the primary agent of transformation towards sustainable development, increasing people capacities to transform their visions for society into reality. Education especially higher education not only provides scientific and technical skills, it also provides the motivation, justification, and social support for pursuing and applying them. Generally, higher education refers education in post higher secondary level, i.e. colleges and universities. Higher education system is supposed to prepare youths to become effective and earning members of the society. For this the youths have to be empowered in real sense. It also aims to prepare youths who will be able to face the challenges of life and get employability. In this respect, improving the quality and coverage of higher education for sustainable development must be among the society's priorities. Assam is not so much developed in the educational field but it has a strong base in HRD. The state has nearly 90% rural areas because of slower growth of urbanization process and most of the colleges of the state are situated in rural areas. The higher education system in Assam has a lot of problems not only for quality management but also for its stable existence. It is very disheartening to see in Assam that the higher education system has become merely a factory of producing a large number of graduates, post graduates who are nothing more than a burden on the society. Despite the recent reform initiatives, Assam has fared poorly in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education. As per the recent 'Annual Status of Higher Education in States and Union Territories 2013' (ASHE) prepared by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the GER in higher education is 13.4 percent in Assam against the all-India GER of 19.4 per cent. In terms of overall GER, Assam ranks 28th among all states and Union Territories (UTs) in India. In this paper an attempt has been made to assess the role of higher education in transformation of Rural Assam and also to explore the major challenges of higher education in the state.

KEYWORDS :

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

Education is the primary agent of transformation towards sustainable development, increasing people capacities to transform their visions for society into reality. Education is a life long process of an individual. It begins at birth and continues through out the life. The actual meaning of education is the development of mental, physical and spiritual qualities of a human. Higher education generally refers education in post higher secondary level, i.e. colleges and universities. Higher education not only provides scientific and technical skills, it also provides the motivation, justification, and social support for pursuing and applying them. Higher education system is supposed to prepare youths to become effective and earning members of the society. For this the youths have to be empowered in real sense. It also aims to prepare youths who will be able to face the challenges of life and get employability. In this respect, improving the quality and coverage of higher education for sustainable development must be among the society's priorities. Presently, in the era of globalization and knowledge economy, higher education is the key to over all progress of an area. The role of higher education thus, becomes all the more important in present time.

Despite the recent reform initiatives, Assam has fared poorly in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education. As per the recent 'Annual Status of Higher Education in States and Union Territories 2013' (ASHE) prepared by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the GER in higher education is 13.4 percent in Assam against the all-India GER of 19.4 per cent. In terms of overall GER, Assam ranks 28th among all states and Union Territories (UTs) in India. However, the gender parity with regard to enrolment in Assam is better than the all India average. In terms of gender, enrolment is almost equal with 51.6 per cent comprising males, and 48.4 per cent comprising females.

1.1 Assam State:

Assam is the pioneer state of the North- Eastern Region of India and situated in the far, north-east corner of the country. The total geographical area of the state is 78,438 sq. km, which accounts for about 2.4 percent of the country's total geographical area. The entire area of Assam can be broadly divided into three well-defined geographical units namely- the Brahmaputra Valley covering the main body of the state in the north, the Barak Valley in the narrow

protruding south and the state's Hilly region that separates the two valleys. Although the potentiality of resources is very high, the state is still lagging behind in respect of economic development. This is mainly due to curse of nature and lack of proper attention of the central government. The state as well as the entire north east region of India has been subjected to century long neglect. Even after 63 years of the country's independence, same kind of central apathy is being continued to the region.

The state has 9 scheduled tribes in the plains districts and 14 in the hills districts i.e. in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills (Sengupta, 2002). The total populations of Assam in 2001 census was 266, 55528. Of them 3308570 persons were scheduled tribes (STs) constituting 12.42% of the total population of the state. The percentage of tribal population to total population of Assam increased from 10.03 in 1951 to 12.42 in 2001. Among STs Bodo represents nearly half of the total ST population of the state (40.9%), Miri (17.8%), Mikir (10.7%), Rabha (8.4%), Kachari (i.e. Sonowal Kachari) (7.1%), Lalung (5.2%), Dimas (3.2%), Deori (1.2%) of total ST population of the state. The rest of the scheduled tribes are very small in their population size (2001 Census). The mentioned tribes have contributed to the core in framing the Assamese Society and culture.

Assam is not so much developed in the educational field but it has a strong base in HRD. The state has nearly 90% rural areas because of slower growth of urbanization process and most of the colleges of the state are situated in rural areas. The higher education system in Assam has a lot of problems not only for quality management but also for its stable existence.

1.2 Higher Educational Scenario in Assam:

The present scenario of higher education in Assam can not be regarded as satisfactory because, most of the meritorious students go away from the state after passing out their secondary level education in the state. This is mainly due to non-availability sufficient number of quality professional institutions of higher education in the state. Assam being a part of national policies, cannot escape from the national policies in higher education. The National Knowledge Commission (Assam being a part of national policies, cannot escape from the wave of LPG in higher education NKC) was constituted on 13th June 2005 and the commission

stressed on three important aspects of higher education, i.e., expansion, excellence and inclusion. On expansion of higher education in Assam, the state government has taken initiatives to establish universities and various types of colleges in the state during the last few years.

The following table-1 shows the different types of higher educational institutions in Assam in the year 2013-14.

Table-1.0 Higher Educational Institutions in Assam, 2013-14

Institutions	Number
1. University:	
a) University (including private & Deemed)	10
b) Research Institute	7
2. College for General Education for BA/B. Sc./B.Com:	
a) Govt. College	7
b) Provincialised College	295
c) Colleges receiving financial assistant	41
d) Junior College	466
3.Colleges for Professional Education:	
a) Agricultural and Forestry	2
b) Technology and Engineering colleges	18
c) Management Institute	14
d) Veterinary	2
e) Medical Colleges (including Homeo, Ayur vedic, Dental, Pharmacy/ Nursing)	16
f) Polytechnic Institute	10
g) Architecture and Hotel Management Institute	3
h) ANM Training college	17
l) GNM Nursing college	20
4. Teacher Training Institute:	
a) College of Teacher Education	10
b) Post Graduate Training Centre (PGTC)	1

Source: Statistical Hand Book Assam, 2014, Directorate of Economic and Statistics, Assam

Apart from the conventional system of education at present, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) plays an important role in expansion and development of higher education in Assam. The Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), which was established in 2006 has been playing a vital role in providing various professional and vocational courses for the learners of the state. The Institute of Distance and Open Learning (IDOL), the Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University also plays a prominent role in providing higher education through open and distance mode in the state.

Although there is rapid expansion of higher educational institutions in Assam, the gross enrolment ratio of Assam is still very low compared to that of some other states of the country. It is only 12.8% against the national average of 19.25% in 2013. Moreover, in case of enrolment in higher education there are always gaps among the different groups of people like ST & SC people. The following table-2.0 shows the figure of enrolment by courses in Degree Standard and above in the year 2013-14

Table-2.0 Enrolment by courses in Degree Standard and above, 2013-14

Courses	Enrolment		
	Total	Scheduled Cast	Scheduled Tribes
Ph. D/ M. Phil	1267	110	113
MA	9628	738	1221

M. Sc	5249	414	429
M COM	1679	198	165
BA	178034	24173	21215
B. Sc	36386	1564	2557
B. Com	19628	2270	2710
B.E. (Engg) Govt.	975	65	148
LLB/LLM	7646	2124	567

Source: Director of Technical Education & Directorate of Higher Education, Assam, Statistical Hand Book Assam, 2014, Table- 23.08, Directorate of Economic and Statistics, Assam

1.3 Higher Education for social transformation:

Higher education can be considered as a tool for transformation of a society. However some thinkers reject the idea that education could be the force to transform society. Rather their views are that education can be reformed or improved only if society itself is reformed as education is only the image and reflection of the society and it only imitates and reproduces the latter and it does not create it. Whatever be the arguments, it is fact that the growth of higher education and economic development of a state reveals that one depends upon the other. The report of Economic Committee headed by Raghuram Rajan categorizes seven states including Kerala, Panjab, Tamilnadu, Haryana, Maharashtra, Goa, and Uttarakhand as comparatively more developed. All the states are also comparatively more developed in higher education as they surpass the national GER of 21%. The most backward states like Assam (12.8%), Bihar (11.2%), Jharkhand (10%) etc. remain backward in the sphere of higher education as the GER in the areas are significantly below the national average. The development, no doubt, accelerates the growth of higher education and on the other hand, it is also to be admitted that higher education is also instrumental for building up the foundation for development.

As per 2011 census, the literacy rate in Assam is 73.18 which no doubt maintains the national standard as the all India rate is 74.04. The increase in literacy rate and pass percentage in secondary in secondary level open up the door for higher education for a number of students. But because of the paucity of seats it is seen that even the students securing 1st divisions fails to get admitted in the top ranked colleges in Assam. The problem is that there is not sufficient number of seats in the higher educational institutions in proportion to the number of students passing out the secondary level. This leads to the poor GER in higher education in the state. It is also true that Gross Enrolment Ratio does not reflect the quality of higher education. The problem of dropped out is a major challenge for the advancement of higher education. The percentage of dropped out students would be certainly more than 50% in Assam. It is noticed in general observation that less than 40% of students enrolled in Degree colleges in Assam carry on their study up to 5th or 6th semester.

1.4 Major Challenges in Rural Colleges of Assam:

The poor performance of the state in the field of higher education especially in the rural areas is thus conditioned by several factors. The major challenges are -

Since the eighties of the last century 'Quality and Excellence' have been considered key words in higher education. Quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept which should embrace all its functions and activities, teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students' buildings facilities, services to the community and the economic environment. Quality of teaching is inextricably associated with the resourcefulness of teachers, which in turn, largely depends upon the physical, economic and social environment under which the teachers have to

work. To be resourceful, the teachers need to improve the quality of research which is not properly paid attention in the rural colleges of the state mostly because of shortage of resources, infrastructure, guide etc. The teachers, on the other hand, should have enhanced and updated professional skill and widened horizon of knowledge which appears to be very poor. That a vast majority of teachers of rural colleges are IT illiterate and they don't know even how to operate a computer and this, in turn has been the factor which has put them at a long distance from the emerging trends of higher education. The lack of information facilities in the colleges is creating a serious problem relating the knowledge gap among the teachers, students and college authorities in most of the rural colleges of Assam.

Another important factor contributing to indifference of teachers to research activities is the shortage of faculty members in most of the colleges in order to carry on the process of curricular transactions as smoothly as is expected to. Almost in each of the departments, at least one or two even more ad-hoc and contractual teachers have to be employed. Even then, the regular teachers who are supposed to do research are often over burdened with heavy work-load, especially those in the departments like English, economics, and political science. Many such colleges therefore fail to afford to send teacher to under take research work under various schemes launched by UGC. The ad- hoc appointments on contractual teachers are also having adverse effects in quality education. At the same time there is no denying the fact that a great majority of teachers are reluctant to do research and many of those who have done M. Phil or Ph.D., close the chapter of further study in the aftermath of award of their degree because all that they had done it only for promotion & incremental benefits. As a result, it is seen that many unscrupulous practices have been cropped up in the field of research works.

Every organization needs a proper leader who guides the functions of the organization. Leadership is a process (ability) of influencing the followers (group) and providing guidance, directing and leading the people towards attainment of the objectives of an organization. It is an essential ingredient for successful organizations. A leader can do many things to facilitate the successful implementation of change. These societal and cultural changes meant leaders have been challenged to rethink how they encouraged management, workers, and organizations. The worlds of education are changing day by day, and leaders in today's educational institutions need to determine how to effectively lead in the acquisition, development, and dissemination of information to the tomorrow's generation. What lacks most in rural colleges is good leadership in management that needs to have academically keen interest. The principal in fact, is the leader of teachers in a college and he has to play the role not only of an administrator but also of a leader of the team of teachers.

In Assam majority of colleges established at private initiative for the higher education of the local people in the rural areas. Most of such colleges are resource starved and are still dependent on private donation for building and other infrastructures. Fund is a major problem for existence and development of higher educational institutions in rural area of Assam. The state govt. very often expresses the matter of lack of fund. Due to poor enrolment in some rural colleges cannot rely on the process of internal collection and generation of fund. Hence, the fund crisis is an important problem for development of higher education in these areas.

Socio-economic problems of the state in particular to create the unhealthy forces like "bandh" culture, extremism, politicization etc. and these forces are making huge loss towards our education system. The over all environmental conditions have got damaged due to such type of problems. Moreover the higher secondary class (10+2) section is still attached to the under graduate colleges which is creating an unbearable burden.

The courses offered by the colleges are not up to the mark at this period of cut throat competition. The traditional courses generally

imparted in these colleges are yet to be modernized to fulfill the social demands in the field of employment. However it is not denied that some traditional disciplines are still needed. But the continuation of the trend of liberal education set forth by renaissance which lays emphasis on quest for knowledge for salvation from ignorance needs to be modernized by the introduction of the new trend of scientific and technological education for social and economic prosperity in the age of globalize economy.

To mark educational institutions for higher learning centre of knowledge as proposed by the National Knowledge Commission, stakeholders including governments shall have to shoulder the responsibilities of extension of infrastructural facilities, appointment of adequate number of teachers, enhancing other facilities including financial assistance. It may not be possible for public agencies alone to provide adequate facilities for such large scale expansion immediately. Private has to come to fill in the gap. But we have to resist predatory tendencies for commercial exploitation by putting strong regulatory measures on the private institutions. If possible, Assam govt. should do away with venture system of colleges completely to make the academic ambience of the state healthy.

Most of the colleges lack the basic facilities like indoor stadium, fully computerized library with a rich collection of reference books and national and international journals to compel the teachers & students to spend more time in the campus. In most cases, the facilities of toilet and canteen are not adequate to meet the growing need of the students. Even the classrooms are not well equipped. The advanced techniques of modern information technology have not yet found their way into classrooms. More over, the most of the students in rural colleges of Assam are from Assamese medium background. They generally prefer to read in Assamese medium even in college stage. But no good text book in Assamese medium is found in market. Even there is no Assamese medium text book prescribed in the syllabus of these courses. Since no definite text book is available, students express reluctance to study this subject. Hence non availability of textbook in Assamese is also a challenge for rural students at present.

The colleges have to be satisfied with admission of only those students who are willing to study degree programmes but can not afford to go far away from home for financial problems and some other problems. This has created a situation that the colleges cannot restrict their admission to meritorious students alone. They are constrained to fix a low cut off marks for admission. A few meritorious students also get admitted into these colleges, but their achievement does not affect the quality aspect to an appreciable extent.

The problem of inadequate transport services in rural areas also seriously affects the class schedule of the colleges. Most of the students come from remote villages, which are in most cases, 20 to 35 kms away; the class routine has to be adjusted to the timing of the private busses. As a result, in most of the colleges' classes have to be started from 10 or 10-30. Even then a good number of students cannot reach the college by that time and miss a class or two. Moreover these students- a majority of them come from poor cultivator's family. They are to help their parents in cultivation, farming and other routine activities of the rural folk. As they are hurry to go back home and cannot remain at the campus till 3-30 pm for academic and extracurricular activities. It must be said that whatever quality is reflected in the performance of these educational institutions is threw result of the integrity, dedication and social commitment of those faculty members who value their profession and the interest of the institution above every thing else.

It is also seen in colleges of rural areas that most of teachers of these colleges are from the near by town or city. In some situations it is found that teachers come from 50-70 km away from the college. Communication system in Assam is also not good as some other

developed states of India. Thus, a teacher attending college from a reasonable distance, somehow finish their daily routine or class only. If the situation and circumstances demands some additional assignment, somehow they want to avoid, which adversely affects the interest of the student community. Some time, a science student needs more time in practical class. Since the teacher is in a hurry to go back home, students may some time feel disappointed because of their 'time constrain'.

1.5 Conclusion:

Management and governance are two important parts for strong existence of Assam's higher education. The present structure of management is not seen in its most desired form. Due to faulty management practices, the higher education system has been suffering extremely. The quality of higher education in most our colleges and universities requires substantial improvement. To enhance quality there should regular appointment against all the vacancies on priority basis and create new posts to meet the growing demands. It is mentionable here that no new posts have been sanctioned to the colleges of Assam since 1992.

Higher education system is supposed to prepare youths to become effective and earning members of the society. It also aims to prepare youths who will be able to face the challenges of life. For this the youths have to be empowered in real sense through higher education. But, it is very disheartening to see in Assam that the higher education system has become merely a factory of producing a large number of graduates, post graduates who are nothing more than a burden on the society. Most of the colleges in rural area may not be able to produce high skilled manpower required for global level due to lack of adequate resources, infrastructure and other expertise. So such colleges should take initiative to introduce career-oriented courses that can produce skilled and trained manpower required for local and regional needs in the field of employment and self employment.

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