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# Culturally Responsive Higher Education in India: Issues and Challenges

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**ABSTRACT**

The globalized sense prevailing in Indian society and the advancement in information and communication technologies bring culturally, linguistically and regionally different people together at one platform to share their experiences, to fulfill their dreams and live as an 'mega denizens'. The role of higher education in such scenario becomes vital as it is, in the truest sense, a means to prepare responsible citizens for a developed nation and change the ever increasing population of youth from the 'demographic disaster' into 'demographic dividend'. In the present scenario of globalized, techno-savvy and commercially driven sensibility the aim of higher education in the Indian society has become mere a medium to achieve productive education which can help only for scientific and technological growth, mechanic expertise, materialistic gains, data based knowledge, market generated outlook and greater stress on being educated leaving behind its core purpose of upliftment of human values, ethics and cultures as well as cultivation of the 'artistic fervor'. The biased approach towards any particular culture, language and region has not been part of the Indian social structure and its educational system. The assimilation of various cultures in Indian society has always profited in the richness of Indian civilization and its educational system since its advent. However, the reshuffling of 'power structures' has destroyed the multicultural flavor of Indian society. In such ambiance the culturally responsive higher education is a clarion call for Indian society.

The purpose of this study is triad fold. Firstly, this paper identifies the many facets and importance of a multicultural/ culturally responsive Higher Education in India. Secondly, the current study seeks to examine the current issues and educator's beliefs and interpretation within culturally responsive/ multicultural educational practice, implementation and importance. Thirdly, specifically this study endeavors to review the challenges before the multicultural/ culturally responsive Higher Education in India and recommend some ways to revive it.

**Introduction: Present Scenario of Higher Education in India.**

The higher education system in India has grown in a remarkable way, particularly in the post-independence period, to become one of the largest systems of its kind in the world. However, the system has many issues of concern at present, like financing and management including access, equity and relevance, reorientation of programmes by laying emphasis on health consciousness, values and ethics and quality of higher education together with the assessment of institutions and their accreditation. These issues are important for the country, as it is now engaged in the use of higher education as a powerful tool to build a knowledge-based information society of the 21st Century. Recognizing the above and the basic fact that the Universities have to perform multiple roles, like creating new knowledge, acquiring new capabilities and producing an intelligent human resource pool, through challenging teaching, research and extension activities so as to balance both the need and the demand, the University Grants commission had initiated nation wise discussion on the said issues during its Golden Jubilee Year, 2003 (Recommendations, 2003:iii). The new challenge before the country at the beginning of the twenty first century is to become a developed society by the year 2020, which requires that not only a vibrant economy driven by knowledge has to be ushered in soon, but also a new society where justice and human values prevail has to be created. Moreover, challenges in higher education are no longer only nation centric. They have already attained global dimensions, particularly after trade in services has been brought under the purview of the WTO regime. With the explosive growth of knowledge in the past century and with the development of handy tools of information and communication technologies as well as of other scientific innovations, competition has become a hallmark of growth all over the World. As a result, knowledge is not only going to be the driver of Indian economy, but also, it is going to permeate into all the strata of Indian society for a better quality of life and living conditions. Therefore, India has to rise to the occasion urgently and reorient its higher education system to be vibrant,

competitive, meaningful and purposeful, Besides, there is absolutely no substitute to quality of higher education, although the country has been faced for a long time with the serious problem of meeting the quantity needs of our society. It is, therefore, essential that a careful balancing of the two is given priority to meet the twin requirements of the society in the foreseeable future.

**Issues Related to Culturally Responsive Higher Education in Indian Perspective:**

Before proceeding towards our main discussion it is essential to understand the nature of culturally responsive teaching. The notion of culturally responsive education is premised on the idea that culture is central to student learning. According to Gloria Ladson Billings, "It is an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994:47). The use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the students' own cultures. This link between culture and classroom instruction is derived from evidence that cultural practices shape thinking processes, which serve as tools for learning within and outside of school (Hollins & Oliver, l999:23). Thus, culturally responsive education recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources (Nieto, 1999:45) for creating optimal learning environments.

Culturally relevant or responsive teaching is pedagogy (Gray, 2000:10) grounded in teachers' displaying cultural competence: skill at teaching in a cross-cultural or multicultural setting (Diller & Moule, 2005:12). They enable each student to relate course content to his or her cultural context (Scherff & Spector, 2011:8). Culturally relevant teaching was made popular by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in the early 1990s, the term she created was defined as one "that empowers students to maintain cultural integrity, while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings,

1995:465). Culturally relevant pedagogy can also be found in the literature as "culturally appropriate", "culturally congruent", "culturally responsive", and "culturally compatible". Ladson-Billings provides some clarification between critical and culturally relevant pedagogy, with the difference being that culturally relevant pedagogy urges collective action grounded in cultural understanding, experiences, and ways of knowing the world. This has become more widely known and accepted in the education field. The theory surrounding culturally relevant teaching is connected to a larger body of knowledge on multicultural education and helping culturally diverse students excel in education (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008: 941). In her landmark book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Geneva Gay expanded the traditional view of culture beyond race and ethnicity. She wrote, "Even without being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave" (Gray, 2000:10). In other words, culture is a student's beliefs, motivations, and even social groups and norms. Thus, the teacher who practices culturally relevant teaching understands that culture manifests in a variety of adaptations within how students prefer to learn. A culturally responsive teacher uses differentiated instruction to tailor learning to every aspect of a student's culture.

Thus based in recognizing and accepting cultural differences, culturally response education is a pedagogy rooted in not only equality but also fairness. Culturally responsive education recognizes and accepts that cultural differences dictate modifications that are responsive to and address said differences. This is accomplished by varying teaching styles, employing flexible grouping, and collaborating with students, in order to create a more cooperative learning climate. Culturally responsive pedagogy echoes the multiculturalism ideal but on a larger scale. As stated by Bode & Nieto "The organization and structures of schools often are contrary to the needs of students, the values of their communities, and even to one of the major articulated purposes of schooling-to provide equal educational opportunities for all students" (2010:139).

Where multiculturalism focuses on the classroom practices, culturally responsive education encompasses all levels of the academic arena, including administrative practices. A culturally responsive administrative approach emphasizes the importance of the implementation of policies, procedures and curriculum that address the needs of the diverse learners in their charge, using cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors to help reach and teach students (Ford & Kea, 2009:18). In order for students to be successful, we must first understand their values. By understanding, the values held by varying cultures, educators are more able to provide learning opportunities that are matched not only to students' academic goals, but to intrinsic motivations as well. Only when we understand children in every facet of their lives, academically and non-academically, can we meet their needs.

Culturally responsive teaching is very closely linked with multiculturalism in the sense that they both clamor for an equal and equitable education for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, or sex (Ortiz, 2012:5). Both of these terms denote an approach to education that recognizes and affirms the cultural differences in our nation. They consider the importance of language, race, ethnicity and the role that each of these elements play in forming the social landscape, both in school and society. While a multicultural education affirms issues of identity and differences among people as a positive thing, it also uses this same lens to question and confront both historical and current issues of power and privilege in society. Today multicultural education strives to instruct teachers as to the ways in which culturally and linguistically diverse students learn and function in order for them to receive and experience the most diverse and culturally rich learning possible.

A multicultural/culturally responsive approach to education addresses the importance of students' backgrounds, including

prior experiences, cultural knowledge, and socialization practices. While many modern educators and educational institutions stress "multiculturalism" citing its correlation with success, modern education still falls short of its multicultural goals, often approaching cultural diversity with a blind eye. Ignoring diversity within the classroom, or taking a "blind" approach to education, meaning providing instruction and discipline as if culture makes no difference and all people are the same, takes away from the student identity. Instead of learning about and celebrating differences, \diverse students are demeaned and marginalized as their culture and experience have no place in the "blind" classroom. This idea of blindness is, in and of itself, a primary reason for student failure. When culture is not considered, behavior can be misinterpreted, and reprimanded or reinforced inaccurately as indicated by Ford & Kea in stating that:

"Teachers who are culturally competent recognize that behavior is socially constructed…one teacher may view a student's open and direct expression of his opinion as appropriately assertive, proactive self-advocacy; and another teacher may view the same behaviors as aggressive, inappropriate, disrespectful, or confrontational" (2009:12).

An essential component of multiculturalism within the classroom, content integration has been described as an infusion of ethnic and cultural content into the modern educational curriculum. As expressed by Banks content integration "deals with the extent to which teachers use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalization and theories in their subject or discipline. Essentially, content integration, is the degree to which teachers implement and utilize examples and information from a variety of cultures and groups of peoples to teach and illustrate key ideas, theories, concepts and subjects (1993:28). For example, teachers of math and physics can include biographies of physicists and mathematicians from different cultural groups. In this way, educators integrate a cultural component to their instruction that does not distract or take away from the content being taught, but reinforces and adds to the information taken in by students.

A second component of culturally responsive education is known as equity pedagogy. Equity pedagogy refers to the idea that all teaching may be equal but not equitable. An equal education means that every student is treated the same way, regardless of language, culture, or race. "The dictum "Equal is not the same" is useful here. It means that treating everyone in the same way will not necessarily lead to equality; rather it may end up perpetuating the inequality that already exists" (Bode & Nieto, 2010:157). As stated by Nieto, an equitable education: "First, acknowledges the differences that children bring to school such as their gender, race, ethnicity, language, social class, sexual orientation, religion, abilities, and talents among others. The refusal to acknowledge differences often results in schools and teachers labeling children's behavior as "deficient" or "deviant". In other cases, it results in making students "invisible". Second, it means admitting the possibility that students' identities may influence how they experience school and, hence how they learn. Being aware of connections among culture, identity, and learning should in no way devalue children's backgrounds or lower our expectations of them, yet this is precisely why so many educators have a hard time for accepting "Equal is not the same." That is they are reluctant to accept this notion because they may feel that in doing so they must lower their expectations or "water down" the curriculum so that all children can learn. Yet neither of these practices is necessary; on the contrary, it is imperative to raise the bar for all students. Third, accepting differences also means making provisions for them. When students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds are viewed as strengths on which education can draw and build, pedagogy changes to incorporate students' lives. This approach is based on the best of educational theory: that individual differences must be taken into account in teaching and that education must begin where children area at. If we are serious about providing all students with educational equity, then student' cultures and identities need to be seen not as a burden, a problem, or even a

challenge, but rather assets upon which to build. (2009:157-158)

It is not an ethnic-specific or gender-specific movement, "but a movement to empower all students to become knowledgeable, caring, and active citizens in a deeply troubled and ethnically polarized world" (Banks, 1993:8). Belonging to the dominant culture does not make one exempt of the need of multicultural education. If multicultural education is to be successful, it must be considered to be essential for all students, not just some or others.

From the ancient time Indian higher education concentrated not only to impart education which can be helpful for survival in the worldly life but also to aid in intellectual and spiritual enhancement. For this purpose the greater stress was given on teaching of human values, ethics, traditions, rites and rituals with help of interesting stories, festive ceremonies, signifying narrative suffused with higher goals of human life. Its aim was moral and spiritual conditioning of the students. In ancient India close relationship existed between the pupil and the teacher. The teacher used to pay individual attention on his students and used to teach them according to their aptitude and capability. Knowledge was imparted orally and the different methods of learning were used inform of memorization, critical analysis, introspection, storytelling, question and answer method, hands-on method and seminars. Memorization was the preliminary stage of learning in which learning was done by heart the sacred text through indefinite repletion and rehearsal by both the teacher and the taught. Critical Analysis was another method in which knowledge was comprehended. It was through critical analysis that Sri Ramanuja and Sri Madhvacharya differed from their teachers on the interpretation of the Brahmasutra composed by Sri Shankara and later came out with their own interpretation of the Brahmasutra. Madhvacharya even made his teacher subscribe to his view which shows that gurus were open to new ideas and views articulated by their students. Under introspection method Sravana (listening), Manana (contemplation) and Nididhyasana (concentrated contemplation) of the truth were done so as to realize. It was another method to study Brahma Vidya (Vedanta). In story telling the teacher used stories and parables to explain. This was the method Buddha used to explain his doctrines. In question and answer method the pupils used to ask questions and the teacher used to discuss at length on the topics and clear their doubts. Hands-on method was the best for professional courses including medical science, students/apprentices in which students used to learn by observation and through practical method. In Shashtrarth the students gained knowledge thought debates and discussions which were held at frequent intervals.

But in modern higher education system in India the stress has been shifted towards creation of employable graduate who can fulfill the demand of the globalized world. The graduates coming from the present education system have data based knowledge without concern for higher goals of education, i.e., to enhancement of higher human values, concern for environment, love of humanity and individualistic spiritual growth. In such scenario the culturally responsive education should be brought before present generation.

**Challenges for Culturally Responsive Higher Education in India:**
The rapid developments in science and technology and the challenges of globalization are posing additional challenges to the education system in the country. This is also the time when parental care to the children is on the wane. The adverse effects of the media on the mental development and moral values of the younger generation are being felt increasingly in all spheres of life. Gross consumerism has distorted the outlook of persons into one of equating possessions with richness. Exploitation of natural resources is proceeding without reference to sustainability. The hiatus between the rich and the poor is getting wider. While the education system needs to keep pace with the scientific and technological developments in terms of building the skills and knowledge, it also needs to address the more fundamental issues of the social and moral consequences of such unregulated

activities. In this context, there is now a growing demand to lay greater emphasis on education to inculcate, nurture and develop values, particularly among the youth of the country through culturally responsive higher education (Recommendations, 2003:32).

For this purpose the higher education system has to lay greater emphasis on modification in course selection, patterns of teaching, adaptation of texts, co-curriculum activities, and implementation of NSS, NCC and Rovers and Rangers module in the structure of higher education. UGC has also recommended in its report that it is need of hour "to inculcate human values in the University students, like quest for peace, adherence to truth and right conduct, non-violence, compassion, tolerance, love for all living beings, respect for the Motherland and the glory of its culture and traditions, in order to promote *societal* concern and responsible citizenship. A Cell for Value Education may be established at the UGC to plan, implement and oversee this requirement. The UGC together with NAAC could play a crucial role in realizing this objective. It is also necessary to evolving a syllabus for a compulsory paper of appropriate credits at the undergraduate level of all disciplines, to stress human values and the duties laid down in the constitution and the same may be suitably supported by the methodology and examination/ evaluation criteria facilitating a learner-centric approach. A Committee of Value Education Experts may be constituted by the UGC for taking appropriate steps in this connection. (Recommendations, 2003:33)"

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