Incorporating Rural Concerns within Higher Education in India

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Broad Overview

We are living in challenging times. On one hand, the humanity today is enjoying unprecedented gains in improvements of living standards. Educational levels are soaring; life expectancy has increased; access to information and opportunities for participation have grown exponentially. These are indeed impressive gains within our life time - these improvements in standards of living for all humanity are phenomena of the past half century, or less. The world today has wealth, technologies, knowledge, capacities and institutions that previous generations did not possess or even dream of; global air travel and even visits to space are now possible with ease. Yet, we live in an era of enormous and growing discontent. There has been widespread rise in inequality within and across societies; highly consumptive life-styles have caused widespread environmental degradation and severe climate changes; violence against girls and women has continued unabated.

Therefore, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as agents of knowledge creation, exchange and dissemination need to become more conscious of its importance and responsibility towards society. In today’s context, as the accelerated changes pose challenges to them, they are obligated to address and redefine their traditional roles, to review their perspectives on social responsibility and to consider its implications. This cannot be accomplished with the help of an educational model, which thrives on old ways of thinking. Thus, the time is ripe for reviewing and reconsidering the interchange of value between university and society; that is to say, we need to begin thinking on the lines of social relevance of higher education in general and professional education in particular (UNESCO Chair, 2015).

Indian context

Despite India’s economic growth, the country continues to witness poverty, marginalization and deprivation, structurally located in rural, tribal, slum, homeless, Dalit and Muslim households. New forms of social exclusion, urban poverty, environmental degradation, conflict and violence have also emerged in the past decade. Ensuring inclusive development, democratic governance and sustainable growth require new knowledge, enhanced human competencies and new institutional capabilities in the country. It was expected that education would contribute solutions to these problems to some extent. However, in spite of enhanced investment on expenditure, leading to increased enrolment, these issues remain largely unattended. The role of institutions of higher education in societal development seems to be the potential missing link (Tandon, 2014).

Today the ‘19th century idea’ of the university is undergoing drastic changes. There is conflict between different goals of higher education—social transformation and attainment of social justice through education on the one hand and, on the other, education as means to individual prosperity and advancement. There are divergent opinions between education as a public good and education as a commodity for private consumption. Further, a significant proportion of the new entrants into higher education in India are going to be from groups that have traditionally not accessed post-secondary education; thereby, making the social composition of classrooms more heterogeneous than ever. This creates an opportunity for promoting learning of the students, who come from diverse communities, in a
manner that they may take the benefits of higher education back to these communities and at the same time also draw upon the knowledge nurtured by such communities. The question is, importantly, one of integration of knowledge – bringing together education and work, theory and practice, university and society. This kind of integration is an urgent task at a time when India is investing heavily in its higher education sector and would like to see positive transformation in human resources in a relatively short period (Tandon, 2014).

**Community Engagement**

HEIs relate to their surrounding communities in performing some of its functions. They are mostly construed as serving its core missions of teaching, research and service, through the various functions it performs. Here, engagement of HEIs with the communities is mostly viewed through the lens of service. It is important to note here that the engagement function of HEIs with respect to the communities is not limited to its service function alone, and encompasses the other missions of teaching and research as well. When we talk about engagement vis-à-vis higher education, it signifies mutual exchange of knowledge between the universities and communities in an attempt to produce an output which is of benefit to the larger society. Such engagement is possible through the teaching and research function of the university, as much as it is through its service function.

This kind of engagement, where the institution and the community are involved in a common enterprise, gives added depth and meaning to traditional concepts like ‘service’ and ‘outreach’, by making the community, a partner in academic knowledge. Therefore, across the world, colleges, universities and academic associations are striving to make civic engagement an integral part of the way they do their work. This gives rise to the concept of ‘engaged universities’ (UNESCO Chair, 2015).

Furthermore, CUE implies a reformulation of the pertinence of Universities/Colleges and their activities in the face of these new conceptions of social responsibility. The main contribution of civic engagement in terms of social responsibility is the idea of serving the society at large, dealing with real problems of common people and communities, under a vision of ethics and values. This transformation requires a deep sense of citizenship as an active way to contribute to a wide range of collective goals (GUNi, 2014). These changes were reflected in the Communiqué of the 2009 UNESCO World Conference of Higher Education:

‘Higher Education Institutions, through their core functions (teaching, research and service to the community) carried out in the context of institutional autonomy and academic freedom should increase their interdisciplinary focus and promote critical thinking and active citizenship. This would contribute to sustainable development, peace, wellbeing and the realization of human rights .... [Higher Education] must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defense of human rights and the values of democracy (UNESCO, 2009).’

In the Indian context, according to the erstwhile Planning Commission,

‘Community engagement should not be seen as an ‘addition’ to learning and teaching, but intrinsic to it. This is essential if education is to be a vehicle for social transformation and
attainment of social justice, rather than as means to individual prosperity alone, on the other; if education is to be a public good rather than merely a commodity. For this, institutions of higher education need to locate their learning and teaching in the communities in which they are located, and to harness the idealism and dynamism of the youth (Planning Commission, 2011).

Therefore, Community University Engagement as a concept implies relationships between the universities and communities, which is mutually beneficial and adopts a bidirectional flow of information between the two. This engagement between the universities and the communities can be at the local, regional, national or even the virtual levels, and is aimed at the co-creation of knowledge, which is beneficial to the society at large. Such engagement therefore deviates from the normal outreach/extension functions, to an approach which is more participative and committed to the co-creation and sharing of knowledge.

In order to operationalize community university engagement, it is important that an institutional mechanism is developed to adopt a holistic and functional approach to community engagement based on the following core principles (Tandon, 2014):

i) Mutually agreed interests and needs of both communities and institutions be articulated and respected;

ii) Engagement must encompass all the three functions of institutions of higher education—teaching, research and outreach/practice;

iii) Institutional engagement cutting across disciplines and faculties should be mandated, including natural sciences, and not restricted to social and human sciences alone;

iv) Participation in community engagement projects by students should earn them credits and partially meet graduation requirements and it should be integrated into their evaluation systems;

v) Performance assessments of teachers, researchers and administrators in such institutions should include this dimension of community engagement.

In line with this school of thought, more and more institutions (such as Bundelkhand University, Indian Institute of Technology-Guwahati (IIT-G), Barkatullah University, Mysore University, etc.) have come to recognize that traditional extension and outreach programs, though important and necessary, are not sufficient to heal the rift between higher education and public life. What is required is an approach that extends beyond service & outreach to actual ‘engagement’. By this, we mean that there is a need to move from a model of ‘public service’ where universities do things for ‘passive & needy public’, to one of ‘public work that taps, engages and develops the civic agency, talents and capacities of everyone, inside and outside the academy. Therefore, what we require today is an ‘engaged model of university outreach’ which is far more collaborative than the customary one. Therefore, higher education which is generally organized into highly specialized disciplines requires a paradigm shift towards a more systemic perspective, emphasizing collaboration, cooperation and partnership (UNESCO Chair, 2015).

The various forms of community engagement are: (PRIA, 2014):

1. Linking ‘formal’ learning and the local community

2. Researching with the community

3. Sharing knowledge with the community
4. Designing new curriculum and courses
5. Involving local practitioners as teachers
6. Social Innovation by students

Promoting rural development through community engagement in Indian HEIs

As many Indians continue to live in rural India, and many rural communities are disadvantaged, it follows that there should be substantial academic engagement in teaching and research with rural India. Areas of study would come from many disciplines and be interdisciplinary, including best practices in rural development, rural health issues, natural resource management, livelihoods diversification, poverty alleviation strategies and good governance. An emphasis on community engagement is an opportunity to inspire the systematic development of resource materials on the rural sector to build the knowledge and capacity needed to empower disadvantaged rural citizens.

Below mentioned account gives an illustration of how community engagement in HEIs can be used a tool for rural development and for addressing pressing rural concerns:

1. **Linking learning with community service**

In this approach, students and teachers apply their knowledge and skills in a chosen community to improve the lives of people in that community. This can be achieved through ‘adoption’ of a specific village or slum, and then providing engagement opportunities to students from various disciplines and courses to apply their knowledge to address the challenges of that specific community (Tandon, 2014). This linking of ‘learning’ with ‘service’ is commonly known as service-learning. The basic objective is to put to use the ‘theoretical’ knowledge gained by students in the classrooms/universities, in providing ‘practical’ service to the communities in the field.

For example, engineering students at an education institution in Assam used their technical knowledge to upgrade the rural systems in surrounding communities in an attempt to boost the rural economy. For instance, by engaging the local artisans and villagers, they set up a pilot project on production of plain muga silk fabric with power loom. This not only contributed to the students practical learning, they were also able to put to use their theoretical knowledge into something more practically useful and relevant. The communities on the other hand, benefitted by way of monetary returns which resulted from the marketing of the silk produced.

2. **Linking research with community knowledge**

In this approach, various faculties of universities and colleges devise joint research projects in partnerships with the communities. In this approach, the community’s own knowledge is integrated into the design and conduct of the research. New research by students/teachers gets conducted and students complete their thesis/dissertation and research papers to complete their academic requirements (which can
later be published), and at the same time the community’s knowledge is systematized and integrated in this research.

For e.g., a University in Haryana has institutionalized a Centre for community engagement which particularly focuses on research activities, through its add-on courses. For instance, a course on folk medicine is based on the premise that indigenous rural knowledge residing within the communities is valuable and needs to be documented. In this case, it is the herbs/plant based effective remedies known to village women. This knowledge is tapped by the students going into the communities, who then document indigenous medicines and treatment methods, and finally produce it as academic literature. Similarly, the Biotechnology department of a University in Bengal has been engaging with the local rural community through its various agri-based initiatives, for knowledge exchange and dissemination of best practices in agricultural sector. The department engaged with the nearby communities, in order to strengthen their capacities in floriculture and agriculture. It also sought to use the indigenous local knowledge and expertise of the communities in the plantation of different types of crop varieties. As a result of such engagement, not only did the department expand its technological database, the communities too experienced a sea change by way of secure and sustainable livelihoods.

**Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) & Participatory Research (PR)/Community Based Research (CBR)**

Since its inception in 1982, PRIA has consistently engaged in a process of change to simultaneously empower citizens, in particular the poor and marginalized. PRIA has pioneered the concept of PR in bringing about social change among the marginalized in India. The essential premise of PR is recognition and utilization of people’s knowledge for purposes of transforming the relations of power between marginalized communities and those in positions of power and authority (Singh & Tandon, 2016).

Given the nature of PRIA as an organization promoting PR, engagements related to joint research with the community has been the most common initiative. These partnerships involve several actors in addition to PRIA and local communities. As an enabler of partnerships, PRIA facilitates linkages between HEIs and local communities to prepare for and undertake joint research. In taking such an enabler role, PRIA’s ‘bridging’ nature proves to be very useful. PRIA is able to influence various departments and schools in HEIs to look at research as a joint enterprise with the community. As a civil society actor, PRIA has gained credibility amongst community-based organizations. Therefore, it is able to ‘bridge’ the divide between HEIs and communities. PRIA’s important contribution in many such efforts has been to demonstrate the value of indigenous knowledge available in the community, and the need for a mutually supportive approach in partnerships. As a consequence, the practice of CBR has gained certain acceptability in several HEIs in the country (PRIA, 2014).

PRIA provides CBR training to communities/practitioners primarily via three modes: face to face interaction through the ‘Training of Trainer’s’ program; online mode, via the PRIA International Academy; and, capacity building via field practice (Singh & Tandon, 2016).
3. **Knowledge sharing and knowledge mobilization**

Under this mode of engagement, the knowledge available with students and teachers in various disciplines is made available to the local community to realize its developmental aspirations, secure its entitlements and claim its rights from various public and private agencies. These can take the forms of enumerations, surveys, camps, trainings, learning manuals/films, maps, study reports, public hearings, policy briefs, and engagement with urban homeless shelters, teaching and health services in poor communities, legal aid clinics for under-trails etc. (Tandon, 2014). The idea behind such initiatives is to transport ‘knowledge’ out of the hallowed portals of academic institutions, and disseminate it within the communities, who can then use it for their well-being and other activities.

For eg., *many universities across India engage in knowledge sharing activities like awareness camps and drives on literacy, rural entrepreneurship, environmental protection/conservation, gender sensitivity, health, entrepreneurship awareness, skill development, legal literacy, human rights training, rural entrepreneurship etc.*

4. **Devising new curriculum and courses**

This form of engagement provides for consultations with local communities/students/community-based organizations, which are used by universities/colleges to design new curricula and courses that respond to specific needs of the community, such as short-term workshops, certificates and degrees as well. They are meant for community members, as well as the university/college students. This will enrich the curriculum of existing courses through locally-appropriate subject-matter (which interests local students most); along with creating new, locally appropriate educational programmes that will interest the new generation of students. Such courses augment the theoretical knowledge of the learners with the help of practical experiences of community members/CSOs.

For e.g., *a university in Assam has introduced a course in one of its social science departments, which responds specifically to the needs of the ethnic and strife-torn rural communities of the north east. Departing from the traditional pedagogy followed in most universities, this particular course focuses on more community interface, in form of field based interventions, brainstorming workshops, multi-stakeholder dialogues, as compared to plain class room discourse.*

5. **Including practitioners as teachers**

Here, local community elders, women leaders, tribals and civil society practitioners have enormous practical knowledge of a wide variety of issues—from agriculture and forestry to child-rearing, micro-planning and project management. This expertise can be tapped by inviting such practitioners inside the institution to co-teach courses both in the classrooms and in the field. Such instructors should be duly recognized, compensated and respected for their knowledge
For e.g., SPARC, a Mumbai based CSO has assisted in building the capacities of rural women slum dwellers, using their own indigenous knowledge, who are then recruited as teaching instructors in urban planning courses in universities in Maharashtra.

6. **Social innovation by students**

In consultation with student unions, associations and clubs, student initiated learning projects which have a social impact can be supported. Such social innovation projects by students can also have meaningful links to curriculum and courses.

For e.g., a college in Delhi University embarks on a large student initiated project, which is aimed at impacting the lives of the people in need. They work on a range of issues such as empowering community puppeteers, liberating manual scavengers, improving rural livelihoods etc.

Therefore, it is clear that community engagement, conceptualized as a social good, emerges as a means to allow students to build good citizenship and social responsibility, and to allow universities to demonstrate their commitment to social development (Bawa, 2014). Different strategies can be employed to achieve the objectives of civic responsibilities and public contributions, including community based research, knowledge creation and mobilization, educational opportunities for community members (continuous education, workshops, presentations, and so on) (Tandon & Hok Ka Ma, 2014). However, it is important to accord primary importance to community engagement activities and be embraced and promoted as a means of improving the quality and relevance of teaching, learning and research, and not be relegated as an extra-curricular activities.

**Being a Socially Responsible HEI!**

The social responsibility of Universities implies their relevance and contributions to the future development of individuals and societies; it implies that teaching and research as the core functions of the university are linked closely with the elaboration and promotion of shared societal visions and common public goods. Its fundamental objective is to promote the social usefulness of knowledge, and its relevance goes beyond responding to the needs of economic development. It requires a two-way perspective between universities and society, which involves directly multiplying the critical uses of knowledge in society (GUNi, 2014).

One of the ways to integrate social responsibility with the function of teaching is to review both the curriculum and pedagogy of syllabus, courses and programs being taught in HEIs. A key issue is learning of responsibility and citizenship while acquiring professional knowledge and degrees. Francois Vallaey calls it educational impact of social responsibility:

> “Responsible universities ask what kind of professionals and citizens they are shaping and also reflect on the proper organization of education that ensures socially responsible students. What kind of professionals and citizens we are educating? How would we structure our educational system to build citizens who care for sustainable human development? Will our graduates be able
and willing to redirect the currently unstable and unjust course of global development or will they simply want to find a job?" (Vallaeyes, 2014)

Therefore, university-community linkages have to be integrated into the processes of making and sharing knowledge, into teaching-learning, research and practice. Strengthening higher education-community linkages means that we place the connection between community and the university at the heart of the educational process in order to ensure the continuing relevance of higher education (Tandon, 2014).

References


