

Challenges to Higher Education in Punjab: with Special Reference to the Problems of Rural Areas

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Abstract

The literature on higher education specially reveals multiple disparities in education, the most important being those between the rural and urban societies apart from the two genders. On the basis of research evidence it has been found that the majorities of the students going in for higher education belong to upper castes, urban areas and have convent/public or private school background. Rural areas have been touched only marginally by higher education of quality. As far as the State of Punjab of India is concerned, it has proved itself as a prosperous state on the basis of different economic indicators but its social indicators tell an altogether different story. The State is still struggling with many problems as drug abuse, female foeticide, unemployment and dowry, which are hindering its progress. Studies indicate that Punjab is far behind the target of universalization of Elementary Education. Education at all levels is besieged with multiple problems. The state has not succeeded in overcoming the problem of low level of enrolment; irregular attendance and high drop out rate, particularly in rural areas.

The present paper highlights different challenges to the higher education in Punjab. Special focus is on the problems of rural areas, where accessibility to the higher education is the main issue. There is a huge gap between the literacy rates of urban and rural areas as well as between two genders. The paper

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urges the need for opening up of higher educational institutions in the rural areas as well as increasing state funding in education sector.

Introduction

The state of Punjab occupies an extremely important place in India. In the last century its geographical boundaries shifted twice. During the time of partition of India in 1947, it was the worst effected state and then in the recent years, it experienced a long span of militancy which spread over almost a decade. In spite of these disturbances Punjab has maintained its position as the most prosperous state of the Indian Union. The agricultural economy of Punjab experienced the technology-induced green revolution resulting in a large-scale development in its agricultural sector. According to the Census of India 2011, Punjab has the highest per capita income whereas 21.92% of Indian population is living below poverty line; this percentage is only 5.26% for Punjab. Its production of wheat is the highest among the wheat producing states of India (Census of India 2011). Not only the agricultural sector, its industrial sector too is developing at a very fast pace. This is an indication that Punjab is a very progressive state economically.

When we look at the social indicators, the picture is totally opposite. Sex ratio in Punjab is steadily declining. At present the sex ratio in the state is 895 and in the age group of 0-6 yrs this is only 846 (Census of India, 2011). In spite of being a rich and prosperous State, its educational sector suffers from gross neglect. Only 75.84% of its population is literate as compared to states like Kerala (93.91%) and Mizoram (91.58%). Factors like drug abuse, under-employment, lack of relevant education opportunities, glorification of sex and violence in media have been found to be some of the stumbling blocks for rural youth of Punjab (Dhillon, 2009). The low percentage of

rural youth going in for higher education appears to have a direct link with some of the social problems faced by the society in Punjab. Surveys have confirmed that Punjab has a high incidence of drug abuse in the age group of 16 to 35 yrs (Sandhu 2007). The problem is more acute in rural areas, where unemployment is rampant. In the absence of educated youth in the rural areas, social evils like dowry have multiplied in significance particularly in villages.

Higher Education in Punjab: Issues and Challenges

The education scenario as a whole in Punjab is quite dismal. Thousands of schools lack teachers, classrooms, furniture or even drinking water. The rural population is gradually migrating to the cities seeking better educational opportunities and personality development of their wards. As infrastructure in villages for the education of students remains inadequate, the urban and rural divide continues to increase day by day. The universities in Punjab cater mainly to the well groomed students from urban areas. While improper education facilities in villages make the students from villages lag behind. When every university admits on the basis of merit or entrance tests, it is the rural students who suffer the greatest setback. The Punjabi university however has pioneered a positive move by establishing rural campus at “guru ki khashi” where admission is only reserved for rural students along with financial aid. The State government at present is spending millions on “sarv siksha abhiyan” for educating children up to primary level; however it is not serious about higher studies for rural students. In the recent years, there has been a mushrooming of private schools in villages offering good quality education, but as all parents are not in a position to afford the huge fees of private schools, most of the students are deprived of a chance to acquire basic educational skills and quality education at school level in the

villages. The government has to take steps to ensure the enlistment of rural students in private schools to boost the education level of rural youth. At the same time financial aid should be provided to hard working students who are incapable of financing their education. The best thing is to establish more rural campuses on the pattern of Punjabi Varsity's rural campus, so that the rural students have access to good quality of education. As availability of transportation can also help to make educational facilities accessible to all, villages should be provided with a good transport system by the State authorities, keeping in mind the timings of colleges and campuses. Implementation of these steps can bridge the urban/rural divide. The Government of Punjab is encouraging the participation of private sector for providing good quality education by giving a package of incentives in the form of land at cheaper rates along with other facilities. Under the Free and Compulsory Education Scheme, all children in the age group of 6 - 14 are to be provided primary education. In order to achieve the goal of integration of primary education, efforts are being made to increase retention of children in schools and increase the enrolment by opening new primary schools, providing infrastructure in the existing primary schools and decentralizing planning, irrespective of any social bias.

India lives in villages and Government is trying to provide educational facilities to villages, every child has now access to a school. Around 95 per cent of our rural population has access to primary school within one kilometer of their habitation. This is a significant achievement. But the big questions are: does the socio-economic condition of children allow them to go to those schools? And what is the quality of education available at these schools? Quality of education is mostly teacher dependent. This premise calls for appointment

of sufficient number of teachers in rural areas and concentration on their development.

The growth and expansion of education in Punjab has been quite tardy. The state is far behind the target set for the universalisation of elementary education. Education at all levels is besieged with multiple problems. Primarily Punjab has yet to overcome the problem of non-enrolment, irregular attendance and high drop out rate, particularly in rural areas. Single-teacher schools, two-teacher schools, schools without headmasters, without buildings, drinking water, toilets, libraries, laboratories, playgrounds or proper electricity connections are in abundant majority. Not just that in rural areas, science and commerce education at the intermediate level has completely collapsed and learning achievement in general has remained extremely low.

These startling revelations have been made by a study conducted by the Centre for Research in Economic Change, Punjabi University, Patiala (2000). The study says that the educational system is not well-integrated and lacks coherence. Multiple schooling with different affiliations has played havoc with the system. Influential sections of society have withdrawn their wards from government schools, both in rural and urban areas. The gap between different school systems has increased to such an extent that government schools have come to be recognized as the schools of the “have not”. The education system has become an instrument of social stratification rather than that of cohesiveness. The upgrading of government schools due to political considerations without providing matching facilities has disturbed the educational equilibrium. The sanctity of teacher-pupil ratio is not upheld. The urban schools are overstaffed as against the acute shortage of teachers in rural areas. The study says public spending on education needs to be stepped up in a time-bound manner. It must be brought at least

to the suggested norm of 6 per cent of the state income. The implication is that educational spending in the state should be at least doubled (Prabhakar 2000).

Another study by Gill in this field has also given a similar explanation that the education sector in Punjab is not in a position to keep pace with the rate of growth of economy. Consequently it has lost its capacity to solve problems and as such society is facing neglect and callousness at the hands of policy-makers. It seems that those handling the affairs of education at the highest level have lost their grip over the ground reality and the desire to uplift the society through human resource development. The process of withdrawal of state funding in education has created crisis in education. Colleges have met this situation by partly keeping certain number of teaching posts as vacant and compromising with educational standards (Gill 2002).

In rural areas of Punjab about 70 per cent of the farmers are burdened with debt and poverty, though the state at the national level is considered one of the most prosperous and developed one. In a widening gap between rural and urban Punjab, the share of rural people is woefully low at the university level. The rural-urban divide is so pronounced in the state on the higher education front that it deserves immediate corrective measures. A study conducted during the academic session (2005-06) by Punjabi University in this regard has revealed that there were only 4.07 per cent students from the rural areas in various universities of Punjab (Ghuman 2006). Throwing light on all aspects related to rural students at the higher education level, the study by Ghuman and others claimed that there had been widespread exclusion of rural students in Punjab from higher education, particularly professional education, in the past two decades. The collapse of school education in rural Punjab,

admission through entrance tests, costly education in private schools, the gap in rural-urban amenities and awareness, the information gap and the lack of guidance and coaching may be cited as some of the possible reasons. There are significant disparities in enrolment ratio between rural and urban areas, urban area being four times higher as compared than rural area. The access to higher education is also low for girls as compared to boys. It has been recommended by the study that the state must allocate at least 6 per cent of its income to education, out of which a bigger share must be allocated for higher educational institutions in the rural areas. Other recommendations include a special incentive for rural students in higher education, strengthening of the existing government and aided schools, handing over the administration and control of government schools to universities in their respective jurisdiction and the regular recruitment of teachers to fill vacant posts (The Tribune December 17, 2007).

At present seven universities serve Punjab. In quantitative terms, the increase in the number of institutions of higher education in Punjab is spread equally across universities imparting Arts/Sciences/Commerce, Technical and Professional education. The facilities they provide, however, appear to be inadequate to meet the present requirement, especially for the population of rural areas, as these are all located in urban areas.

Punjab has fared well in reducing the gap between male and female literacy, which decreased from 15.25 per cent in 1991 to 12.08 per cent in 2001 and 9.7 in 2011. Male literacy rate increased from 65.66 per cent in 1991 to 75.26 per cent in 2001 and 80.4% in 2011 and female literacy rate from 50.4 per cent to 63.55 per cent in 2001 and 70.7% in 2011. Female literacy rate in Punjab is also considerably higher than that of India where 64.6 per cent of the females are literate. According to the 2001

Census, rural literacy rate is 65.16 per cent and urban 79.13 per cent signifying that the gap is not very wide. There has been a reduction in the rural urban literacy gap, from 19.31 per cent points in 1991 to 13.97 per cent points in 2001. It is also a matter of great concern that in spite of having improved its literacy rate as per the latest census reports, the rank of Punjab at the national level has gone down from the 12th position in 1971 to the 16th in 2001 and 21st position in 2011, when compared to other states and Union Territories in India. Punjab's rank in male literacy is 24th and female literacy is 18th in India (Census of India 2011).

The dropout rate in Punjab is 28 per cent at the middle level and 42.03 per cent at the high school level. Thus, only 29.90 per cent school-going children complete high school education. Further the dropout rates are higher among girls compared to boys (Census of Punjab 2001). There are many reasons for this e.g. one-teacher or two-teacher primary schools, schools without buildings or even the basic facilities like toilet and clean drinking water and therefore incapable of retaining the students enrolled. Under such circumstances parents gravitate towards cities where good quality education along with proper infrastructure is readily available, but here again there are some hurdles as the cost of education is sometimes unaffordable for parents. Data show that Punjab's performance on education sector calls for attention, particularly in terms of highly differential access to higher education between rural and urban areas as well as between the two genders. The gap between urban and rural literacy is 13.97% and gap between male and female literacy is 12.08%. Although there is paucity of data on higher education in Punjab with special reference to rural-urban and male-female gap in literacy rate, yet the figures in the 2011 census sufficiently reveal two forms of disparity in the attainment

of education. The sad part of the story is that the share of education in public (government) spending is falling. Between 1990-91 and 1997-98 at constant prices of 1980-81, the overall educational expenditure of the State has grown at an annual rate of 1.43 per cent against 3.63 per cent growth rate of net state domestic product and 6.17 per cent growth rate of the state budgetary expenditure.

The process of withdrawal of State funding in education has created a two-fold crisis in education. One, it has created a financial crisis for public-funded institutions such as colleges, universities and schools, which keep certain number of teaching posts vacant, so that they do not have to compromise with educational standards by recruiting under qualified staff. Secondly, some of the institutions have opened self-financing and profitable courses charging very high fees. This situation has been exploited by certain private institutions in information technology, engineering and medical courses making a mockery of the whole situation. Quality control mechanism has collapsed and students are charged exorbitant fees for education that is lacking in quality.

As higher educational institutions in the country in general and Punjab in particular have grown in number and size, the problems and prospects too have correspondingly increased. Its relevance to development, especially to the socio-economic needs of the society has increasingly become an issue of debate. Comparing the situation of higher education in other states with the all-India level, its development in Punjab is seen to be relatively superior. But here again, there are problems, such as imbalanced and unplanned institutional growth, lack of infrastructural facilities, excessive and discriminatory system of admissions, financial constraints, non placement of degree holders, irrelevant course content and the gap between general and professional

courses. Hence, there is an urgent need for modifications, adaptations, orientations and innovations.

Annual Status of Education Report 2006 (Rural), states that practically every village in Punjab has a primary school, a middle school within 2 kms, a high school within 2.5 kms, and a senior secondary school within 7 kms, thus exceeding the norms set by the Government of India. Of the nearly 40 lakh school children, 80 per cent attend government schools, but 78 per cent of these drop out by the time they reach senior secondary level and one-half of them who appear in the matriculation examination, as regular students, fail to pass. This is a colossal waste of educational effort on any count. The fast growing popularity of private English medium schools, more so in rural areas, puts a question mark on the quality of education provided by government schools.

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