



## Understanding of Higher Education in Transitional Society: A Case Study of Rural Odisha, India

ASHOK DANSANA  
Faculty of Education  
University of Delhi  
Delhi, India

### Abstract:

*Higher education is considered as an asset for an individual for his maximum growth and meaningful affiliation. It is that capital and instrument which makes possible for a society and nation to deal with adversaries and complexities in an effective manner. Taking the instrumentality and capacity of higher education into confidence, nations across the world are trying to make it accessible to their considerable population. One of the consequences of that is, in the recent decades, higher education has been given importance in India's developmental plans. India has been endeavouring to make it inclusive in terms of accessibility and quality. One of the very clear agendas of giving importance to higher education in this country during formulation of various developmental policies in the recent times is to ensure that the people of the lower ladder of society could participate in it and make them adapted in the competitive environment posed by knowledge society and forces of globalization. But the paradox is that due to certain existing discrepancies in those ambitious policies and their implementations these people are developing negative connotation of higher education. The negative understanding and underestimation of higher education by these people is not a positive sign for the society which is considered to be at the lower ladder in particular and for India in general, which aspires to establish a knowledge society in near future.*

**Key words:** higher education, transitional society, Odisha

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, there has been growing importance of higher education. It has been one of the central points in the debate, discourse and policy formulation because of its multidimensional effects on people's lives in particular and in the world of existence in general, in the age of liberalization and globalization. Over the ages higher education has been conceptualized and interpreted in different manners. On the one hand some have holistic twists in their understanding of higher education, while others have been reductionists or individualistic in their approaches to conceptualize it. Nevertheless both understandings adhere to the fundamentals of liberalism and progressivism.

However, the people who are considered as underdeveloped and for whom various developmental plans are set, have indifferent views and understanding of higher education. The consequences of indifferent understanding of higher education by these people would be bringing adverse effects in their development. This case study in the western part of Odisha is unique to a certain extent. This article deals with the understanding of the people of two villages about higher education, who are experiencing sporadic changes in socio-economic, institutional and technological spheres. Through this article the author attempts to make some critical analysis of the possible consequences of these people understanding in their lives particularly in the domain of inhibited competitive environment.

## **General Understanding of Higher Education and Its Institutions**

Karl Jaspers' (1959) *The Idea of University* and Ronald Barnett's (2000) *Configuring University*, in the context of reforms in higher education, have claimed that higher education has the capacity to make better deal with the dwindling and uncertain complex situations. As an aim of higher education it has been asserted that "life is something more than mere economics; and this is true of no other field as it is of education. Let us not be mesmerized by the following

notion that higher education is an investment good with productivity in economic terms higher than that of most other investment. This may have been true of the past and may or may not be so in future, but the central point is that unlike other forms of capital such as machines, higher education has returns. These returns are the very substance of what development is all about, i.e.; the quality of life in its totality including individual dignity and self-respect and command over one's own life which is true hallmark of individual freedom.

These returns are difficult to quantify and to compare with economic return; but they are nevertheless, real. They are even more important than the so-called notion building consequences, which are at best means to end. Thus, education and higher education in particular, is part and parcel of the human endeavour for a more civilized existence end in itself, even it is a means to other ends." (Cf. Patel 2003). Flavio Comim (2007) refers to Amartya Sen's Capacity Approach (CA): seen as influenced by John Rawls' conception of education in shaping a contractualist view of liberal societies, he says "the value of education shouldn't be assessed only in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare.

Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and take part in its affairs and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own worth." He, further aiding to human development perspective says, "impact of education is not only related to the capabilities of 'senses, imagination and thought', as a superficial reading of Nussbaum (2000), but it is also present in the capabilities of 'practical reason', 'affiliation' and 'control over one's environment. Thus, education and its influence on the constitution of autonomous human beings come to be considered the main engine of development."

Comim asserts that investment in primary education becomes a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the achievement of human development, given that important functionings and capabilities can be achieved only as part of individual's further pursuit of higher education. Explaining it, he says, "It is difficult to see now individuals, who have only the benefit of primary education, are free to enhance their capabilities of social inclusion, information and participation in

contemporary knowledge societies.” He considered that investment in primary education should be seen as a step towards the flourishing of a human being in terms of his/her potentialities. Manuel Castells (1994) states: “the science, technology and the humanities are equivalent to what were the factories of industrial age.” He further states that, if knowledge is the electricity of the new informational – international economy, then the institutions of higher education are the power sources on which the new development process must rely. Harry Gray (1999) says, “Universities are economic engines”, the great missing factor in regional economic renewal and indeed of the whole country’s economic development. “It is the capacity to learn which is critical to innovation process and essential for developing and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage.” (Wolfe and Gertler 2002). B.R Ambedkar complains that “higher education is the panacea of our social trouble.” (in Sontakke 2004)

In most recent times, higher education has occupied a special position across the world’s communities, which recognize it as major vehicle in the processes and missions of sustainable development. Some of the vital declarations and recognitions are: Prague Declaration in 2003, where 130 higher education representatives from around world declared that ‘if higher education is the nursery of tomorrow’s leaders then the sector bears profound responsibilities to create a sustainable future’ (UNESCO 2005); United Nations adopted the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014, in 2005, which aims at integrating the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and leaning (UNESCO 2006).

From the above understandings and interpretations of higher education one can come to the conclusion that higher education is a kind of asset for the individual growth and for the development of society as well. It has been given special status, particularly to deal with complex and uncertain situations being faced by world communities. The instrumental capacity of higher education attracts leaders of development and policy makers to make it available to the members of society who are in a disadvantaged state and thus take them to a better state. The Government of India in the recent times,

particularly in its 10<sup>th</sup> (2002-2007) and 11<sup>th</sup> (2007-2012) Five Years Plans has given importance, comparatively with the previous plans, to higher education sector. In every financial year this sector has got a considerable share from the total financial allocation of the country's gross domestic and fiscal product.

As a result, these plans period (2002-2012) has witnessed consistent growth in absolute terms. During this span of time, there have been a larger number of institutions of higher learning and universities established by the Central Acts. Many national innovative inclusive schemes have been launched to attract youth from all sections of society to pursue higher education and high quality research. Equally, the country's regional governments are making efforts to improve the higher education sector. However, in the given situation, the Government of Odisha is far behind the much needed endeavours for the growth and development of the higher education sector.

## **Demography and Poverty Profile of Odisha**

Odisha is one of the major states of the Indian Union, with a population of 41,947,358 (3.47 percent of the total population of India, Census, 2011). The population is predominantly Hindu (94.67 percent). The decadal growth rate of population of Odisha during 1991-01 was 15.97% as against 20.06% in the previous decade. The decline in the growth rate may be attributed to the rise in literacy rate, effective dissemination of the message about benefits of small family, and the drive launched by the State Government to provide better access to family planning measures. The sex ratio in the State i.e. number of females per 1,000 males marginally increased from 971 in 1991 to 972 in 2001 and from 972 to 978 in 2011 as compared to all India average, which increased from 927 to 933 and from 933 to 940 during the same period. The density of population, which was 203 persons per sq.km. in 1991, increased to 236 per sq.km. in 2001 and to 269 in 2011 (with 22<sup>nd</sup> all India rank) as compared to all India average, which increased from 267 to 325 and from 325 to 385 during the same period. However, there is a significant inter-district

disparity within the State in this regard with the district of Khurda having a population density of 666 persons per sq.km., at one end of the spectrum, and Kandhamal district with a population density of only 81 persons per sq.km at the other end. The urban population of 13.38% in 1991 increased to 14.97% in 2001. On the literacy front the achievement has been impressive as the literacy rate increased from 49.09% in 1991 to 63.08% in 2001 and from 63.08% to 73.45% in 2011 as against an increase from 52.10% to 64.83% and from 64.83% to 74.04% at the national level during the same period (Census, 2011).

Odisha has a deplorably staggering figure among all the major states of the country in terms of overall poverty as well as the rural poverty (Rural poverty stood at 48.01% against the all India average of 27.09% in 1999-2000, according to the Planning Commission in 2006). The poverty estimates made by various agencies including the planning commission show that while the rest of the country has made significant progress in this regard (The percentage of population below poverty line in India has come down from 54.88% in 1973-74 to 27.09% in 1999-2000, Planning Commission, 2006), the incidence of poverty in Odisha has not changed correspondingly (The percentage of population below poverty line came down from 66.18% to 47.15 during the same period in Odisha).The extent, depth and severity of rural poverty in Odisha are very high and its multidimensional facets have been maintained by the dynamic interplay of several factors.

The rural poverty gap remains larger than the all-India average. Perhaps not surprisingly, the districts of Odisha that are the most mined, namely, Jajpur, Kendujhar, Dhenkhal, Angul, Jharsuguda, Sundergarh, Mayurbhanja, Koraput, are also the poorest districts in the State. Adivasi and Dalit families in the most mined districts constitute 44 to 82 percent of the total Below Poverty Level families (Orissa Development Report 2004). Population living Below Poverty Line during 2009-10 in State was 37% and almost half of the population of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Planning Commission 2012).The coastal region registered the sharpest decline. The extent of poverty in southern and northern regions is still very high and it remains a matter of serious concern (Economic Survey, Orissa 2010-11). Despite many initiatives, the poor

condition of the disadvantaged social groups is not being ameliorated at adequate pace, which is often held responsible for the widespread corruption during implementation of various developmental programmes. Odisha, which figures predominantly in the list of under-developed State in India has been a victim of some ill-thought-out development strategies. “Despite being rich in its mines, minerals and natural resources, Orissa has not made any real progress as far as the development of the State and its people are concerned.” (Kumar 2006)

### **Profile of Western Odisha: The Society in Transition**

The two villages come under the ambit of administrative units of Boudh and Jharsuguda, located in the western part of Odisha (map given in the following section. Western Odisha, located in the western part of Odisha and south-eastern part of India, is constituted of the administrative units/districts of Anugul, Bolangir, Bargarh, Boudh, Deogarh, Jharsuguda, Kalahandi, Nawpada, Sambalpur, Sonepur and Sundergarh. Nearly 85% its population lives in the rural areas and depends mostly on agriculture for their livelihood. The share of total main workers is 78.03%, 8.88% and 13.09% in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors respectively (HDI, Govt. of Orissa, 2004). The total literacy status is around 70%, the male population literacy status is 84.28% and female is 65.36% against all Odisha 73.45%, 82.40% and 64.36% respectively (Census 2011). In absolute terms, higher education in this sub-region is gradually growing but it is not inclusive and grounded in relative qualitative term. The gross enrolment ratio of the relevant age groups, 18-23, in higher education in the sub-region is around 10% (as in 2009, Task Force Report, Govt. of Odisha). There was a considerable number, 133, degree colleges, among which 16 colleges were exclusively meant for women. There was also a considerable number, 9, Sanskrit colleges to provide Sanskrit education and literature in the sub-region. There was also a considerable number of institutions of higher education and institution of national importance. The sub-region houses institutions and universities such as National Institute of Technology (NIT), at Raurkela, University

of Technology, Burla, Medical College, Burla and one general university, Sambalpur University, a teaching cum affiliating university, Jyoti Bihar, Burla. Typical to other sub-regions of Odisha, general and traditional higher education is the overriding phenomenon in the western sub-region as well. There is widespread inter-district variation in terms of land holding, per-capita income, education (especially of higher education) and daily sources of livelihood. There is also variation within the districts too. Take, for instance, Jharsuguda district, where status of employment of the main workers is



66.00%, 14.30% and 19.80% in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors respectively is not like in the other districts of the sub-region. Practices like fishing, horticulture, collection of forest products, animal husbandry and selling of fuels (wood, coal) are common among the economically disadvantaged sections. Cultivation of rice during *Kharif* season and of both rice and wheat during *Rabi* Season, are the major part of primary sector economy of this sub-region. This area is endowed with vast mineral deposits like coal, iron-ore, manganese ore, bauxite, chromite etc. Taking into account the rich mineral resources, many Multi-National Companies (MNCs) are establishing small and big industries across the sub-region. At present this sub-



region houses 30 small and big industrial units. Large industries like Rourkela Steel Plant (at Rourkela, Sundergarh), National Aluminium Company (Anugul), Coal based power plants (at Talcher and Benharpali of Dhenkanal and Jharsuguda) have been set up during various plan periods.

In Western Odisha, around 30% of its population belongs to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, although it varies from district to district. They have their own traditional living pattern and unfortunately they are still considered backward, untouchable and treated with ignorance on various occasions in macro society. However, sporadically, it is seen that by virtue of their own efforts, some portions of population from these sections live a settled economic life, while large sections of population from these categories are deprived of their basic rights. They have vulnerable sources of livelihood. The consequences of an uncertain and low commercial practice push them to other destinations and into the vicious cycle of poverty. In the off season they look for work in stone mines, coal mines and different poverty alleviation programmes sponsored by Central and State governments.

Now questions might arise related to what we mean by transitional society? What are the features of this society? Various disciplines use the notion 'transition' in different contexts and derive different meanings there. In science, according to the theory of thermodynamics, the term transition is used to describe the transition phase 'of substances when transforming in solid, liquid and gaseous aggregate states.' (Cf. Stanley 1971). The economic historian Karl Polanyi uses transition and transformation synonymously in his seminal book, *Origins of our time: the great transformation*, published in 1944. His investigation was concerned with the transformation of society into a market economy focusing on the political and economic dimensions of this process (Polanyi 1944). Several social theories and studies on technology systems strive for an understanding of social transformations (Rotmans et al. 2001; Foxon 2007; Grin et al. 2010; Geels 2011). They focus on technological, social and economic changes that entail profound alterations in structures, institutions and social relations (Fischer-Kowalaski et al. 2012). Therefore, it is understood that

the concept of transition varies from discipline to discipline and situation to situation.

If the entire economic activities of Western Odisha in general and of the villages (under study) in particular are taken into consideration, one can situate the sub-region into the phase or stage of ‘the preconditions for taking-off’ of economic growth (Rostow 1960). However, people of the two villages still have considerable economic activities based on traditional agriculture and hierarchical social structure and low vertical social mobility, as their special features. It suggests that somewhere the people of the villages are located at the preconditions for the take-off stage to transform them into take-off stage. ‘Take-Off’ stage is characterized by dynamic economic growth. The main characteristic of this economic growth is self-sustained growth which requires no exogenous inputs. Taking into account the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the sub-region and the society living there, it has been labelled as transitional society. It should be stated here that although it appears to be at the preconditions stage of transformation from the face values, there is a wide range of disparities within the sub-region, as a result of the very notion of transitional state being immensely distorted. And hence with the given complex state of socio-economic conditions, any developmental initiative requires meticulous planning and efficient implementation at every level.

However, among several developmental initiatives, growth and development of higher education has been one of the major on record of the regional government but it seems to be less effective in practice, leading to apparent mismatching with the needs and demands of individual students and of the sub-regional socio-economic and cultural conditions. One of the weakest features of the developmental initiatives in the sphere of higher education is that it is yet unable to create that situation which can attract the interest of the larger potential stakeholders and acquire involvement of the latter.

## **Unconstructive and Reductionist Understanding of Higher Education**

A household survey was conducted during 2008-2009 and 2010-2011 in two different phases where a total of 80 family heads and 20 graduates from two villages, from the Boudh and Jharsuguda districts of Odisha, participated. The participants constituted both male and female. The majority of the people who participated in the interviews had narrow and pessimistic views and understandings about higher education. During the course of interviews and observations with members of the villages, it has been established that higher education is a means of getting a lucrative job only and this is their subjugated established understanding towards higher education. Some narratives of the interviews may be mentioned here. A male member of a family says, “my son has done Bachelor of Arts but he did not get any job. Nowadays he is helping me in agriculture. I spent money for his education but he could not get a job after the completion of his education. I have a daughter too. She wanted to go for higher education but we prevented her giving the example of her elder brother. There are many graduates in our village but very few have got government job.” The son of the male says, “I tried to get a job but I was not successful. I am doing cultivation and doing well in terms of production and productivity, where my father was less effective. But at the same time people of my village often criticize my engagement in agriculture. They say I should not do this kind of job after having a higher degree. Sometime, even my family members show their disappointment over my engagement in agriculture. They say my education is worthless because I am doing agricultural activities.” A female member of another family says, “both of my daughters are graduates but both are jobless. We took many difficulties for their education but we are not getting any returns from their education. We are expecting them to get the job of a school teacher but that was also turned negative. They are at home, nowadays we are looking for some prosperous grooms as their life partners but that also seems to be less bright. One of the girl graduates says, “we, along my younger sister, are facing criticism in our daily life. Because they think that we should have government jobs in our

hands after completion of our education. I had not any strong feeling of taking any lucrative job, as people expect us to do. The unfortunate state of affair is that the youth of my neighborhood are not showing very positive interest in higher education, because their parents often give them very easy example of us. We have to listen to critical words from our parents due our inability to get a job and a good response from the people around us in our village.”

From the above narration one can come to the conclusion that there is an established notion of higher degree and its relation with prosperous jobs. This established understanding often puts them into the trap of great confusion in the milieu of competition and turns them into vehement critics of higher education. For instance, they criticize the educated ones, when he or she gets engaged in private enterprise in the form of doing agricultural activities or getting engaged in its allied activities like animal husbandry, aquaculture etc. They think that an educated person or the graduates should get employed in the government sector rather than in the private one. For them a graduate without employment in the government sector or well-organized private sector is the result of failure of higher education. They praise a lot when an educated or a graduate get a job in a government sector. However, they hardly perceive the intricacies of returns that the higher education possesses in the form of personal, social, economic and political fortification of the graduates. When a graduate or an educated performs excellently in agriculture, social and political affairs, this would not get much recognition and appreciation.

From the people’s experience in the villages, in the last one and half decades, their localities have witnessed large scale educated unemployment. As a result, they might have developed a negative understanding of higher education because their understanding of ‘higher education as a means of getting a lucrative job’ is no more than a dominant and unbreakable truth. Their criticisms have been present in the day to day life. However, the village members accept a kind of alternative way of living conducted by the educated or the graduates, for instance, their occupational profile, daily living style, association with the state of affairs of the different regions and people of different cross culture through print and

electronic media. According to the words of a male member of a family referring to a graduate, “he has good contact with people. He has so many friends, a wide circle. We often wander where these people are coming from. He is very good in social dealing. But the bad thing is he has not got any job in government sector.”

The attitude of village members towards both higher education and educated unemployed is often found as poorly constructed. They make censure and reprimand on the graduates, institutions, and government for the inability of getting job by the graduates or educated. The most serious negative side is that it prevents and discourages people to send their youth for higher studies, which can't be ruled out as a big challenge for further growth and development of higher education in particular, and development of a society in transition in general, in the mission of prospective knowledge society and in the era of globalization. The society, which is considered as to transit itself from traditional and preconditions stages in the growth processes, is weak in terms of qualified capital asset in a narrow sense and underdeveloped in terms of mindful human and rich skilled human resources in a broader sense. And the prevailing situations in the villages may bring adverse effects where their localities would be forced to depend upon the extensive inputs from outside even at the cost of their indigenous economy pattern, physical environment and culture, a situation which is typical for the sub-region Western Odisha as well.

## **Conclusion**

Higher education has been conceptualized, understood, interpreted by educationists and visionary leaders in a broader sense and these have given greater value to it in the process of development. However, the understanding of transitional society in Western Odisha, which is considered backward in terms of information seeking, knowledge behaviour, scientific temper and sustainable sound economy, is narrow. Here, the problem is the linking of higher education with higher order job preferably in the public sector, which defeats the other essential purposes of higher education. More importantly there

would be a setback for the ambitious policies; many are in place, which visualize mainstreaming a society by the instrumentality of higher education, if such narrow attitude persists there.

However, the main reasons for the depreciation of the value of higher education in the transitional society, like in Western Odisha, cannot be made solely responsible to visible numbers of educated unemployed, but it is rather due to lack of desirable effective individual, social and political growth of the graduates in their practical lives. So, generally speaking, if somebody tries to understand the depreciative state of higher education among the members of a backward society, in transition, the causes may be its low quality, which is often mistaken and reduced only to ill-equipped infrastructure, job seeking behaviours and giving subordinate importance to the achievements in the form of productivity in the latter parts of lives of the graduates. Changes in the perception of these people are crucial and they would be possible only through the help of existing institutions and universities along with effective coordination among the agencies and bodies that deal with higher education. The institutions of higher education, like those in the rural Odisha of India, can be considered as centers of experiment and yet those have to be accepted by the people living there. Therefore, whatever the cost on the part the State, the laboratory of experiment must be equipped and responsible for the mass implication of its outcome. They must bear the response to the culture, context and transformation around them and across the world and only then the understanding and interpretation of village people in transition will be broadened and will help them in the processes of their development, particularly to adapt to the knowledge based society and to deal with the forces of globalization in a sustainable manner.

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