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***The Evolution, Innovation and Escalation
in Liberal Education in India: Role of
Private Universities***

Abstract

Liberal Studies as a concept was already successful in the Western countries especially the US. It is already on the path of success and sustainability in Indian education scenario as well. During the last few decades, the people and the government saw the rise of Indian corporate houses, their competency and liberalisation in industry succeeded liberalisation in education sector also. Liberal studies is the speedily moving and widely accepted model of education in India today. The article focuses on the success of Liberal Studies owing to the active involvement of the private institutes, their endeavours, their initiatives to make a difference. The study has focused on twelve institutes of national repute most of which were founded in the twenty-first century who have brought liberal education to a new height with various experiments and endeavours.

Introduction

The dawn of twenty-first century saw the rise of India in the field of commerce and industry and also in education. New institutes came up with state of the art campuses, dynamic management, innovative practices and pedagogy to impart various courses. Courses or combination of courses hitherto unheard of were accepted and took pace as if the people and the industry were waiting for it for long. The old courses, curriculum, nomenclature and pedagogy started becoming redundant. This period also saw the rise of private players in school and college education. Institutes backed or promoted corporate houses or tycoons came up as self-financed institutes. They brought professionalism in the management of

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the institutes, focus on the field and innovation in research and dissemination of knowledge. These institutes also had international universities as their role models and the main thrust was on Total Quality Management [TQM].

It is noteworthy that courses which were considered as derisory like BA, B.Com, BBA [Social Sciences, Humanities and Commerce] etc. got a new fervour with fundamental innovation in the course structures, pedagogy, addition of multidisciplinary approach, research and practical exposure and ‘Liberal Studies’ as the new flagship nomenclature encompassing everything. Liberal studies is the speedily moving and widely accepted model of education today. The word ‘liberal’ itself seems attractive apparently especially if in education. But it is not about being liberal about studies or assignment or attendance or exam. The institute may provide flexibility but it is about liberating the mind, knowledge, wisdom, thinking and creativity. In other words, making mind, knowledge and creativity shackle free and not limiting education or a course only to a specific topic or educating self for a particular profession only and nothing out of it. “Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world [e.g. science, culture and society] as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills and as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015”¹ Liberal studies has endeavoured to break the water tight compartment of education, especially university degree education which limited a student in terms of knowledge but also in following a profession and understanding other aspects of the world. Liberal studies focuses on skills, human life, critical thinking and creativity and thus broadens the choice of profession and occupation a person can take with a better understanding of self and world.

Methodology

The study has focused on twelve institutes of national repute most of which were founded in the twenty-first century and have brought liberal education to a new height with various experiments and endeavours.

The details are based on the primary data from their websites, official brochures and also on secondary data from educational portals mentioned in bibliography. Talks with a few educationalists, interviews, have also been used as an aid for broader perspective and knowledge. The author also does not

claim authenticity of data or facts mentioned as they are taken from the official websites and may change from time to time. The said data and facts are just to add to the discussion and substantiate the reasoning.

Discussion

Liberal Studies as a concept was already successful in the Western countries especially the US. It is already on the path of success and sustainability in Indian education scenario as well. The article focuses on the success of Liberal Studies owing to the active involvement of the private institutes, their endeavours, their initiatives to make a difference.

1.1 The Entry of Private Players

“A lot of corporates with deep pockets have entered the education space in the past few years, giving a further boost to a sector which was already hot. With huge investments, they want good people to run such units.”²² The trend of entry of private players in education also saw many corporate houses, business leaders establishing institutes and universities as an offshoot of their group. This may initially be a part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) or initially they may fund them but the model is to make them self-sustainable financially and in reputation and management. Of course they would not like to run it as profit centre like their companies but a workable model which reaches potential to develop on its own, independent of the corporate group. This model of self-finance universities is new in India. The Central or State government established and managed the colleges and universities directly or by granting funds to the trusts. The trusts, however, were not independent in matters of funds, recruitment, development and curriculum. The private players added a new flavour to the philosophy and education, dynamism in management style, and fluidity in the courses, curriculum and pedagogy.

The people and the government saw the rise of Indian corporate houses, their competency and liberalisation in industry succeeded liberalisation in education sector also and the economic growth of people resulting into various initiatives. Perhaps, the time was right and many initiatives and endeavours to revolutionise education scenario in India took place. “Many ideas fail not because they are bad ideas, nor because they are poorly executed, but because the timing is not correct.”²³

1.2 Renovating the Gate of Entry

The private universities showed their in-depth comprehension and foresightedness of education and its impact on the society and professional world. Their experience of business, industry and ever changing scenario of global economy and world order brought new ideas and insights. These universities first of all renovated the gate of entry for the students to the institutes. “On the issue of admissions, private player may be given the discretion for admission, but will have to justify merit. Perhaps a Tribunal on Admission Disputes can be set up for those aggrieved by the admission policy of an institution.”⁴ Entrance exam of their own or of national repute was made compulsory and gone are the days when a student just walked in with a rich mark sheet of board or an influential contact to seek admission. To bring quality and transparency the universities gave little or no importance to just the academic performance in board exams. They wanted sharp students who would score well in entrance exams customised for their purpose with personal interviews. This brought about a sense of fair play and healthy competition for admission, the universities too will get filtered quality on whom they would invest time and energy in shaping them into better citizens.

This endeavour also brought about consciousness and cautiousness amongst the people for the importance of liberal studies, studying various subjects, overall grooming and inculcation of good attitude. The fees charged by the private players are higher compared to the government funded institutes and so the students as well as the university wants value of money and maintain quality and promised standards. The simple wisdom of if you have good students you will have excellent faculties, dynamic management and broad and deep research initiatives. There is also a noteworthy point here: the admission cycle of these universities do not just begin after the higher secondary board exam results are declared but way before it. In fact, the entrance tests are completed before the board results are declared and the registrations have to be made much in advance. The online revolution made it possible for students to apply to any university across the country without having to pay a visit. These universities walk an extra mile to attract good students and to facilitate them by conducting tests, interviews and counselling at different centres and not just their campus. This was an effective step to ‘reach out’ to the talented lot. The table below shows universities taking admission based on entrance tests:

CHRIST UNIVERSITY	SYMBIOSIS INTERNATIONAL [DEEMED UNIVERSITY]
NARSEE MOHANJEE INSTITUTE	SRM INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
PANDIT DEENDAYAL PETROLEUM UNIVERSITY	O. P. JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY
AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY	ASHOKA UNIVERSITY
FLAME UNIVERSTIY	RNB GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

- The universities are mentioned as per the chronology of their establishment year.

1.3 Pedagogical Edge with Set of Distinct Deliverables and Outcome

There was a time when study of humanities or social science was considered lower in cadre among the educational degrees. Literature was considered as reading stories and poems, performing arts were considered as hobby classes, social science subjects like history, sociology, public administration, international relations etc. were considered just theories. All in all a student who studied humanities or commerce was considered inferior to engineering, medical or science graduates. One of the reasons was the pedagogical approach to the study of humanities and commerce and second was the perception. The education imparted was all bookish and mugged up theories without any practical approach, applicability and add-ons like critical thinking, creative solutions, leadership and personality development. The advent of private players and new methods to pedagogical approach did a reverse engineering of developing certain skills in students and broadening their horizon of thinking and widening the knowledge area by defining deliverables and outcome. The new pedagogy was designed accordingly and more and more people joining from industry or practical field added their experiences in the syllabus and courses lessening the gap of employability and education. “The key to a successful liberal arts education is the discovery process. It is the process that is often taught to entrepreneurs as “lean” or “customary discovery”. It is not about taking a theory and overbuilding an unusable solution. It is about seeing the simplicity of the world.”⁶

The importance of liberal studies rose as it gave a wider scope of learning, training of skills set, industry and practical exposure imbibed as part of pedagogy and deliverables reflected in grade sheets as well. The rise of competition among the students also ensured that students take to practical exposure programmes like industry visits, internships, research projects, and fixated short term courses seriously offered and encouraged by these dynamic institutes. “These graduates didn’t leave learning at the classroom door. Instead, they have experimented and experienced life, often through internships, and in the process they fine-tuned their careers.”⁷

Skills building and developing leadership qualities, research bent, fostering creativity and critical approaches, innovation and entrepreneurship are a few intensive areas of outcome around which the institutes and the educationalists started weaving their curriculums, students’ activities and overall deliverables. “We must create learning environments that let students draw on the internal resources that brought them to college in the first place. As instructors, we must

focus our attention on creating an environment where students can gain knowledge and skills in critical thinking and problem solving in their chosen areas of learning”.⁸ One of the advantages that the institutes offering liberal studies got was the selection of students, limited seats and higher fees compared to traditional government institutes. As discussed in point 1.2 the institutes renovated the entry itself and thus filtering the quality of students, higher fees ensured that the students and the parents remain vigilant about their education and career unlike the traditional government institutes where a student gets admission without any filtration and pays meagre fees and there is no vigilance or sense of responsibility from either the students or the institutes. The huge number in the traditional government institutes was also a hindrance for individual attention of the faculties and planning of the institutes. Thus, a student of liberal studies started developing his soft skills, communication, leadership skills and people skills to balance the lack of technical skills that a student of engineering or medical would have. This raised their level in employability and entrepreneurship. “It is critical to understand the difference between what people say and what they do. You have to learn how to do the same thing. I would recommend that you spend some high-quality time and effort to become a student of people.”⁹ JRD says, “I came long ago to the conclusion that the three most important requirements for getting along with people were, first, communication; the importance of frank and sometimes continuous discussion between people of groups.”¹⁰ Here it is pertinent to quote and refer to JRD Tata who always regretted the lack of technical skills but always excelled owing to his people skills, communication and critical thinking. What could be a better example for a student of liberal studies to excel in life and career?

International exposure programmes were initiated by many dynamic institutes offering liberal studies. These programmes were not targeted to encourage brain drain or attract people with glamour but a genuine effort to round off the exposure programmes. The exposure programmes that the institutes have initiated range from rural work or visits, industry visits and internships, cultural exposure and visits, research projects and field research to international exposure where the students do not visit a particular country and university as a tourist but to study the culture, working style, and education of that country. This also brought universities of various countries closer wherein they could exchange good practises for the overall betterment of education and a peaceful world order. The cross cultural exchanges increased among the youth itself and technology and social media facilitated it. Many times we understand ourselves and our culture in comparison to others and other cultures. A new outlook and understanding rose when the youth started interacting and becoming friends at

international level. Now the relations amongst the nations are not just political or commercial but also educational and cultural. “I don’t want my house to be walled in on all sides and windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my houses as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”¹¹

1.4 The New All-rounder of Education at the Institute-Teacher

The teacher is the central and pivotal organ of an educational institute. No institute can function or move an inch in the absence of a teacher. A new institute set-up first of requires enlisting good and qualified teachers over and above everything. The students’ education, activities, curriculum design, research, assessment will fall into place only if there are teachers around to carry out their work. Infrastructure and facilities are secondary to teachers and students. Good teachers are the sure-shot *Mantra* of acceptance of the institute and success of the students. The traditional government institutes faced certain restrictions in attracting good teachers and even the government started to think of them as liabilities who have to be paid well and not assets without which you cannot function. “A major shortfall in this direction is the inability of our institutions of higher learning to attract and retain qualified and trained faculty of high order. As the bureaucratic process of administration continues to stifle Indian academia, it will further reduce the competitive edge of Indian higher education institutions.”¹² The rise of private players in Indian educational scenario also saw the rise of ‘the new teacher’ who is an all-rounder; is passionate, researcher, manager and many a times an experienced person from industry. These new institutes encouraged and invited people from the industry to join full time academics or on ad-hoc basis to tab their experience and practical outlook. This gave new bent to the curriculum design and pedagogical flavour.

“Besides curriculum re-design and practice orientation in sync with the changing realities in the world of business, the institutions need to focus on developing worthy faculty to meet the ensuing global shortage of educators.”¹³ Many professionals joined as a full time faculty or an expert faculty bringing and implementing their rich experience for the betterment of education. The private players of education also renovated entry gate or teachers. A teacher need not join at the bottom but at any level depending on his/her experience and expertise. “Faculty members from practice bring a wealth of business experience that enriches both faculty research and classroom learning”.¹⁴ They were given freedom to design curriculum and experiment, facilitated with speed in execution and investment to bridge the gap between education and requirements of the society and industry.

This teacher did not just use books, libraries or labs, he/she used experience, insight and wisdom in the classroom and outside. The teacher also got involved in the operations and strategies of the institutes, in research and internships. The rich industry experience to the teachers, who had, did not have to be told about the constant need of upgradation and evolvement, about importance of skills and leadership, they brought them here and implemented. The students who were focused accepted the teacher because of his/her background and practical tips. The pedagogy and curriculum saw new dimensions in revamping and delivery. “A feeling of discomfort and with what one is doing and an urge to seek improvements in the competence and professionalism of one’s students are pre-requisites for enhancing one’s teaching capabilities.”¹⁵ The teacher became a teacher, a mentor, a doer, a researcher, a leader and an example to be followed beyond his/ her knowledge of the books and lectures in the classrooms. “I did not find it at all necessary to load the boys with quantities of books. I have always felt that the true text-book for the pupil is his teacher. I remember very little that my teachers taught me from books, but I have even now a clear recollection of the things they taught me independently of books.”¹⁶ The benchmark that ‘the new teacher’ has set today has kept even the corporate leaders wondering as he/she has been contributing in all round development. The best investment any philanthropic organisation in education can make is investing in teachers and facilitating them with their experiments and self upgradation. They cannot be just taken as employees like employees in any other industry or organisation but as the pivotal figure who can function and bring laurels if given freedom, respect and facilitation in endeavours.

1.5 Breaching the Barriers

The nation like India has been blessed with diversity of nature and culture in its vast expanse. The institutes of higher education formerly catered to the local community or to say in other words the students who enrolled in the institutes were from the same city or towns nearby and so were the academicians. There was only limited local flavour in education which limited the scope of the students as well as the teachers in understanding the diversity of nation itself, global outlook still distant. The new age private players entered the education arena with a bang revolutionising many dimensions as we saw above. This included breaching the barriers of distance, culture and language. An institute today does not have intake of students just from the neighbouring towns but from the entire nation and so is the case with faculties. The students do not just opt for a nearby college but a known and a college of good ranking anywhere in the country. The criterion of distance as the choice was removed and quality

education, good infrastructure, competent faculties and peers at par became the criteria for applying to an institute.

The boundaries were still breached when institutes embraced internationalisation and global outlook by welcoming students from other countries for short term programmes or degree courses. They also started encouraging their Indian students for international exposure by giving incentives, scholarships, travel grants and various alliances with universities abroad. The role of teachers who also did not worry about working in a nearby college became important. These universities have stringent parameters of selecting faculties and their promotions and diversity is welcomed even in the faculties. Yesterday the traditional government institutes had faculties from nearby areas or from the same states who did not bring varied culture or perspectives. This also limited a student's learning of languages, cultures and regions.

Today the new age universities have faculties from various states and also from abroad who bring varied perspectives and knowledge to the table. This breached the geographical barriers and the horizon of the institute as well as the student widened immensely. It was an excellent icing on the cake of the pedagogical endeavours of the visionary founders especially in subject like liberal studies. The facilitation was practical and visible and not just an ideal on paper. "Indeed, liberal education models can produce learning or change, by being one of the key voices which question how the fruits of scientific, religious, and political ideas help, or not, in educating, developing, and sustaining more whole human beings and, by extension, a more just world."¹⁷

The state of the art infrastructure developed with no avariciousness facilitated the new models of education. The campuses became a world in themselves, vibrant with activities, multi-cultural people studying and working together, accommodation facilities, in-house sports complex etc. The government accreditations like NAAC also encourage and incentivised infrastructural facilities in the campus. The ambience, safety and security, facilities and amenities within the campuses attracted students from distant lands to join an institute.

The institutes also initiated their outreach and branding activities across the country as well as abroad. The new age private players who renovated the entry for the students spread their admission centres in various cities to facilitate students seeking admission from distant lands.

Figure 1.2 shows universities with more than ten test/PI centres across India:

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The breach of barriers was not just geographical or cultural but also skill and knowledge based. The universities came up with centres of excellence in various subjects and expertise. This was to bridge the gap between the industry, required research and education imparted. Many companies started sponsoring centres of excellence for sharing their expertise, facilitating the students and teachers with research and trying to bridge the gap of industry and societal expectation and education. This initiated continuous cycle of interaction of institutes with society, industry back and forth and continuous upgradation of curriculum, pedagogy and research areas. “If you successfully apply these ideas, but then stop doing them, you will slide backward from great to good or worse. The only way to remain great is to keep applying the fundamental principles that made you great.”¹⁸

1.6 Breaching the Broadcasting Barriers

The private players who entered the educational arena brought many dynamic practices from corporate. One such was the novel and continuous outreach to students’ community in particular and society at large. They broadcasted about their promoters, infrastructure facilities, students’ achievements and activities, academic up gradation and achievements etc. through various means hitherto unknown or untouched by the traditional government institutes. Like any vigilant FMCG company, these institutes used all the means of clear branding available in the twenty-first century from developing elegant and informative websites to active use of social media portals, to education promotional sites to traditional print, TV and billboard ads to spread awareness about their activities and achievements. There was also a movement of creating news first and then broadcasting them. The dynamic private players who had brought their global exposure and rich industry experience understood the nuances of moving forward, dealing with change, branding activities and ultimately what is needed to ensure that a student gets conducive atmosphere with maximum opportunities to learn, train and develop into a responsible citizen and professional.

Conclusion

The dawn of twenty-first century saw the sunrise of Liberal Studies conceptualised and driven by the private universities. It was soon accepted and taken as a holistic replacement of the traditional courses and degrees of government universities. Humanities and Social Science got a shot in the arm with the new design of curriculum, pedagogical approaches, research insight and the various careers options after following the courses. The role of Liberal studies was aligned with the need of the hour in various fields from government to industry, from entertainment to entrepreneurship and the outcome based education brought vigour and respect for what was once considered bookish or theoretical knowledge. “In the context of building socially cohesive societies and sustainable models of development, the humanities and social sciences can never be irrelevant. For example, studies in psychology, sociology and philosophy need to be reoriented to reflect new information and communication technologies.”¹⁹

When the curriculum was developed for holistic effect and acceptance, the institutes too facilitated this with state of the art infrastructure, expert faculties, cutting on red-tape for fast forward movement, involvement of industry for helping at every stage from curriculum development to placement activities. This was possible with the advent of the corporates who initiated various institutes first as a philanthropic activity but with a vision to make it self-sustainable operationally. Their rich corporate experience and global outlook helped the institutes to take wings and soar. The trust behind the names of the promoters also played a major role in public acceptance of the experiments and endeavours. “Perhaps, then, you might gain that rare tranquillity that comes from knowing that you’ve had a hand in creating something of intrinsic excellence that makes a contribution. Indeed, you might gain that deepest of all satisfactions: knowing that your short time here on this earth has been well spent, and that it mattered.”²⁰ The visionary founders proved it and have continued with their endeavours for bringing about a major change and paradigm shift in the way humanities and social sciences have been delivered.

Notes

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