Tech-Driven Higher Education in 21st Century India: Beyond Clichés, Reflecting on Institutional and Pedagogical Readiness

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Abstract: At the outset, one must acknowledge how Digital Technology and the consequent Virtual Existence have turned the world into experiencing both the real and the virtual/unreal in a way—simultaneously. Conducting and experiencing of any acts including those of vital and crucial importance for human life have become simultaneously real and virtual and/ or unreal. Against this backdrop, though it may appear almost superfluous to discuss the ubiquitous role of technology and digital technology, it is still worthwhile to critique it and thereby to come to terms with it. As is well-known, notwithstanding the envisioning of the significant role of digital technology in NEP-2020, in the thick of Corona times, digital technology made, though all of a sudden, a deep incursion into the domain of higher education, across India, and perhaps all the stakeholders of higher education—students, faculty and higher education institutions' administrators—without much expertise and understanding of the full potential and implications about digital technology came to 'use' it (digital technology) in view of the then prevailing compelling conditions. While being conscious of this backdrop, the present article attempts to be reflective of the implied clichés and assumptions and further somewhat candidly verify our readiness—the readiness of the establishment and the pedagogical of HEIs at ground zero level.

Keywords: Higher Education, Digital Technology, Marginalised Sections, Online Teaching, Real and Virtual and/or Unreal, Establishment and Pedagogical Readiness

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Teachers require suitable training and development to be effective online educators. It cannot be assumed that a good teacher in a traditional classroom will automatically be a good teacher in an online classroom. … There are numerous challenges to conducting online examinations at scale, including limitations on the types of questions that can be asked in an online environment at scale, including limitations on the types of questions that can be asked in an online environment, handling network and power disruptions, and preventing unethical practices. … *Further, unless online education is blended with experiential and activity-based learning, it will tend to become a screen-based education with limited focus on the social, affective and psychomotor dimension of learning* **(**Emphasis mine) (Government of India, 2020).

The quote flagged above as epigraph shall indicate the overarching objective and the pedagogical shift that are required for before venturing into full-fledged digitalisation of higher education scenario of India. Accordingly, the conceptual paper in the first place recalls and reviews the state of play of higher education in Indian context, and secondly, keeping in view with the conviction that 'policy formulation' cannot be done in an isolated manner either by the government or by the establishment alone since it (the establishment) is one of the stakeholders in the making of policy of education. Further, it is believed that it is the responsibility of the other stakeholders to join hands and come forward with tangible proposals to assist the Government in making a policy, presently, with regard to policy of online teaching-learning and digital education.

Fortified thus this conceptual paper attempts to verify the readiness of the eco-system and the role of the stakeholders in a candid manner with special reference to the challenges to meet with, the sacrifices to be made and the metamorphoses to be undergone without which the success of the online learning-teaching will be doubtful and partial.

A Recap of Higher Education in the Indian Context

Though sounding to be stating the obvious and appearing conventional, it must be proudly acknowledged that education has been always accorded high position and importance by the culture of our nation. However, as an ancient nation, understandably, India has had its own rich yet complex history of education and higher education in particular. Inevitably and prominently, one would get reminded by the once-world-famous higher education destinations, like, Nalanda and Takshasila which were centers of knowledge and excellence of various disciplines and nuances in times of ancient India. But the vagaries of history did witness the downfall of the same which fact could never be undone completely later on, like any other historical developments. Subsequently and through the Middle Ages and into the modern times, the presence and spread of education was found to be limited and selective.

In spite of the hoary past of education and excellence thereof in India, over a period of time—to reiterate, through the Middle Ages and into the beginning of modern times—education acquired more of the nature of 'literacy-level' education, was founded in religious and/or philosophical studies, and was accessible only to a minuscule minority of the population. Perhaps the turning point in this long yet winding journey of education of India, especially in the field of higher

education in the modern sense, the colonial administration of the British indeed did make a reckonable contribution though not totally without ulterior motives and of the reasons of colonial administration. But the real and positive and proactive contributions had emanated from the successive administrations of free India.

Accordingly, the expansion of higher education has proceeded relentlessly, aiming to meet the nation's developmental needs, respond to globalisation, and play a pivotal role in leveraging its opportunities. More importantly, it seeks to fulfil the aspirations of the Indian people, particularly the marginalised communities, who have historically been denied access to higher education. In fact, at times, one can't help feel that the expansion of higher education has taken place more in the 'spirit' of democratisation of higher education which resulted in the establishment of new universities in both the public sector (state government and central government) and the private sector.

'Democratization' of Higher Education in the Indian Context vis-à-vis Marginalized Sections and the Consequences Thereof

Since acquiring Education and specifically Higher Education, as has been pointed out and considered as so taking the ground reality into consideration, has remained more as a means for launching on to higher social status/job/profession/enterprise, and even as a means to surpass social discrimination than as a sole means for passion for it (higher education):

> To take a historical perspective of higher education in Indian context, one has to concede that education in India in the past had a limited access, and was proved to be a prerogative of select sections of society. Further, education always had

been associated with the ensuring and enhancement of status in society. Perhaps the point to be reckoned is education in most instances has been pursued more as a means to having a hike in socio-economic conditions than as a means to fulfilling a passion and/or to innovate. This is not to mean to dilute the high-end intentions of higher education and research, especially in the post-independent India. But it is a practical and down-to-earth stand on the matter of higher education in India. (Prasad, 2016, pp. 16–17)

Further to speak candidly about the politics of governance of India, it always has been proved to be doing the art of doing the possible *a la* Bismarck's way: "politics is the art of the possible, the attainable—the art of the next best." Speaking democratically this shall not be questioned and even not to be doubted since in any democratic context the same shall happen. As is well-known, India, having woken up to independence with the burden of the past which was found to be soaked in anarchy, monarchy, feudalism, colonialism, for all practical purposes the nation made a big leap to democracy. This situation motivated/compelled the successive governments of free India to be indulging in practicing the doing the art of possible to meet the aspirations of the millions of the people of the country whose aspirations for education and the consequent benefits otherwise which had been thwarted for centuries prior to the attaining of independence:

> The rapid expansion is to meet the demand of the large populace who were denied opportunities and status—social, economic and political due to lack of higher education. Expectedly, this resulted in at least to a substantial extent, uplifting the masses, and meeting the aspirations of the marginalised classes who in turn have become resources to the ever-

burgeoning polity and economy of the nation (Prasad, 2016, p. 18).

Before foraying into the prospects and challenges of digitaliaation of higher education in Indian context, the implications of the 'democratiaation of higher education' needs to be evaluated in a pragmatic manner. As has been mentioned above, democratisation of higher education, carried out in a conventional mode indeed has brought in empowerment to the marginalised sections by way facilitating access to the campuses of higher education institutions where face-to-face mode of imparting and learning of education has happened, and thereby these sections of the people have had the pleasure of learning/getting trained in experiential manner and in real time/context.

Implications of Digitalization of Higher Education for the Marginalized Sections of India

Since candidness as the governing principle for developing this conceptual paper, a vital aspect like the impact of digitalisation of higher education which includes online teaching and learning on the marginalised sections could not be taken as a non-issue and/or taken-for-granted in the light of the reasons like the historicity of the issue and comparatively the late entry of these sections into higher education which otherwise had remained as a privileged domain. At his juncture it must be clarified explicitly that this is not an attempt to take lightly the potential adverse impact of digitalisation of higher education on other sections. But just to highlight, comparatively speaking, there is a higher vulnerability of the aspirants hailing from these sections.

Maybe it is warranted to make explicit the potential vulnerability especially with reference to the marginalised sections, incidental-

ly whose means of acquiring higher education are always constrained, when they get into the means of digitalisation of higher education:

a. As has been visualised by NEP-2020, the possible missing of 'experiential learning' will have left a feeling of hollowness in their acquisition of knowledge. Perhaps this loss will remain unfilled.

b. Though it might be of common knowledge to state that exclusive online teaching-learning will take its toll especially in the areas of practical(s)-based subjects like sciences and technology. Perhaps this does not even require to be mentioned. Hence the consequent learning/getting trained will not be sound enough, which may ultimately leave them 'half-educated.'

c. On top of these, whatever be the teaching-learning domain, be it languages, humanities, sciences and technology, exclusive online learning will take away the benefit of personal interaction between the teacher and the taught which at times will lead to the generation of new knowledge since knowledge is not constant but dynamic.

d. Notwithstanding the near-compelling situation of adapting to online teaching-learning which ultimately take away the phase of campus life in one's life will remain as a big loss—as it removes the opportunity of 'growing up' in life learning the essentials of life, like socialisation and working in a peer group in real time and three-dimensional manner.

e. A more pertinent reason would be if not all, many of the students coming from the marginalised sections, when they enter higher education, they are found to be entering the higher education domain with a sense of shyness, hesitation and diffidence and at times raised on weak foun-

dations of basic education as they hail from remote and rural areas.

Against this backdrop, while being swayed in favour of digitalisation of higher education in Indian context, one has to be concerned about the implications of digitalisation of higher education for these sections. Since, as has been apprehended, and rightly also, by the NEP-2020 whether the readiness of pedagogy is available for implementing online and/or digitalising of higher education.

To put it more pertinently, unless proper preparatory care is taken, the implications of the digitalisation of higher education could be disastrous for the marginalised sections whose aspirations have already risen and been sustained to some extent—and rightly so. Considering the expression of apprehension as 'rightly' is justified as what are at stake could be 'equity' and 'quality' of education.

To reiterate and to speak candidly, unless the equity and the quality of the higher education received by the marginalised sections is ensured, there would be reversal in their participation in furthering the cause of the development of the nation. Further, the late and the recently facilitated and achieved scholarly, academic and professional accomplishments of the marginalised sections needed to be sustained, and thereby their contribution to the overall growth of the nation may not get hampered, and in turn the nation's growth will not be hampered.

Digitalisation of Higher Education in the Indian Context: Challenges and Prospects

Smart and pragmatic are the watchwords of the 21st century in the light of technological advancements including online/virtual, and digital technology at global level. It will not be exaggerating to state that all walks of human life have been affected by the paradigm shift caused by the technological advancement, perhaps across the globe. 'Reality' has doubled up as 'virtual.' Perhaps this comprehension of the 'reality' is already obvious and common experience, if not commonplace experience.

Set against this, India which is rich in human resources should sustain its effort to turn the vast human resources read as population in common parlance as really human resources—who are skilled, informed and contributing to the economic, social and cultural advancement of the nation. Thus, tertiary level/ higher education domain have come to face-to-face with the reality of virtual and/or blended mode (virtual and face-to-face combined) mode of teaching and learning. In fact, this development induced by the paradigmatic technology-based changes that have come into the core of our life, has compelled us to think about the new norm and the new reality that has forayed into the domain of higher education of Indian context.

In view of this compelling urgency and the incursion and invasion of the technological changes and more importantly the aftermath of the global calamity, and perhaps, the unexpected offshoot of globalisation, the Covid-19, have cornered us and compelled us—the stakeholders of the Indian Higher Education—to find a way-out from the then-stasis of the Covid-19.

What might have started and become a practical means and a professional way-out in the times of the aforementioned crisis has ultimately proved to have become a mainstay of the teaching and learning of higher education in Indian context. Accordingly, one of the stakeholders, the Establishment represented its strong plea for ad-

vocating and ushering in the much-avowed and stated 'Online and digital education' in higher education domain of India through its visionary document, NEP-2020.

Against this backdrop, the present conceptual paper, in the first place, sees space and validity for online and digital learning. In continuation of this affirmation, the proposal will attempt to make a candid approach to the vital and paradigmatic shift that has been taking place in the teaching and learning in higher education scenario of India by way of incorporating and strengthening Online and Digital Education and the implications and ways and means of fully realising the potential thereof.

However, as has been stated, a pragmatic verification of the factual position and roles of the stakeholders shall be carried out for identifying and realizing the major shifts in the attitudes and means for effecting the efficient functioning of online and digital teaching and learning. Accordingly, the following are to be realized on the part of all the Stakeholders of Higher Education—the student community and the parents/ society thereof, the teaching fraternity, the society/cultural environment/industry/ the NGOs and the establishment including the government of India and various state governments and other functionaries at various levels of higher education scenario. Specifically speaking, all the stakeholders of higher education, enumerated as above must engage themselves in:

A. Challenges to Cope with by the Teaching Fraternity as a Stakeholder

(i) *The Challenge of making the online classes and digital learning as student-centered*

The pitfall/temptation waiting for the teachers in online teaching and digital learning is the legacy of teacher-centeredness. in fact, speaking frankly, the lot of undoing that happened in higher education domain is due to the teacher-centeredness.

(ii) *The challenge of trusting students' comprehensions and integrity, and apportioning time and space in the online teaching-learning for students*

The legacy of distrust of students' comprehension and integrity that was conspicuously present in the face-to-face mode should not pass on to online teaching-learning and digital education. Hence enough space and time should be apportioned for students in the online learning mode.

B. Challenge to be Met with by Student Community is its Readiness to be in the Centre-Stage of Online Learning and Digital Education

The legacy of student dependency and passivity is understandably anathema in the higher education sector and represents a deep-rooted and persistent malaise. Readiness to take up the mantle of active participation and contribution in the online learning on the part of students since the meaning and comprehension and acquiring skill for the students will happen only through this means.

C. Sacrifices to be Made by the Teaching Fraternity and Metamorphoses to Undertake by all the Stakeholders

The teaching fraternity has to overcome being narcissistic means being in love with their preferred ideology and fancy ideas

and including, though unfortunately, being in love with one's own voice.

The legacy that negatively affected the face-to-face mode should not creep into online teaching-learning. Since online learning and digital education has the potential to accord personalised attention on the student, the same shall be utilised to its full extent, and thereby individual students can be nurtured to promote their perceptions and expressions. In fact this shall be the spirit of higher education.

D. Challenge to Meet with by the Establishment Including Government of India and Various State Governments/Society/Culture/NGOs and Educational Administrators at Various Levels

Providing the necessary eco-system including materials /equipment and skilling ambience and ensuring acceptance for the credentials acquired through online and digital mode: In view of the obvious paradigm shift in imparting and learning higher education through online and digital mode, the necessary ecosystem has to be created in a proactive manner by the Establishment of all nuances for creating and sustaining quality higher education through online and digital mode.

Thus, the responsibility for ensuring that online and digital education is functional, high-quality, and equitable lies primarily with all the stakeholders in the higher education sector, and this should be realised in the long-term interest of Indian society as a whole. In view of the foregoing argument, more done in the spirit of playing devil's advocate, it is warranted on the part of the author to clarify that digitalization of higher education can take place but with necessary development of ecosystem and with a concern for sustaining social justice and

equity for reasons that are best known to all concerned.

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