

Higher Education in North –East India, Issues and Challenges

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Abstract— Higher education plays a vital role in the nation’s overall development which includes social, economic and industry. Higher education is the backbone of the society which imparts indepth knowledge and understanding that cultivates the students mind towards positivism and to new frontiers of knowledge in different walks of life. It broadens their mind to critically analyse contemporary issues and enables them to make their own judgement. It helps in developing the three faculties of mind emotion, will and intellect. The higher education sector has rapidly developing in North-Eastern region. It provides quality education to the aspiring students according to the demands of time, individual and community to produce qualified professionals and intellectuals who can cater to needs of the society and utilize the natural resources of North-Eastern Region. The scope and demand for higher education is increasing day by day and the most important mission of higher education is the creation of intellects by providing world class education for promotion of global standards in the institution of higher education. Higher educational institutes should be centre of knowledge production and dissemination. Through this paper the author highlighted the scenerio of higher education and some challenges faced in North –East India and suggest measures for this.

Keywords- Higher Education, Development, Knowledge, North-East.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is a potent instrument for social regeneration, economic and cultural development. It is the basic tool for the development of consciousness and reconstruction of society. It is the leading of human souls to what is best and making what is best of them.

Higher education is considered as an important instrument for bringing about social, economic, political and technological progress of any country particularly for a developing country like India. Higher education in any society is of vital importance, in the whole education system. In India higher education has been an integral part of education system since time immemorial. Realising the importance of higher education, Jawaharlal Nehru once said, ” A university stands for humanism for tolerance, for reason, for progress, for adventure of ideas and research for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people.” Universities and colleges are institutions of higher education which play a pivotal role for socio-cultural and economic development of nation. An overview of the higher education system of our country reveals that there are about 54 Central University, 443 State University, 126 Deemed Universities, 403 Private universities, 5 institutions established and functioning under the State Act and 161 Institutes of National Importance. Other institutions include 45000 Colleges as Government Degree Colleges and Private Degree Colleges, including 1800 exclusive Women’s Colleges, functioning under these universities and institutions as reported by the UGC. Distance learning and open education is also a feature of the Indian Higher Education system, and is looked after by the Distance Education Council. Indira Gandhi National Open University is the largest university in the world by number of students, having approximately 3.5 Million students across the globe.

But inspite of all these developments and growth, quality of higher education remained the main concern for all the stakeholders in the education system ie students ,parents, institution management, faculty members, policy makers and society

as a whole because poor quality of higher education affects the overall progress of any nation. Today knowledge is power. The more knowledge one has, the empowered one is. According to University Grants Commission (UGC) India needs 1500 more universities with adequate research facilities by the end of the 2021 in order to compete in the global market. The current Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is 26.3%. Rapid economic growth, globalization, emergence of the private sector in higher education and an increasing demand for quality education wider than ever before. India suffers from quantity as well as quality challenges in higher education. The increase in the GER in higher education requires a substantial increase in the number of institutions and consequently would require an adequate number of teachers for imparting education. The overall scenario of higher education in India does not match with the global quality standards. Hence there is enough justification for an increased assessment of the quality of the country's educational institutions. Traditionally these institutions assumed that quality could be determined by their internal resources. Critical appraisals undertaken by the governmental committees and independent academicians have highlighted the crisis confronting the system in India including North-Eastern Region.

North-Eastern India comprising states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura contains an area of 262279 km² (8% of India) and shares according to 2011 census population is 4,57,72188 (3.76% of India). The term North-East was formalised through the British colonial administration as a frontier region. It is linked with Indian heartland through the 21 km wide Siliguri Corridor, which is commonly known as the chicken neck, created by the Redcliff line, the boundary drawn by the British colonial administration before they departed from India in 1947. The corridor is flanked by Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. After 75 years of independence these states suffer from a terrible cultural disconnect. Ethnic conflict and cleavages characterise the region. The north-eastern region is smaller than several states like Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, both in area and population. Occupying a strategic location in the country, the region is rich in agriculture, forest and mineral resources. In majority of the states, the people are tribal, and are employed primarily as cultivators and agricultural labourers. There is no doubt that the region is endowed with rich biodiversity and natural resources which has immense potential for economic growth. The rich natural resources such as tea, timber, tourism, oil, coal, and bio-resources that are available in the region, if exploited to the optimum extent, will have great impact on the economic progress of the region as well as the country. For this purpose there is a greater need of skilled manpower which could be possible through quality higher education. In order to provide skilled manpower through quality higher education, there is immense need of higher education infrastructure and knowledge base in the region that would eventually empower the people. Higher education is a powerful tool to build a knowledge based information society of the 21st century.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is conducted with the following objectives-

1. To study the higher educational scenario of North- East region of India.
2. To study the issues of higher education of this region.
3. To study the challenges faced by the higher education in the region.
4. To provide necessary suggestions for overcoming the challenges.

III. METHODOLOGY

Methodology is an integral part of any study. A research design can be compared to a blue print that an architect prepares before starting of construction. The present study employed descriptive method. Descriptive studies involve description, recording, analysis of the existing condition.

For the present study “Higher Education in North-Eastern Region, Issues and challenges” Secondary data has been used. Data has been collected from various publish books, reports, survey and census report

IV. HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

North-East India officially known as as the North-Eastern Region is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political administrative division of the country. This region is enchanting terrain of hills and plains inhabited by people with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds speaking different dialects. The region has been experiencing problem of unrest caused mostly by the slow pace of development as compared to other parts of India. The region is economically backward and hence opportunities for jobs including self-employment avenues are limited. This region is rich in natural resouces. There is now an increasing realization that the region may have to plan their future development making maximum use of local resources with central support. So the planned use of rich diversity of the region should be exploited to improve the quality of life of the people and improvement of environment which is the need of the day However the development of human resource is a priority. The NE Region has a high literacy level and is rich in ethnic cultural heritage with linguistic diversity. However, the region lacks infrastructure, facilities in educational institutions and access, equality and quality are the major concerns in the higher education of North-East Region. Hence there is an urgent need to tackle the problems in the region to improve the access and quality of higher education. Though it was late in realizing its responsibility, the central government has taken a number of initiatives for the holistic development of NE India. In 1971 , North-East Council (NEC) was established as forum of the states in the region to coordinate economic and social development activities . In 2001 the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (DoNER) was set up to deal with matters pertaining to the socio-economic development of the 8 states. A Forum of Vice-Chancellors of North-Eastern universities was formed in 2008 to strengthen academic activities in the region’s educational institutions. The Department of Higher Education earmarks about 10% of its budget for these special category states and the development plans are centrally financed via a 90% grant and 10% loan. Utilized funds are automatically transferred to the Non Lapsable Central Pool of Resources(NLCPR) which is administered by the Ministry of DoNER.

Table - 1

State-wise Population of North-East India.

State	Male	Female	Total	Percentage Share
Arunachal Pradesh	7,13,912	6,69,815	13,83,727	0.11%
Assam	1,59,39,443	1,52,66,133	3,12,05,576	2.58%
Manipur	14,38,586	14,17,208	28,55,794	0.24%
Meghalaya	14,91,832	14,75,057	29,66,889	0.25%
Mizoram	5,55,339	5,41,867	10,97,206	0.09%
Nagaland	10,24,649	9,53,853	19,78,502	0.16%
Sikkim	3,23,070	2,87,507	6,10,577	0.05%
Tripura	18,74,376	17,99,541	36,73,917	0.30%
NER	2,33,61,207	2,24,10,981	4,57,72,188	3.78%
All India	62,32,70,258	58,75,84,719	1,21,08,54,977	100%

Source: Census, 2011

Table - 2**State-wise Population Density (per Sq. Km.)**

State	Population Density
Arunachal Pradesh	17
Assam	398
Manipur	128
Meghalaya	132
Mizoram	52
Nagaland	119
Sikkim	86
Tripura	350
NER	175
All India	382

Source: Census, 2011

Table-3**State-wise Literacy Rate, 2011**

State	Literacy Rate
Arunachal Pradesh	65.4%
Assam	72.2%
Manipur	76.9%
Meghalaya	74.4%
Mizoram	91.3%
Nagaland	79.6%
Sikkim	81.4%
Tripura	87.2%
NER	78.5%
All India	73%

Source-Census 2011

Table-4**State-wise SC and ST Population**

State	Total population	SC Population	ST Population	%Share SC		%Share ST	
				From NER	From All India	From NER	From All India
Arunachal Pradesh	13,83,727		9,51,821	0	0	68.79	0.91
Assam	3,12,05,576	22,31,321	38,84,371	7.15	1.11	12.45	3.72
Manipur	28,55,794	97,328	11,67,422	3.41	0.05	40.88	1.12
Meghalaya	29,66,889	17,355	25,55,861	0.58	0.01	86.15	2.44
Mizoram	10,97,206	1,218	10,36,115	0.11	0.00	94.43	0.99
Nagaland	19,78,502		17,10,973	0	0	86.48	1.64
Sikkim	6,10,577	28,275	2,06,360	4.63	0.01	33.8	0.20
Tripura	36,73,917	6,54,918	11,66,813	17.83	0.33	31.76	1.12
NER	4,57,72,188	30,30,415	1,26,79,736	6.62	1.50	27.7	12.13
All India	1,21,08,54,977	20,13,78,372	10,45,45,716		100		100

Source –Census 2011

In terms of area, Arunachal Pradesh is the biggest state in the region, Assam is the second biggest and Sikkim is the smallest. The first two shares about 62% area of the region. In terms of population, Assam is the giant with over 66% of of the regional population. The growth of population in Assam has been higher than the all India average. In Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland, the tribal population ranges between 64 and 95% of the state population. The region is less urbanised (except Mizoram) than the national average. The overall literacy in the region is good, better than the all India average, only Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya have the literacy rate a little less than the national average. Mizoram is the best among all the north-eastern states in improving the literacy rate for both the male and female and the gender gap is much lower than the national average and the state stands second in terms of literacy, only behind Kerala.

The state of higher education in North-Eastern region of India is entangled with the environment available in the political landscape of different states. It is intriguing that while every year a large number of students of this region are going abroad for higher education, the students of NER have to go to the mainland for pursuing higher education. According to University Grants Commission (UGC) data, over five lakh students from eight states of the north-east venture every year go outside the region due to lack of proper higher education facilities. The NER may have some typical inherent contradictions and impediments for the growth of higher education, though, the recent decades have witnessed a remarkable increase in the higher education.

V. SCENERIO OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

Providing higher education to its human resources plays a crucial role in the development of any nation and social change. Higher education will be the most important driver for our nation's social, economic and political transformation. A well educated population, equipped with the relevant knowledge, attitudes and skills, is essential for economic and social development in the 21st century. According to UNESCO Report in the 21st century "higher education is the mandate to bridge the knowledge gap between countries and communities enriching dialogues between people culture, international living and networking of ideas, research and technologies".

Higher education institutions were set up comparatively late in the North-East region. The first college –Cotton College in Guwahati was established in 1901. Upto 1947 there were 16 colleges , a majority of them in Assam. Gauhati University was first university established only in 1948 while universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were established in 1857 nearly a century earlier. Due to the difficult geographical conditions, Gauhati University could not attracts students from far distant areas of the region and access of many students to higher education was restricted. The second university in the region, a Central University –North-Eastern Hill University was set up in Shillong, Meghalaya in 1973. Currently there are 77 universities, including central, state, deemed, and private university in North-East India.

Table-5 (Number of University in North-East India , 2021- 2022):

Name of States	Central University	State University	Private University	Deemed University	Total
Assam	2	18	6	1	27
Arunachal Pradesh	1	0	8	1	10
Manipur	3	3	4	0	10
Meghalaya	1	0	9	0	10
Mizoram	1	0	1	0	2
Nagaland	1	0	4	0	5
Tripura	1	1	1	0	3
Sikkim	1	2	7	0	10

Source: UGC Annual Report 2021-22

In a significant development on the first day of the autumn session of the Assam Legislative Assembly on 12 September 2023 Education Minister Dr. Ranaj Pegu brought 6 new university bills and several amendment bills, reshaping the educational landscape of the state. These legislative moves aim to strengthen the higher education system and cater to the evolving academic needs of the students. As per Pegu, the university were introduced for Sibsagar College (Autonomous), Gurucharan College, Bongaigaon College, North Lakhimpur College (Autonomous), Nowgong College (Autonomous) and Jagannath Borooah College (Autonomous). It was declared by the Education Minister of Assam that Kokrajhar Govt. College will be a university in the next Assembly session in the month of December 2023 at Kokrajhar.

Table-6 (Statewise number of colleges as on 2021-22):

Name of States	Affiliated Colleges	Constituent/ University College	PG Center/Off Campus	Recognised Center	Total	Stand Alone Institutions
Assam	598	6	3	1	608	14
Arunachal Pradesh	40	2	0	0	42	42
Manipur	102	3	0	0	105	93
Meghalaya	72	3	2	3	80	34
Mizoram	36	3	0	0	39	19

Nagaland	67	1	0	2	70	20
Sikkim	21	9	0	0	30	8
Tripura	53	1	1	0	55	14

Source: UGC Annual Report 2021-22

**Stand Alone Institutions (not affiliated with university) which are not empowered to provide degrees and therefore run only diploma level programme.*

A large number of Model College is establishing by the Assam Government in the state.

Table-7 (Statewise numbers of universities and Colleges Accredited by NAAC in North –East India) As on 19-5-2023

States	University	College	Total
Assam	8	239	247
Arunachal Pradesh	3	9	12
Manipur	1	42	43
Meghalaya	2	24	26
Mizoram	1	26	27
Nagaland	1	35	36
Sikkim	2	9	11
Tripura	2	23	25

Source-NAAC Report

After this date a large number of colleges and university is accredited by NAAC and process is going on including North – East India.

Higher Education encompasses colleges and universities. Higher education institutions do have three basic function or objectives. These include imparting dissemination of knowledge, engaging in research work investigation and conducting different extension work. The ultimate objective is to equip the students with the most advance knowledge which eventually becomes the basis of economic development (Phazani 2016). Before independence of India, there were only 16 colleges in the north-eastern region, majority were located in the Assam area. The establishment of the first university in Guwahati in 1948 kick started the process of expansion of higher education from the pre-university up to the post graduate and doctoral level in the whole of North –East India. In spite of the late start, higher education in North East India has very rapid growth in post independence era. Higher education is central to the creation of the intellectual capacity on which knowledge production and utilization depend and to the promotion of the life-long learning practices necessary to update individual knowledge and skills. Another favourable development is the emergence of new types of higher educational institutions and new forms of competition, inducing traditional institutions to change their modes of operation and delivery and to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new information and communication technologies. The higher education in North Eastern region of India faces a lot of challenges. Some of the challenges are discussed below-

- 1. Inadequate physical Infrastructure:** The infrastructure of higher educational institutions in North-Eastern Region of India is not satisfactory. According to NAACs assessment and accreditation most of the higher educational institutions in the region are not ranked highly. The higher educational institution of this region are bound to grade in the lower side since quality of input is also very low. The central university and state university having a good quality

infrastructure. But it is not seen in the case of under graduate level educational institutions. It is very pitiable in our North-East India. The states college education is not high level in case of infrastructure.

2. **Paucity of Quality Faculty Members:** The North-Eastern higher educational institutes faces lot of challenges in matters of quality faculty. The placement scenerio of this region looks very grim with hardly any high profile recruitment. It is the biggest challenge. It is very difficult to recruit and retain quality teachers, as the work environment is not congenial to pursue quality work in some of the states.
3. **Paucity of Quality Research, patents, Citation:-** Research is a major component in any higher education. Each institution needs to be updated as well as have to well equip with research component that make them stand out from others. The one department in which our higher education is weak is research output and outcomes. Most research here is like excavating a corpse from one grave and putting it in another. Both sleep quietly forever. The acrimony and cynicism of the remark apart, our output and outcomes are mediocre, inadequate, repetitive and futile. The citation value of our research papers is near zero and recognition abroad is negligible. Patents generated out of genuine research are a great source of funding for institutions.
4. **Political Instability:-** One of the biggest challenges to the spread of higher education in North-Eastern Region is political instability in the region. Insurgency and internal displacement have also largely impacted on expansion of higher education. Due to frequent calls for shutting down of colleges and university by the different underground outfits in the region. Such kind of atmosphere spoils the study culture and affects growth of higher education in these states.
5. **Language and culture:-** The North-Eastern Region (NER) is a store house of large number of ethnic group and languages. There are more than 250 dialects and many of them are fully developed ones. Yet there is no serious attempt to retain and cultivate these languages part of the culture. There is hardly any serious thinking given to pursue for strengthening the language and culture of the different tribes. The universities and colleges do not have adequate support to engage in language and culture studies. The tribal dance and music is also another area which is slowly getting low priority as the western music and culture have taken over through the missionaries. There is an urgent need to preserve them in the higher educational institutions by encouraging performing arts and music of the tribal as separate area of study.
6. **Inadequate funds-**The most important aspects of higher education development in NER is funding in a large scale. For quality and standard education there is the need of proper laboratories, hostel and play grounds etc which involve huge cost. Since education is a state subject, almost all states suffer from resource crunch and do not provide necessary support for the purpose. To add further woe to this, corruption and nepotism mars quality higher education in the region.
7. **Lack of job guaranteed courses-** Education is always seen as a medium to guarantee livelihood prospects in future. But in today's competitive world where whole world is running after professional courses the educational institutions in NER are still venturing for traditional courses. Although in recent years the situation has changed and most of the institutions are providing professional education courses but these are failed to provide the infrastructure for campus recruitment or somehow not fulfilling the guarantee to provide services.
8. **Collaboration-** What ever small number of colleges and university those are present in the NER, they do not have any large scale collaboration with either industry or any educational institution either within India or outside. Our NER have no industry as compare to other state of India. Many universities are still adverse to collaborate with industry and do not have the course structure for industrial collaboration.
9. **Lack of innovation-** Oxford dictionary states that "Make changes in something established, especially by introducing new methods, ideas, or products." It states that "innovation is crucial to the continuing success of any organization" and it also states that change alternation revolution, upheaval, transformation, metamorphosis,

reorganization, restructuring, rearrangement, recasting, remodelling, renovation, restyling, variation, new measures, new methods etc. But these are rarely found in the higher education in North –Eastern India.

To remove the challenges from the higher education in North –East India, it is necessary to globalise the higher education that can compete the standard for keeping pace with the changes of the time.

The abundance of natural resources and rich biodiversity of the region has been untapped and unexplored to a great extent. Whatever little attempt that has been made benefited a handful of vested interests. The first and foremost need is to attract more investment from all the stakeholders for providing a platform for higher education and learning.

1. **Development of human resources-** The people, government and the state have the responsibility in tapping the potential for increasing human resources in higher education. The economic backwardness of the region should not stand on the way for the spread of higher education in the region. The quality also needs to be at par with all India standards. The state governments should initiate measures to encourage deserving students by providing grants for coaching for NET-JRF and other national eligibility tests.
2. **Research and technological development-** Research, technology and developments are inseparable components of university. Research projects help to generate resources, strengthen infrastructure facilities and augment the academic resources for the benefit of the students in addition to the personal recognitions to the scholar. Universities and research institutes and legal fields may be constituted to formulate policy on consultancy and patent and also to formulate policy on the technological development on the basis of local needs and available local resources.
3. **Bringing innovation and creativity-** While addressing the Grand Finale of the Smart India Hackathon, on 9th April 2018, the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi stated that Innovation has the power to overcome the challenges of our world. He also said, “what will drive innovation are IPPP—Innovate, Patent, Produce, and Prosper. One needs to look into person’s involvement for improvements. The higher educational institutions need to take advantage of the present time making an effort to apply to Government. Innovation is the power of changing the mind set and set of minds. Teachers need to be creative in their approach and application. A creative person always thinks about solution for the problems. Creativity comes from within the person, and it is an urge, pressure the person for finding a solution. Creativity is the ability to generate new ideas by combining, changing or reapplying existing systems.
4. **Strengthening of higher education institutes-** The increase in the quantity of Higher Educational Institutes is not enough to bring an overall development in the field of higher education. In fact the HEIs must be strengthened in terms of quality as well so that there is a nourishing rise in the overall higher education. The increase in both qualitative and quantitative terms is important. This can be brought about by the scheme on higher education such as RUSA. It seeks to improve the overall quality of existing state higher educational institutions by ensuring conformity to prescribed norms and standards and adoption of accreditation as a mandatory quality assurance framework.
5. **Preservation of Tribal Culture-** The typical tribal culture and practices which is rich with traditional knowledge needs to be augmented so that it can complement with modern knowledge. Universities as well as institutions of higher learning have to take up the responsibility in preserving such kind of traditional knowledge and conduct further research on those areas. This will save the culture from extinction.
6. **Proper plan for Higher Education-** The Department of North-East Region (DONER) Ministry and all the state governments of the region converge together and draw a blue print with a vision to develop the region. The courses that are to be offered in the universities and colleges are to be tailor –made such a way that the syllabi have to incorporate the unique features of the region.

Higher educational institute should aim and strive at promoting economic development of the region by supporting start-up companies. The development of companies in the local market leads to job creation leading to employability. Our North –East Region is full of natural resources, if these are utilised in proper way , employment will be generated surely. In such a scenerio we would witness a longer queue of job providers than job seekers.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the light of discussion above it is important to note that the development of NER is intertwined with the growth of higher education sector in the region. For this the state and central government have to examine the issue from the holistic perspective rather than as an isolated problem. The issue of nation building and national integration is linked to development of higher education in the region. North-East Region is found to be lagging behind in quality education and lack of constructive higher educational institutions as compared to other regions of India. Though there are good number of colleges and universities, the quality of education imparted is not up to date. The region has been witnessing rapid expansion of higher educational institutes, but due to political negligence and poor administration in higher educational institutes in NER drives the colleges and universities into disappointing condition. Even though the NER is politically an integral part of India, there is a need for more social and cultural integration. Education, particularly higher education, can play an important role in achieving this objective. The North-East has seen a large number of institution coming up in the last decade. The central and state governments now need to improve the infrastructure of these institutions and attract talented quality faculty so that there is a visible improvement in the quality higher education. The North-Easrn Region is highly rich in natural resources and with the developed manpower and technology the young generation can utilise these resources in a proper way.

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