WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

GER in Higher Education, Demographic Dividend and National Education Policy Connect in India

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ABSTRACT :

Economists, sociologists, and political class have been highlighting the significance of demographic dividend for quite many years. The critics however present a darker side, as the younger workforce is lacking essential skills that match the requirements of the Industry and Service sector. In the agriculture sector, the problem of disguised unemployment is also grave all across states. In such a scenario, this paper tries to analyse the exact scenario the country is having with respect to the demographic dividend especially with context to higher education and skill formation. The objective of National Education Policy (NEP) especially with respect to skill-based education and better industry linkages and exposures have been analysed. The effects and limitations also have some implications for the Viksit Bharat 2047 target.

Introduction

The demographic dividend refers to the potential for accelerated economic growth resulting from an increase in the proportion of working-age population (Canning D, 2015). The importance of this demographic dividend has been emphasized for many years, serving as a crucial indicator that the Indian population is no longer viewed as a liability (Sharma, 2015). The global community is indeed looking towards India due to its vast demand and investment opportunities; however, many Indian leaders continue to promote the narrative of a youthful workforce, despite the lack of a clear strategy to effectively leverage this potential for economic development and nation-building. In the next three to four decades, the demographic dividend will transition into an aging population phase (Das & Roy, 2020). A study published in the Lancet indicates that India's total fertility rate (TFR) fell to 1.9 in 2021, below the replacement level of 2.1, and is projected to decline further to 1.29 by 2050 (Koul, 2024). This trend signifies that since 2021, India has not been able to replace the number of deaths with new births, leading to an increasingly older population.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was introduced with this understanding, aiming to capitalize on the demographic dividend and achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat 2047. India is anticipated to benefit from its demographic dividend only until 2040, making it imperative to implement early reforms in the education system as suggested by the NEP to achieve the desired outcomes. However, political opposition from rival parties in certain states presents challenges to the implementation of the National Policy, particularly following the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976, which transferred the education subject from the State List to the Concurrent List.

Currently, India allocates only 3.3% of its GDP to education, with a primary emphasis on increasing enrolment at the primary level, while neglecting the qualitative aspects of higher education, which receives a disproportionately small share of resources. Currently, among the total number of students enrolled in higher education, 12.1% are in university departments while 78.9% are in affiliated colleges. Given the already low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), the 87.76% of students attending affiliated colleges indicates that those in general degree colleges (excluding professional technical colleges) represent the largest segment. It is important to note that these affiliated degree colleges nationwide primarily prioritize increasing enrolments, which results in a significant neglect of quality due to infrastructural limitations.

Approach to leverage the demographic dividend through the National Skill Development Agency and similar state bodies predominantly targets vocational institutions, leaving general degree colleges to manage independently. The growing number of degree colleges, which still account for over two-thirds of the GER in higher education, requires immediate attention and a robust strategy to effectively capitalize on the demographic dividend.

Gross Enrolment Ratio and the Demographic Dividend

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) serves as a statistical measure for assessing student enrolment in higher education. It is determined by dividing the number of students enrolled in higher education by the total population within the age group of 18 to 23 years (Mittal & Paani, 2020). A high GER indicates significant participation in higher education, regardless of whether students fall above or below the official age for that educational level. It is possible for the GER to surpass 100% due to the inclusion of over-aged and under-aged students, such as those who are repeating grades or who have enrolled earlier or later than the typical age.

In India, the GER was recorded at 28.4% for the academic year 2021-22, based on the 2011 population projections for the 18-23 age group (AISHE, 2022). Approximately 78.9% of all students are pursuing undergraduate courses, while 12.1% are engaged in postgraduate studies. At the undergraduate

level, the highest enrolment is observed in the Arts discipline (34.2%), followed by Science (14.8%), Commerce (13.3%), and Engineering & Technology (11.8%). At the postgraduate level, the largest number of students are enrolled in Social Science (21.1%), followed by Science (14.7%). At the time of India's independence, there were 20 universities and 500 colleges. As of the 2020-2021 academic year, there are a total of 1,113 registered universities and university-like institutions, 43,796 colleges, and 11,296 standalone institutions. The total number of faculty members is 1,551,070, with approximately 57.1% being male and 42.9% female. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) stands at 28.4%, which is significantly lower when compared to the GERs of various developed and developing nations. For instance, the GER in the United States is 88.2%, Germany 70.3%, France 65.6%, the United Kingdom 60.6%, Brazil 51.3%, China 49.1%, Indonesia 36.4%, South Korea 94%, Malaysia 45%, and Canada 69%.

These statistics indicate that even some developing countries surpass us in terms of GER. A low GER in higher education adversely impacts the effective contribution of the workforce across various sectors that require specialization in innovation, research, design, and leadership at multiple levels. It is increasingly recognized that economic prosperity and productivity can be achieved through enhanced intellectual and professional capabilities of individuals.

National Education Policy, GER and the Dividend:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has established a revised goal for the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 50% by the year 2035. To achieve this, NEP 2020 proposes two key initiatives: first, the establishment of additional Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), including universities, to enhance student enrolment capacity; and second, the development of strategies to promote online education and Open Distance Learning programs. Furthermore, improvements to the school education system are necessary to ensure that a greater number of students complete their education up to the 12th grade, thereby increasing their eligibility for college and university programs.

It is also crucial to maintain a favourable employment landscape for graduates from HEIs; otherwise, institutions will struggle to attract students. NEP 2020, along with the previous policies from 1968 and 1986, recommended allocating 6% of GDP to education, a target we have yet to reach. Despite insufficient budget allocations, the government is concentrating on establishing professional HEIs such as IITs, IIMs, and AIMS. This approach, however, invests heavily in a limited number of institutions, failing to significantly impact our GER.

Should the government be unable to establish numerous HEIs, reliance on the private sector will be necessary. In recent years, nearly all new HEIs have emerged from the private sector, with few exceptions. Nonetheless, it is imperative to overhaul our regulatory framework to effectively encourage and manage the private sector, ensuring quality education. Under the existing regulatory conditions, an increase in private HEIs will not yield substantial results, as many seats remain unfilled. A significant number of students are deterred from enrolling in these institutions due to their questionable reputations. Thus, there is an urgent need for a new regulatory system.

Upon examining the affiliated colleges, it is evident that a significant number of them possess limited student intake capacities, and even when capacity is available, they struggle to attract students. This situation arises from the historical establishment of numerous higher education institutions (HEIs) that were permitted to operate with insufficient infrastructure. Consequently, it poses a considerable challenge for these institutions to achieve the targets set by the National Education Policy (NEP), which stipulates an enrolment of 3,000 students per institution along with adequate infrastructure to support them. Therefore, significantly increasing the number of institutions and enhancing the existing student intake capacity appears to be an arduous endeavour in the forthcoming years.

Additionally, the recruitment of qualified educators presents another substantial challenge, alongside the need for physical resources. Education delivered in environments lacking adequate infrastructure and human resources inevitably compromises quality. In the light of these factors, merely increasing student intake capacity in substandard HEIs or establishing additional substandard institutions will not contribute to improving our Gross Enrolment Ratio; rather, it will likely result in a rise in the number of educated individuals lacking the necessary skills for the job market.

NEP 2020 and Viksit Bharat 2047

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 serves as a vital component of India's vision for a 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India) by 2047, striving to establish a nation that is both globally competitive and sustainable. NEP 2020 prioritizes high-quality education, equity, and inclusivity, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby contributing to various facets of India's progress. The policy advocates for vocational education and skill enhancement, equipping individuals to meet the requirements of the contemporary workforce and fostering India's economic advancement and competitiveness. Furthermore, NEP 2020 encourages research and innovation within higher education, facilitating scientific progress and technological growth, which are essential for enhancing India's position on the global stage. Ultimately, NEP 2020 transcends the boundaries of a mere educational framework; it represents a strategic plan for realizing Viksit Bharat by preparing the nation with a skilled, educated, and innovative workforce capable of propelling economic development, social advancement, and environmental sustainability.

Conclusions

To realize the goal of Viksit Bharat 2047, it is crucial to leverage the demographic dividend, particularly as India is projected to benefit from this dividend only until 2040. Consequently, prompt reforms in the educational framework, as suggested by the National Education Policy (NEP), should yield the anticipated outcomes. The government must exhibit a strong dedication to education by progressively increasing budget allocations to meet the 6% target. Investing in education transcends mere expenditure; it represents a commitment to India's future. By empowering the youth, the nation can cultivate active participants and leaders who will contribute to a brighter future. Addressing concerns about fund mismanagement and inefficiencies requires the establishment of robust accountability systems. Effective monitoring and evaluation are vital to ensure that funds are utilized efficiently and transparently. Collaborations with the private sector can harness their expertise and resources to enhance infrastructure, develop curricula, and improve teacher training.

Public-Private Partnerships should be pursued wherever possible. The digital divide remains a significant obstacle, as limited access to technology and internet connectivity further marginalizes underprivileged students. Globally, teachers are expected to engage in continuous learning to foster their intellectual growth, which ultimately benefits their students. If non-teaching responsibilities overshadow the primary focus of teaching, the enthusiasm of dedicated educators may diminish. Our colleges and universities have the potential to produce exceptional scholars and researchers if states adhere to national policies and motivate their teachers.

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