Higher Education and Socio-Cultural and Political Sustainability

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to present the possibilities in higher education in terms of its role in sustainable development based on a study limited to arts and science education provided in the colleges and universities in the State of Odisha. Socio cultural and political sustainability is the state of affairs where it refers to achieve distributional equity, adequate provision of social services including health and education, gender equity, and political accountability and transformation of cultural identity by a society and nation. It is found that contribution of higher education in the development of quality and equity education is significant. Higher education can minimise the discrepancies in quality, gender equity and helping in developing positive attitude among the conservative people. It can make people assertive and informative about their rights which can secure a better social order and health condition. It is revealed that the relationship between an individual graduate and society is comparatively more productive than the symbolic and semantic relation between university as a whole and society.

Background

In the 21st century there are wide ranges of concerns over the purposes of education especially of higher education while shaping educational policy and plans. For instances, at the first Earth Summit in 1972 in Stockholm, government representatives and non-governmental organisations, education was identified as fundamental to the successful achievement of sustainable development, and a point that has been reiterated by numerous governments and practitioners in the intervening years. Recently, in 2005, the UN adopted a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014 (DESD), which seeks to "integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning." The debates and discussions on the purposes of higher

education basically divide people mainly in two blocks. One block supports the idea of university that of higher education to produce skilled manpower and to serve the ever increasing needs of economic growth of the society, while intentionally or unintentionally blinding their eyes in assessing the social and ecological cost, and another block comes out with the idea of the university to produce intellectuals of critical understanding and high moral traits, appears to be guided and tilted with the foundation of inclusive growth and development in society in a sustainable manner.

This study is confined to general higher education that is arts and science education provided in the colleges and universities in the State of Odisha. The post graduate students from subject like Economics, Political Science, Geography, Environmental Science, Life Sciences (Botany and Zoology) and Earth Sciences who were enrolled for the academic session 2010-2011 in Utkal University, Sambalpur University, Berhampur University and North Orissa University were involved. Out of 520 post graduate students of four major universities, of the targeted subjects and disciplines, 400 students had been involved and explored which is near about 77% of the existing strength. Besides the students, data had been collected from the Heads and teaching staffs of the Departments and Centres of universities through questionnaire and semi-structured interviews cutting across Arts and Science streams.

Socio cultural sustainability is the state of affairs where it refers to achieve distributional equity, adequate provision of social services including health and education, gender equity, and political accountability and participation and retention and transformation of cultural identity by a society and nation. The United Nations 2005 World Summit Outcome Document refers to "independent and mutually reinforcing pillars" of sustainable development as economic development, social development, and environmental protection. Indigenous people have argued, through various international forums such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues and convention on Biological Diversity, that there are four pillars of sustainable development, the fourth being cultural. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UNESCO, 2001) further elaborates the concept by stating that "cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity for nature". It becomes "one of the roots of development understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence". So, talking about the alternative and viable model of development 'sustainable development' is incomplete without

addressing the socio-cultural problems within the ambit of sustainable development. The socio-cultural problems in India are not a new area of discourse; it is there and more markedly since pre-colonial period to till present-day. However, the questions of the present days conception of socio-cultural sustainability has some new faces and features. Among them, the questions of social and communal harmony and indigenous identity and heterogeneity have been emerged as significant areas of contentions across the world. Due to unchecked surge of neo-liberal practices and globalization, homogenization and abolition of indigenous practices in the different parts of India have been foreseeable, very often at the cost social order and communal harmony and cultural identity. The succeeding sections set discussions with various possibilities in higher education in terms its constructive role in socio cultural and political sustainability in different geo-political sub-regions of Odisha.

Socio-Cultural Sustainability

Amid the complexities on the paths of development and socio-cultural integrity there are several affirmations in relation to higher education and socio-cultural sustainability of a region and nation. The students are expected that 'they should grow into independent, critically minded citizens, fully aware of the traditions, histories and ideologies which formed them and respectful of their responsibilities towards their communities and the biosphere. B.R Ambedkar says, "higher education the panacea of our social troubles". Comim (2007), refers to Amartya Sen's Capacity Approach (CA); Sen as influenced by John Rawls' conception of education in shaping a contractualist view of liberal societies, in which following 'the value of education shouldn't be assessed only in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and take part in it affairs and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own worth. He, further aiding to human development perspective says, "impact of education is not only related to the capabilities of 'senses, imagination and thought', as a superficial reading of Nussbaum(2000),but it also present in the capabilities of 'practical reason', 'affiliation' and 'control over one's environment'. Thus, education and its influence on the constitution of autonomous human beings come to be considered the main engine of development. Investment in primary education becomes a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the achievement of human development, given that important functioning and capabilities can be achieved only as part of individual's further

pursuit of higher education. The university has come to be established as the apex of the educational system and learning institutions to safeguard and ensure the unity of knowledge on the one hand, and to conserve, transmit and diffuse knowledge over the centuries, from generation to generation. In this normative statement of the university's function there is no reference to the function of change, unless this is regarded as fallout from the stated role. Reflecting about cultural and intellectual challenges, Ronald Barnett (2000) has argued that we have entered the age of "supercomplexity", and that this has profound implications for our universities. He explains supercomplexity as follows: In short, professional life increasingly becoming a matter not just of handling overwhelming data and theories within a given frame of reference (a situation of complexity) but also a matter of handling multiple frames of understanding, of action and self-identity. The fundamental frameworks by which we might understand the world are multiplying and are often in conflict of the multiplication of frameworks, there shall be no end. He also claims as: Amid supercomplexity, the university has the dual responsibility not only of compounding uncertainty but also of helping us live with the uncertainty; even to revel in it. In this study it was found that in several occasions female graduates are working as role models as well as active agents in development of education in their community and society. As earlier mention that around 80% of people in Odisha live in the rural set up are yet to recognize as advanced and developed on many fronts among them education, particularly higher education is one. In such circumstances the present level of participation and self-capacity building by the graduates is welcome condition in the processes of sustainable development.

Human health in its broadest sense of physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing is to a great extent dependent on the access of the citizen to a healthy environment. For a healthy, productive and fulfilling life every individual should have the physical and economic access to a balanced diet, safe drinking water, clean air, sanitation, environmental hygiene, primary health care and education. *Agenda 21*, the blueprint for action adopted at the Rio Earth Summit, acknowledged the close relationship between health, the environment and development, as well as the need to improve health in order to achieve sustainable development. Poverty eradication and economic development cannot be achieved where there is a high prevalence of debilitating illnesses. And the health of the population cannot be sustained without responsive health systems, a healthy environment and an intact life-support system. People who are poor are more

likely to get sick. But now much more is known about the reverse, which is also true: people who are sick are more likely to become poor. Ill health creates and perpetuates poverty, triggering a vicious circle that hampers economic and social development and contributes to unsustainable resource use and environmental degradation. So, efforts to protect the health of the environment need to be closely linked to programmes to protect the health of people. "Health and development are intimately interconnected. Both insufficient developments leading to poverty and inappropriate development resulting in overconsumption, coupled with an expanding world population, can result in severe environmental health problems in both developing and developed nations. Action items under Agenda 21 must address the primary health needs of the world's population, since they are integral to the achievement of the goals of sustainable development and primary environmental care" (Para 6.1). National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (2011) in its report says "a healthy population is essential for economic development. The poorest people on the planet tend to suffer most from the health effects from exposures to environmental hazards like air pollution and impure water. In turn, disease and disability related to polluted environments slows and blocks economic development. In addition to its toll on human suffering, illness carries a significant financial burden in the form of healthcare expenditures and lost productivity. For example, unhealthy children often cannot attend or perform well in school, and unhealthy adults cannot work or care for their families". E. Buch, in looking at the linkages between poverty and ill-health said that it could be seen that poverty was at the root of much ill-health, and this poverty was multi-dimensional. At the same time, poor health could lead to poverty, both at the national and household levels. Conversely, good health could add billions of dollars to gross domestic product, and he further outlined some of the pathways through which this would happen. He asserted that sustainable development was the key to improved health, since the poverty driving ill-health was interconnected with factors such as poor economic growth, inequity, globalization, environmental degradation and weak health services. Health services had an important role to play in sustainable development by reducing the disease burden. However, this role was being undermined by the insecurity of health services in many developing countries, as well as under-funding and stunted technological development (Health and Sustainable Development, 2002).

Education plays vital role in protecting health. Through it one can get access to information and knowledge and empower oneself related to deal with various diseases,

unhygienic environments and hazards. According to the 2003 Human Development Report, "Education, health, nutrition and water and sanitation complement each other, with investments in any one contributing to better outcomes in the others". Very often people in the underdeveloped and developing regions like Odisha do not have adequate access to those knowledge and information or any other components of development such as health, nutrition, water and sanitation standardize by United Nations. These lead them to vulnerabilities to various chronic diseases at work places like in the field of agriculture, industries and even in the household activities. People are innocently becoming victims of unhealthy practices such as using of contaminated water, production and consumption of chemically and genetically manipulated vegetables and food grains. Considering the educational attainment especially that of higher education in the state of Odisha, it is important to assess its role in the form of productive students' participation in the development of health standard in their daily life of common people.

It was found that out of 1200 responses in 1146 responses (95.5%) the graduates had agreed to have participated in the development of healthy practices and health in their respective sub-region. On aggregate 94% graduates, across four universities, had participated in the development of health and healthy practices in their society and region. Except North Orissa University, where 88% of graduates participated, in other three universities more than 94% graduates participated. The areas of their participation were: participation in developmental schemes like maternity scheme, children's scheme, old age schemes; participation in discouraging bad habits like consumption of toxic agents such as cigarette, tobacco, wine/alcohol etc and consumption of contaminated water, vegetables, food grains etc. Although there is not much scope for the graduates there to participate in such affairs due to certain limitations, such as what to consume and what not, is more of personal. But still then students had different nature of participation in promoting healthy practices among people who were in their contact in different situations of their lives. They speak about their nature of intervention and some of them have been brought here. A student of political science discipline, from Kendrapada district, under jurisdiction of Utkal University, saying about his intervention in old age problems, says "the old age pension scheme is not being properly implemented in our *gram panchayat,* the *sarpanch* is not very keen to register all those eligible people under the scheme as a result old age deserving people are unable get benefit of the scheme. In some cases, I appealed the *sarpanch* to register their name so that they can get benefit of

the government scheme and finally he considered their cases and registered in the name list of old age pension scheme." Similarly, a student of Political Science, Berhampur University, of the view, "there were some cases where the deserving old age people had to give bribe to the official and members of the gram *panchayat* to get benefit of the scheme, I thoroughly convinced people, that, they should not give any bribe for getting benefit of the scheme, this is their right.." A student of zoology, from Jajpur district, under the Jurisdiction of Utkal University, says "in my village people are easily get affected by water borne diseases during rainy season, because they use the open well and tube well water directly without filtered. I often make my village community members cautious in using water from these sources. I advise people to use water purifier like bleaching power and other kind of purifiers available in market, at the office of *gram panchayat* and at the office of Block Development Officer (BDO) supplied by government. People have often kept my advises and have got benefit out of that." A student of economics, from Jharsuguda district, under the jurisdiction of Sambalpur University, says "in my locality people are not much careful about the uses and conservation of water. I warn and guide people, especially in my village, about the drainage and uses of the contaminated water. I strongly suggest people that they should not discharge the water from their agricultural fields to water reservoirs, especially on which they depend for washing and drinking." The graduates are playing vital role in the form of guiding people in healthy practices such as using of uncontaminated water and consumption of healthy vegetables and food grains in their day to day lives. In the rural set up of Odisha people are not much sensitive about the use water and they become victims of water borne diseases especially during the rainy season. Besides that, consumption of contaminated vegetables by ignorant people often become victims of diseases.

Political Sensitivity and Sustainability

To understand the sphere of political development is a quite complex phenomenon. However, certain dynamics are understandable particularly in a situation like in a democratic country, India. The Indian constitution has wide range of provisions within the ambit of its Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policies for socio-political and cultural development of society and nation. The people reside within the sovereign territory of India have been guaranteed with the fundamental rights such as: right to equality, right to freedom, right against exploitation, right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights and right to constitutional remedies.

As earlier pointed out besides fundamental rights there are directive principles such as: right to work, right to equal pay for equal work, right against exploitation, right to equal opportunity for justice and free legal aid, right to public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness, right to human conditions of work and maternity relief, right to living wage and conditions of ensuring decent standard of life for works. This rights and directives coupled with political rights such as: right to vote, to be elected, to access public offices, to criticize government and to hold public meeting give ample opportunity for socio-political and cultural growth, if they are enforced and protected without favour and fear by the designated agencies. Nevertheless, India is yet to get wider recognition in terms of materializing those provisions where many of them had been effective before 1950 and few after consecutive amendments in its constitution.

The constitution of India guarantees for the practices and protection of fundamental rights including that of right to life but paradox is that substantial population in the rural areas are ignorant about it. To practise some of those rights there is provision and practice of local self-government but still there some people who cannot participate in materializing their rights. In such situation often the graduates, who understand the rights and duties of common people and public personnel, are acting as productive forces in making the system more responsive towards the development of people in the right direction and realizing the goals of grass root governance in more stable and inclusive manner.

As earlier mentioned and cited graduates have enough space and scope to work as leaders and advisors at different levels for developing political sensitivity and sustainability in their society, especially in the underdeveloped and underprivileged sub-regions and regions of Odisha. Amid complexities, there are several affirmations in relation to higher education and socio-cultural sustainability of a region and nation. Among those many very few have been briefed here. The students 'should grow into independent, critically minded citizens, fully aware of the traditions, histories and ideologies which formed them and respectful of their responsibilities towards their communities and the biosphere (Jucker, 2002). Comim (2007), refers to Amartya Sen's Capacity Approach (CA); Sen as influenced by John Rawls' conception of education in shaping a contractualist view of liberal societies, in which following (1971:101), 'the value of education shouldn't be assessed only interms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and take part in it affairs and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of

his own worth. Ronald Barnett (2000) says "amid super complexity, the university has the dual responsibility not only of compounding uncertainty but also of helping us to live with the uncertainty; even to revel in it. This is the task in front of the university. In a world where every-thing is uncertain, there is no other task". In this regard graduates reveal about their participation in making people aware and sensitive towards family planning, civic, political and fundamental rights.

It was found that graduates are participating in developing political sensibility in their respective sub-regions of Odisha. This includes their involvement in making people aware and sensitive about their civic, political and fundamental rights. Some personal accounts of graduates may be referred here for a closure view of the reality. In the view of a male graduate, from the discipline of economics, Berhampur university, "whenever I meet the Christian religious leaders, I always suggest them to not to preach the religion by offering money and kinds, this hurts the sentiment of other community members who live together from the time of their origin. If people voluntarily showing interest to accept any religion then that is a different situation, and then people should be convinced with idea of secularism. I personally suggest people saying that there is no harm in following any religion of one's own choice and peace and it does not matter if it hurts people sentiment, and there is no religion to hurt people, their religion hardly makes sense if it does not respect the other sentiments and feelings…." it shows greater understanding of secularism… In another view, a female graduate from the discipline of economics, Berhampur University, says, "I encourage people in my circle that there should not be outward force in following a religion or following the principles of religion rather it should be left to individual choice. And there should not be competition among the religious groups to preach their religion in a manner which causes disharmony among the people rather bringing peace and prosperity. If preaching religion causing disharmony then what are the values of preaching it. Let people free to adopt any religious principle of their own…." concurrence with the secular ideas and told to have convinced people to make their own choices during practising religion.

Conclusion

Graduates can be prepared better to deal with any kind of challenge prevailing in given situation. During this stage (17-23-25 years) the youths are capable enough to understand the challenges around them and if they are guided in understanding those challenges. They can be valuable assets for their society and nation in particular and for

the world community in general, in the context of sustainable development. Although it does seem to be a mandatory approach of the universities of the State of Odisha, constructive effects of youth of general higher education is reflected in different sub-regions of the State. Among the major three components of Human Development Index 'education' is considered as one. Education in rural set up of Odisha is comparatively not well represented in terms of quality, equity and accessibility. Education helps in development of free and autonomous beings needs to be managed collectively. In this study it was found that graduates hands in the contribution of quality and equity education is significant in the processes of collective efforts, management and deliberation. In a developing and diversified society, the graduates' interventions in the form of teaching as private tutors, voluntary part time teacher in school and at home, encouraging parents to send their children to school etc. are essential. The graduates' intervention in development of education has brought multidimensional effects. It helps in the processes of teaching and learning where latter is being seriously neglected by the state, where there is lack of trained teachers, where there is need of economic support to graduates to sustain themselves and continue their own formal-informal education. The interventions of the graduates have, to some extent, reduced the discrepancies in quality, gender equity and helping in developing positive attitude among the conservative people in their society. Their intervention has created positive environment in ever growing competitive knowledge society, because people cannot keep themselves isolated or disintegrated. They have to live there without losing their own identity. In this processes quality education empowers an individual to sustain its own worth with mutualism rather become victims of exploitation in the hands of advantageous groups as negative forces of globalization. The graduates' intervention not only increasing the quality of education at primary, elementary and secondary levels rather they are working as positive forces to education of those who were neglected or dropped out due certain reasons, so they are also taking care of the equity aspect. So, in this context they are also working as agent of quantitative growth of education. The qualitative and quantitative growth of education, as a result of graduates' intervention, not only empowering peoples for informed practices but also make them capable to sustain in a competitive environment by securing their own worth.

Healthy living conditions are essential for healthy life. Lack of knowledge about the rights to decent healthy life or knowledge about healthy production and reproduction, consumption of the produced, people often become the victims of diseases. The diseases,

due to unhealthy life conditions and habits, peril the individual economic and social sustainability up to a greater extent. The graduates have been worked as acumen to inform people for their habit patterns and rights. They advise people to keep away from unhealthy and unnatural agro-production which would no doubt alert people in doing agro-practices more cautiously as a result the causalities of diseases, to some extent, go down and ecological balance remains maintained. The graduates inform people about their rights which secure a better social order and health condition as the cases of their intervention in the old-age problems, child development scheme and facilities available at the official out-lets of local self-government. The study suggests that there are active citizenry by the graduates in Odisha. Despite a wide range of efforts in post independent time people of India are living in the darkness of ignorance of State's responsibilities, their rights and benefits. The ignorance not only curtailing their rights and benefits in public sphere but also causing socio-political instability. People promoting the tainted candidates as their political representatives to rule, who often earn their narrow gains at the cost of the ruled, which can be termed as unpopular sovereignty. In such circumstances graduates have attempted to bring light in the darkness of ignorance in the form of alerting people of their civic, political and fundamental rights. When people would start realizing their justifiable rights they could restore their socio-political and cultural sustainability as it was evident 'the man who dared to contest in the local election' despite external pressure and intimidation, and eventually registers a victory, where prior to that a situation of illegitimate power domination was in place for more than a decade.

Social and cultural lags are some forms of illnesses which push an individual in the trap of exploitation. It brings disharmony in an individual, in nuclear and joint family and in society. Besides the existence of legal provision graduates are working as the active forces to reduce the gaps and misunderstanding among people. The graduates not only bearing higher order of knowledge and understanding but also, they have shown their keenness towards its expansion to other members of their community as a result some positive changes among their community members have been brought about. The nature of extension of the university in the hands of graduates is appreciable than any form of collective extension, which hardly being realized among the universities of Odisha.

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