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The social sciences, a shelter for the 'excluded' student

The general election is just over and a sizable share of India's youth is scrambling for college admissions; their contributions are crucial in realising the dream of Viksit Bharat@2047.

The month of May was important for the youth of India as the results of many examinations were released, generating ecstasy, agony, and heartbreaks. The publication of results triggers a rush for seats in higher education institutions, and, in turn, another series of examinations to qualify for these. This transition to higher education is important as it determines the quantity and quality of human capital, which is vital for economic growth. In developing economies, including India, this transition is plagued by a mismatch between demand and supply. The extent of excess seats in some courses and institutions, and shortages in some others, determines the magnitude of exclusion in the system. Persistence of exclusion leads to a scenario of courses in some disciplines emerging as the last resort for higher education for a large section of students, culminating in the creation of a reservoir of the excluded. Recent trends in India reveal that the social sciences are turning out to be one such large reservoir.

The reasons

Demand-supply mismatches in higher education arise due to the incongruence between aspirations of students and parents, and the availability of courses and seats, which is determined by market forces in private institutions and government policies in public institutions. Perpetual discrepancies in the system lead to three types of exclusions: exclusion due to excessive competition; exclusion due to financial factors, and exclusion based on subjects and courses of study. The first is evident in the case of premier institutions, which have multiple rounds of filtering mechanisms. The fact



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However, in an era of disruptive change, reaping India's demographic dividend depends on how the vast pool of social science students is tapped

that these are few and command high social prestige and pole position in the labour market intensifies competition to enter, resulting in focused elimination. The second is common in the case of private institutions as fee fixation is not bound by statutory regulations and is often akin to dynamic pricing in other services.

Reduction in government financial grants to public institutions has pushed these institutions to resort to self-financing through higher fees. The third kind of exclusion is due to systemic issues as the availability of courses and institutions gets concentrated in some specific regions, with other regions having generic courses (with outdated topics and syllabus). The prevalence of these three types of exclusions undermines the quality of human capital in the long run.

According to the 2021-22 All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), the growth of enrolment during the period 2017-18 to 2021-22 for the undergraduate (UG) level is 4.1% and the post graduate level, 5.9%. The Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme, which has the highest enrolment at the UG level, registered an increase of around 15% from 2017-18. There is an increase of 26.5% in the Master of Arts (MA) programmes from 2017-18 to 2021-22. The share of enrolment in the BA programme in total enrolment of BA, BSc and BCom is 51% in regular mode and 75% in distance mode, while the corresponding share for MA is 12% (regular) and 42% (distance). The larger share and a lower transition indicates that BA programmes are turning out to be a generic pool, accommodating a large number of students who are excluded for a variety of reasons.

The surge of empirical orientation

There are stark differences in preferences for courses within the social sciences. Three things have contributed to this. First, there is a rise in popularity for courses with more empirical

orientation as employability for such graduates is perceived to be higher. Courses in economics are preferred more on this ground when compared to courses in anthropology or sociology. Second, there is an overemphasis on acquiring policy intervention skills. The expectation that social science students need to develop problem-solving skills akin to engineering students has grown overtime, resulting in narrower specialisation within the social sciences. Third, there is the emergence of private universities that promise to provide global education in India, which has generated demand from a narrow section of the affluent population. Ironically, courses which are demanded the least in public institutions, such as anthropology, sociology and political science, are in high demand in these private universities, which have emerged as enclaves of higher quality for the affluent.

Improving quality

Higher education in the social sciences – the lens for observing and understanding changes in society, economy and polity – needs an overhaul at all levels. Quantity expansion to accommodate excluded aspirants of other disciplines needs to be followed up with a concerted effort for quality improvement. Teaching quality enhancement and course contents needs to be accorded top priority in such a mission. An obsession with policy and empirical skills has pushed some disciplines and programmes to the periphery. Financial exclusion has resulted in the widening of inequalities and the creation of elite enclaves of education in the social sciences. The aspiration of reaping demographic dividend rests on tapping a vast pool of youth studying the social sciences, which assumes significance in an era of social changes and rapid technological advancements such as generative artificial intelligence.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The cabinet

The manner in which the

allies for his government's
very survival. But the Prime

one member in his Cabinet
from the Muslim community

understand the importance
of a consensus approach.

Corrections & Clarifications