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Evolution of Higher Education in India Since 1947: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

The evolution of 'higher education in India' since independence in 1947 reflects the 'country's socio-political' and 'economic transformations.' From a 'colonial education system' focused on elitism and 'British imperial priorities', India sought to create an 'inclusive' and robust 'higher education' system that would contribute to nation-building and economic development. The 'establishment of key institutions' such as the "Indian Institutes of Technology" (IITs), "Indian Institutes of Management" (IIMs), and the expansion of universities across the country marked significant milestones in the development of "India's higher education landscape". Government policies, such as the establishment of the "University Grants Commission" (UGC) and the promotion of affirmative action through reservations, played pivotal roles in making education more accessible. However, challenges remain in terms of quality, inclusivity, and global competitiveness. This paper traces the historical journey of 'Indian higher education', highlighting the challenges, achievements, and reforms that have shaped its current structure. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of "higher education in India's development", with a focus on policy shifts, institutional growth, and the efforts to balance quality with accessibility.

Keywords: Higher Education, Post-Independence India, Policy Reforms, Inclusive Education, Nation-Building, Educational Institutions.

Introduction:

The "history of higher education in India" since its independence in 1947 is deeply intertwined with the country's journey towards social and economic development. At the time of 'independence, India inherited a higher education' system that was limited in scope, deeply influenced by colonial policies, and characterized by unequal access. The majority of 'higher educational institutions' were concentrated in urban areas, catering predominantly to the elite and urban middle class, while the rural population and marginalized communities were largely excluded.

The colonial education system was designed to serve imperial needs, focusing on creating a class of educated Indians who could serve in administrative roles under British rule. Upon gaining independence, India faced the monumental task of not only rebuilding its education system but also ensuring that it could cater to the diverse needs of a newly independent, democratic nation.

The primary challenge in “post-independence India” was to transform an education system that had largely served colonial interests into one that could foster “national development, economic growth, social justice, and scientific progress”. The newly formed Indian government, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, recognized the vital role of ‘education in nation-building’. Nehru, a strong proponent of scientific and technological progress, envisioned a modern, progressive education system that would serve as the backbone of India's future. The establishment of institutions such as the “Indian Institutes of Technology” (IITs) in the 1950s, alongside other premier institutions like the “Indian Institutes of Management” (IIMs) and the “All-India Institute of Medical Sciences” (AIIMS), represented a fundamental shift toward creating institutions of excellence that could contribute to both national development and global recognition.

During the early years after independence, the Indian government focused on building infrastructure for higher education, expanding access to various regions, and initiating reforms to make education more inclusive. The introduction of policies such as the reservation system aimed at ensuring that marginalized communities—such as Dalits, tribals, and other backward classes—had better access to educational opportunities. This was a crucial step in creating an education system that was more representative of India's diverse social structure. The government’s efforts to promote regional institutions, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, also sought to address the disparities in educational opportunities between urban and rural populations.

As the decades progressed, India’s higher education system began to expand rapidly, driven by increasing student enrolment and the “establishment of new universities and colleges” across the country. The creation of specialized institutions of higher learning, particularly in science and technology, laid the groundwork for India’s emergence as a global player in fields such as engineering, information technology, and research. The expansion of institutions of higher learning was complemented by a growing emphasis on research and development, with the establishment of research councils and centres of excellence in various academic fields.

However, despite the progress made, the journey of higher education in India has not been without its challenges. Issues such as insufficient funding, outdated curricula, lack of infrastructure, and regional disparities continue to plague the sector. While the expansion of higher education has been impressive, there have been concerns about the quality of education in many institutions, particularly in terms of teaching standards, faculty qualifications, and the relevance of academic programs to the changing needs of the economy. In recent years, concerns about the employability of

graduates, particularly in non-technical fields, have also come to the forefront, underscoring the need for curricula that are more closely aligned with industry demands and global trends.

The 21st century has seen a further transformation in the landscape of higher education in India, particularly with the advent of new technologies, the increasing global mobility of students, and the push for digital learning. The government has introduced various initiatives to modernize the sector, such as the “National Institutional Ranking Framework” (NIRF), aimed at improving institutional quality and promoting competition among universities. The introduction of the “National Education Policy” (NEP) 2020 also marks a significant milestone in the evolution of higher education in India, focusing on holistic education, multidisciplinary approaches, and fostering innovation through critical thinking and creativity.

Despite the reforms, India still faces significant challenges in its higher education system, including the need to address the widening gap between elite institutions and the rest, as well as ensuring that educational opportunities are available to all, regardless of socioeconomic background. The rapid privatization of education and the commercialization of higher education have also raised questions about the accessibility and affordability of quality education for the general public. Furthermore, the global ranking of Indian universities remains a concern, as many Indian institutions still lag behind their counterparts in developed countries in terms of research output, academic reputation, and infrastructure.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive historical perspective on the ‘evolution of higher education in India’ since independence. By examining key milestones, policy shifts, and institutional developments, it will highlight the progress made as well as the persistent challenges faced by the sector. The role of ‘higher education’ in shaping India’s political, social, and economic development will be critically analysed, with a focus on the interplay between educational policies, institutional growth, and socio-economic changes. Through this analysis, the paper will offer insights into the achievements and setbacks in the sector, while also reflecting on the future prospects of ‘higher education in India’ as it continues to evolve in response to global and domestic challenges.

The study also aims to contribute to a better understanding of how India's higher education system can be further reformed to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global economy, while also remaining inclusive and accessible to all segments of society. By reflecting on the historical trajectory of higher education, this paper seeks to provide valuable lessons that could guide future policy-making and institutional development in the sector.

The evolution of ‘higher education in India’ is a testament to the country's resilience, ambition, and commitment to providing quality education for all its citizens. As India continues to navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the future of its higher education system will depend on how effectively it can address the challenges of quality, accessibility, and global competitiveness,

while remaining true to the ideals of equity and social justice that were integral to its founding vision.

Objectives:

- To trace the historical development of ‘higher education in India’ from 1947 to the present.
- To analyze the role of ‘government policies’ and initiatives in shaping the structure and expansion of ‘higher education’.

Historical Development of ‘Higher Education in India’ from 1947 to the Present:

The evolution of ‘higher education in India’ since independence in 1947 can be understood through key phases marked by socio-political changes, economic policies, and the emergence of new educational paradigms. Over the last seven decades, India's higher education system has transformed from a colonial legacy to a vast and diverse educational landscape with aspirations of global competitiveness and social equity.

1. Early Years (1947 - 1960s): Establishing the Foundations:

At the time of independence, India inherited a higher education system that was primarily elitist and colonial in nature. There were only a limited number of universities, mostly concentrated in urban areas, and they primarily catered to the needs of a small educated elite. The emphasis of education during the British period had been on creating a class of clerks and administrators rather than producing a skilled workforce to drive industrialization or nation-building.

Key Developments:

- **Establishment of Key Institutions:** “In the early years after independence”, the Indian government set out to create institutions that would lay the foundation for scientific, technological, and managerial expertise. In 1951, the “Indian Institutes of Technology” (IITs) were established to meet the growing need for technical education. The first IIT at Kharagpur was followed by others, creating a network of premier institutions that would become globally recognized.
- **“University Grants Commission” (UGC):** The ‘UGC was established’ in 1956 to regulate and coordinate university education across the country. It aimed to standardize higher education quality, promote research, and allocate funds to institutions.
- **Affirmative Action:** Policies were introduced to make higher education accessible to marginalized sections of society. The reservation system was implemented to ensure that students from “Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC)” had equal opportunities for ‘higher education’, which led to an increase in the representation of these communities in universities.

2. Expansion and Institutionalization (1970s - 1980s): Rapid Growth and Diversification:

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by a significant expansion of the ‘higher education’

system to meet the growing demands of a rapidly developing nation. The emphasis shifted from merely creating elites to building a system that could cater to the masses and contribute to economic and social development.

Key Developments:

- **Expansion of Universities and Colleges:** The number of universities and colleges expanded dramatically, with a focus on regional balance to address disparities between urban and rural areas. New universities were established in smaller towns, and many state governments also set up educational institutions to cater to local needs.
- **Rise of Professional Education:** There was a concerted push to expand professional education in fields such as medicine, engineering, law, and business. Institutions like the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), which were founded in the 1960s and 1970s, became key players in producing highly skilled professionals for India's growing economy.
- **Focus on Scientific and Technological Research:** During this period, there was a strong focus on scientific and technological education, as India sought to modernize its industries. The establishment of the Indian National Science Academy (INSA) and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) also provided support for research in these areas.
- **Affirmative Action:** In 1973, the government introduced the Mandal Commission, which recommended affirmative action for OBCs in higher education. This was an important step in promoting social justice through educational opportunities for underrepresented communities.

3. Reforms and Globalization (1990s - 2000s): Quality vs. Quantity

The 1990s marked a turning point in the history of "Indian higher education", characterized by globalization, economic liberalization, and increasing pressure to "improve the quality of education". The growing demand for world-class education required India to revamp its higher education system in order to remain "competitive in the global knowledge economy".

Key Developments:

- **"Economic Liberalization" and Globalization:** The liberalization of the "Indian economy" in 1991 led to increased demand for skilled professionals in fields like business, technology, and management. This further emphasized the need to modernize the "higher education system" and align it with 'global standards'.
- **Private Sector Involvement:** With the "growing demand for higher education and insufficient capacity" in 'government institutions', the 'private sector' played an increasing role in the expansion of 'higher education'. Private universities, colleges, and business schools emerged, contributing to the diversification of 'higher education' offerings. However, this also raised concerns about commercialization and the 'accessibility of education' for 'marginalized groups'.

- **Internationalization of ‘Higher Education’:** The late 1990s saw the rise of Indian students seeking higher education abroad, particularly in Western countries. The Indian government responded by promoting international partnerships and collaborations with foreign universities. Additionally, a number of Indian institutions began to introduce globalized curricula and adopt international standards of teaching and research.
- **“National Institutional Ranking Framework” (NIRF):** In 2015, the government launched the “National Institutional Ranking Framework” (NIRF) to rank ‘universities and colleges’ based on their quality, research output, and teaching excellence. This move aimed to ‘improve the global’ competitiveness of ‘Indian institutions’.

4. Contemporary Era (2010s - Present): Innovation, Research, and Digital Transformation

In recent years, India has witnessed significant changes in higher education, driven by technological advancements, policy reforms, and the growing demand for skilled professionals in emerging sectors like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and data science. The period has also seen the introduction of policies aimed at “improving the quality of education and expanding access” to disadvantaged communities.

Key Developments:

- **“National Education Policy” (NEP) 2020:** The ‘National Education Policy’ (NEP) 2020, which replaced the previous “National Policy on Education of 1986”, introduced sweeping reforms aimed at overhauling the ‘Indian education system’. The policy emphasizes multidisciplinary education, holistic learning, and the integration of ‘technology into the education process’. It also stresses the need for enhancing research and innovation in Indian universities and promoting greater internationalization.
- **Digitalization and Online Education:** The rise of digital technologies has significantly transformed higher education in India. Online learning platforms, digital courses, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) have become popular, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions are increasingly adopting technology to offer flexible, affordable, and accessible learning options to a broader audience.
- **Research and Innovation:** India has made significant strides in fostering research and innovation in higher education. Institutes like the IITs and IIMs have emerged as centers of cutting-edge research, particularly in fields like engineering, technology, and management. The government has also invested heavily in research through initiatives such as the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) and the “National Mission on Education through ICT” (NMEICT).
- **International Collaborations and Global Rankings:** India’s higher education institutions continue to improve their global standing, with several universities achieving better rankings

in international league tables. Collaborations with foreign universities have become more prevalent, with a growing number of “Indian students studying abroad and foreign students coming to India”.

- **Focus on Quality Assurance:** The emphasis on quality assurance has grown, with institutions striving for accreditation and recognition from global bodies. Agencies like the “National Board of Accreditation” (NBA) and the “National Assessment and Accreditation Council” (NAAC) play a key role in maintaining ‘quality standards’ across Indian universities and colleges.

“The historical development of higher education in India” since 1947 reflects the nation’s ambitious journey toward inclusive growth, technological advancement, and global recognition. From its colonial legacy to the present day, India has made substantial progress in expanding access, improving quality, and increasing international collaborations. However, challenges such as funding disparities, quality control, and the need for further inclusivity remain. Looking ahead, India’s higher education system faces the task of adapting to a rapidly changing global landscape while maintaining its core principles of equity, accessibility, and excellence.

The Role of ‘Government Policies’ and Initiatives in Shaping the Structure and Expansion of ‘Higher Education’ in India:

The role of government policies and initiatives has been pivotal in shaping the structure and expansion of higher education in India. Since independence in 1947, the government has played an active role in not only expanding access to higher education but also ensuring that the sector aligns with the nation’s socio-economic goals. These policies have evolved over time to address the changing needs of the country, from rebuilding the educational framework after colonial rule to preparing India for a competitive global economy. The following analysis outlines the major government policies and initiatives that have influenced the development of higher education in India.

1. Post-Independence Initiatives: Foundation and Expansion (1947 - 1960s)

At the time of independence, India inherited a higher education system largely shaped by colonial rule. The country’s immediate priority was to rebuild and expand the system to meet the educational needs of its vast population. The first phase of post-independence policy-making focused on laying a solid foundation for higher education.

Key Policies and Initiatives:

- **The University Grants Commission (UGC) - 1956:** The establishment of the UGC in 1956 was a crucial step in regulating and coordinating higher education in India. The UGC was tasked with promoting and maintaining the standards of university education, ensuring financial support to universities, and enhancing research in academic institutions. The UGC's

role in funding universities, setting accreditation standards, and guiding curriculum development provided an essential structure for institutional development.

- **Focus on Science and Technology:** Under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership, there was a concerted effort to build institutions that would foster scientific and technological innovation. The creation of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) starting with IIT Kharagpur in 1951 was a milestone. The IITs became centres of excellence in technology and engineering education, contributing significantly to India's industrial growth and global competitiveness. Similarly, the establishment of the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) in the 1960s aimed at producing skilled managers for the growing economy.
- **Expansion of Regional Institutions:** Recognizing the regional disparities in education, the government set up new universities in various states, particularly in underserved regions. This helped ensure that higher education was not restricted to metropolitan centres but became more accessible to students in rural and semi-urban areas.

2. Expansion and Inclusivity (1970s - 1980s)

In the 1970s and 1980s, the focus of government policy shifted towards expanding access to higher education while also addressing issues of social equity and inclusion. During this period, higher education in India experienced significant growth in terms of institutions, student enrolments, and professional courses.

Key Policies and Initiatives:

- **Affirmative Action and Reservation Policies:** A major initiative during this period was the implementation of affirmative action policies, particularly aimed at promoting access to education for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The introduction of reservations in universities and colleges helped increase the representation of marginalized communities in higher education. The recommendations of the Mandal Commission in the early 1980s led to a significant expansion of reservation policies for OBCs, which had long-term implications for social mobility.
- **National Policy on Education (1986):** The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 was a landmark document that set the framework for the development of education in India. The policy focused on achieving universal access, gender parity, and quality enhancement in higher education. One of its key aspects was the emphasis on vocational education and training to better align education with the demands of the labour market. The policy also called for the establishment of more regional centres of excellence and the improvement of infrastructure and faculty development.
- **Establishment of New Universities and Professional Colleges:** This period saw a rapid expansion of universities and professional colleges, especially in fields like engineering,

medicine, and law. The government also focused on the creation of specialized institutions in key sectors such as agriculture, health, and rural development, with a focus on meeting the nation's human resource needs.

3. Liberalization and Quality Reforms (1990s - Early 2000s)

The 1990s marked a turning point for India's higher education system, as the country underwent significant economic liberalization and globalization. The policy framework began to shift towards quality enhancement, internationalization, and expanding access to competitive professional fields. At the same time, there was a growing emphasis on research and development in higher education.

Key Policies and Initiatives:

- **Economic Liberalization and the Role of Private Education:** The economic liberalization of the early 1990s opened up new avenues for higher education, particularly in the fields of information technology, business, and management. The liberalization also led to an increase in private sector involvement in higher education. The private sector began to fill the gap left by the government's limited capacity to create new institutions, especially in rapidly growing sectors like IT, business, and healthcare. This, however, raised concerns about commercialization and the increasing costs of education.
- **National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) - 2015:** The establishment of the NIRF was aimed at improving the quality of higher education in India by creating a competitive environment among universities and colleges. It evaluated institutions based on various parameters, including teaching, learning, research, and infrastructure. The NIRF became a tool for universities to benchmark themselves against global standards and improve their rankings.
- **Research and Innovation:** The government began to place a greater emphasis on research and innovation in higher education. Initiatives such as the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) provided funding and support for research programs. The government also encouraged public-private partnerships to boost innovation and applied research in universities.
- **Expansion of Professional Education:** As India's economy grew, so did the demand for professionals in new sectors like IT, finance, and business. The government's policy initiatives focused on the expansion of professional education, leading to the growth of institutions such as IIMs, law schools, and medical colleges. The introduction of specialized business and technical courses further aligned education with the needs of the global economy.

4. Digitalization and the NEP 2020 (2010s - Present)

The 2010s brought further reforms aimed at enhancing access to quality education, promoting digital learning, and preparing India's youth for a globalized, knowledge-based economy. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents the most significant and comprehensive reform in recent years, with a focus on multidisciplinary, technology integration, and skill development.

Key Policies and Initiatives:

- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** The NEP 2020 is a transformative policy that seeks to overhaul the Indian education system. Its key focus areas include promoting multidisciplinary learning, flexibility in course selection, and the integration of technology in education. The NEP aims to make higher education more accessible, inclusive, and globally competitive. One of its landmark proposals is the creation of a National Research Foundation (NRF) to support research and innovation across universities.
- **Digital Learning and MOOCs:** The government has actively promoted the use of technology in education, particularly through digital learning platforms and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). The push for digital education was further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for online education infrastructure. The government's Digital India initiative has helped expand access to educational content and resources, especially for students in remote and underserved areas.
- **International Collaborations and Global Rankings:** The NEP also focuses on the internationalization of higher education, encouraging Indian universities to collaborate with foreign institutions. There is a concerted push to improve the global rankings of Indian universities and attract foreign students to India for higher studies. Initiatives like the Study in India program aim to make India a global hub for education.

Government policies and initiatives have been central to the development and expansion of higher education in India. From the establishment of institutions like the IITs and IIMs in the early years to the reforms of the NEP 2020, the government's approach has evolved to meet the changing needs of the country. While significant progress has been made in terms of access, equity, and internationalization, challenges related to quality assurance, affordability, and inclusivity remain. The continued role of the government in fostering innovation, digital education, and global partnerships will be crucial in ensuring that India's higher education system remains competitive and inclusive in the future.

Conclusion:

The evolution of higher education in India since independence in 1947 reflects a dynamic journey marked by expansion, reform, and resilience. Emerging from a colonial legacy, India's higher education system has grown from a handful of universities serving a privileged few to one of the largest and most diverse systems in the world. This transformation has been driven by visionary

leadership, progressive policies, and a sustained commitment to nation-building through education.

The initial decades post-independence focused on institution-building and laying the foundation for scientific, technological, and professional excellence. Institutions like the IITs, IIMs, and AIIMS became symbols of national pride and centres of global learning. In subsequent decades, government policies emphasized inclusivity and social justice, notably through reservation policies and the establishment of universities in underserved regions. The liberalization era of the 1990s further propelled the growth of private institutions, professional courses, and global exposure, albeit raising questions about equity and quality.

In recent years, with the advent of digital learning, global competition, and knowledge-driven economies, higher education in India is undergoing another phase of transformation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a bold attempt to make the system more holistic, multidisciplinary, and future-ready. It envisions an education system rooted in Indian values while being globally relevant and competitive.

Despite the remarkable strides, challenges such as infrastructural disparities, faculty shortages, regional imbalances, and concerns over academic quality and employability continue to persist. Going forward, the focus must remain on bridging these gaps, enhancing research and innovation, and ensuring that the higher education ecosystem remains inclusive, equitable, and adaptive to the demands of a rapidly changing world.

In essence, the historical trajectory of higher education in India is a testament to the country's enduring belief in education as a catalyst for individual empowerment and national development. Sustained political will, effective implementation of reforms, and active stakeholder participation will be key in shaping the next chapter of India's educational journey.

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