1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Indian Education System

Education is a social process. The form and content of education of any age and society are products of society-education dialectics. Education, particularly higher education, as the instrument of the individual, societal and economic transformation in India became well recognized in the second half of the twentieth century. Since independence in 1947, there have been larger investments in higher education, with the concomitant increase in the number of students who opt for higher education. The transformation of Indian education system from the ancient *gurukula* system to today's virtual learning system is a reflection of the changing social context. The new social realities, particularly the interplay between democratization of education, emergence of knowledge society and globalization, greatly influence the educational processes in all societies (UNESCO, 2002)[1]

While trying to meet the local problems of 'accesses and 'equity', India also took note of the international dimension of education. National needs and expectations of the international community may seem to be conflicting, but interestingly, the 'receptivity to change' in the country has led to their complementarities. An analysis of changing conditions reveals that most of these changes are likely to permeate through the educational policies of the next few decades.

[1]http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001314/131494e.pdf

In this context, the quality of education assumes added importance and becomes the primary concern of all the stakeholders in education. These statements may appear like description of the very obvious, but this apparent obviousness is also equally contentious, and it is even more so in the case of higher education. One cannot presume that all means the same by quality higher education. The discussion on quality has generated philosophical debates on many issues of quality, including the meaning of 'quality'. Also, there are several operational controversies and different perceptions about the process of quality assurance and the responsibilities for quality.

1.2 Affordability of Higher Education

For a long period, India did not have an organized way of educating its population. The *gurukula* system was prevalent in India in ancient times, which rendered access to education very difficult for the common person. The organized system of education is a British legacy, introduced by the British in the middle of the nineteenth century. There was a progressive quantitative expansion of the system in the early part of the twentieth century, and at the time of independence in 1947; there were approximately 21 universities and 500 colleges in the country (Gnanam, A & Stella, A. 1999)

Although the increase in the number of higher education institutions and student enrolment seems to be impressive, it is no different from the experience of other nations. Unlike in other countries, however in India, its

impact is nullified due to the growing population. Quantitative expansion resulted in the increase in expenditure on higher education.

Compared to the 1950s, per student expenditure has also increased considerably. In spite of the steep increase in student enrolment, in the number of institutions and in the consequent expenditure on higher education, the higher education system caters to only 6 per cent of the relevant age group. The need to bring in a higher percentage under the umbrella of higher education to promote human resources development is well understood. Growth in numbers has also caused concern about quality-related issues[2]. With the number of new institutions of higher education rising each year, there is apprehension about the standard of facilities available in these institutions and the quality of educational experiences.

Globally, responsibility of bearing the cost of higher education has shifted from the Government to parents and students. The limitations of public finance make charging of tuition fees inevitable. In some countries like Australia and the UK, this shift is deliberate or policy-driven. In other countries like India, this is happening on its own as the consequences of resource crunch faced by public institutions on the one hand, and the emergence of a significant private sector on the other. This shift is making higher education opportunities beyond the reach of a large section of the society. Therefore, this has to be accompanied with the introduction of suitable grants and educational loan programmes that are designed to be, as closely as possible,

[2]http://www.thehindu.com/2004/11/06/stories/2004110609490400.htm

both need-based and generally available to the academically prepared students without regard to the wealth or credit-worthiness of their parents or their individual career and earning prospects.

Higher education costs in India have gone up significantly in recent years. Full costs are recovered for most of the professional programmes whether these are offered in private or public institutions. While fee levels may continue to be low in central universities that form a very small part of higher education in India, the fee levels are quite high in many state universities.

At present, the university system is too large for the Government of India to maintain financially. Until the late 1980s, the state supplied up to 90 percent of the total funding for higher education. In contrast, student fees contributed around 5 percent. However, after the government saw minimal returns from such a huge investment, it changed its policy, increasing funding at the elementary and secondary levels and decreasing funding at the university level. The inevitable result was the creation of self-financing institutions whose funding is derived mainly from tuition fees. In the state of Tamilnadu, for example, self-financing institutions outnumber those that are government-aided.

The inability of the public sector to respond to the rapid growth in higher education is but one aspect of the recent developments in the private sector. Rapid advancements in technology around the world demand that the

educational system produce a skilled labour force in the shortest possible period of time.

While there has been a dramatic increase in the number of public colleges established in recent years, most of them only offer general education courses through syllabuses set by their affiliating universities. These colleges have neither the flexibility nor the financial resources to offer the same innovative programs that private institutions have developed. A graduate of a traditional three-year bachelor's program has virtually no marketable skills as compared to one that has completed a program that included industry placement and enrichment modules in the same three-year span.

1.3 Expansion of Higher Education in India

The expansion of higher education system in India has been chaotic and unplanned. The drive to make higher education socially inclusive has led to a sudden and dramatic increase in the numbers of institutions without a proportionate increase in material and intellectual resources. As a result, academic standards have been jeopardised (Béteille, André., 2005). There are many basic problems facing higher education in India today. These include inadequate infrastructure and facilities, large vacancies in faculty positions and poor faculty, outmoded teaching methods, declining research standards, unmotivated students, overcrowded classrooms and widespread geographic, income, gender and ethnic imbalances. Education in basic sciences and subjects that are not market friendly has suffered. Research in

higher education institutions is at its lowest ebb. There is an inadequate and diminishing financial support for higher education from the government and from society.

Many colleges established in rural areas are non-viable, are under-enrolled and have extremely poor infrastructure and facilities with just few teachers. Apart from concerns relating to deteriorating standards, there is reported exploitation of students by many private providers. Ensuring equitable access to quality higher education for students coming from poor families is a major challenge. Students from poor background are put to further disadvantage, since they are not academically prepared to crack highly competitive entrance examinations that have a bias towards urban elite and rich students having access to private tuitions and coaching. A series of judicial interventions over the last two decades, knee-jerk reaction of the government to the judicial pronouncements, both at the centre and state level, and the regulatory bodies without proper understanding of the emerging market structure of higher education in India have added further confusion to higher education in the country.

In the age of a techno-scientific revolution, the quality of training for teachers and the quality of teaching in higher education institutions demand top priority. Feigenbaum (1994) believes that “quality of education” is the key factor in “invisible” competition between countries, since the quality of products and services is determined by the way that managers, teachers, workers, engineers and economists think, act and make decisions about

quality. While Seymour, D.T (1992) admits that education, and in particular higher education itself, is also driven towards commercial competition imposed by economic forces.

In the context of the Information Technology Revolution, Communication Explosion, the Knowledge Economy and Globalization, India's production of Professionals is phenomenal. With over 300 Universities and 15,600 Colleges spewing out 2.5 million graduates each year, in terms of the volume of production, India trails behind only the US and recently China. Each year India produces 350,000 engineers, twice the number produced by the US. A recent evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes all over the world, conducted by a Shanghai university, has not a single Indian University in the world's top 300 whereas China has six (Kaushik Basu, 2006).

National Knowledge Commission (2006) recommended to the Government of India to create around 1500 universities nationwide that would enable India to attain a gross enrolment ratio of at least 15 per cent by 2015. It also recommended the creation of 50 National Universities that can provide education of the highest standard. As exemplars for the rest of the nation, these universities shall train students in a variety of disciplines, including humanities, social sciences, basic sciences, commerce and professional subjects, at both the undergraduate and post-graduate levels.

Within the context of Higher Education gaining an international dimension, Universities and Higher Education Institutions are expected to be

sensitive to local, national and global expectations. In short, leaders of Universities and Higher Education Institutions are expected to play a very different and dynamic role than universities of twentieth Century in India. UGC grants many higher education institutions the status of deemed universities. Universities and deemed universities are increasing student intake, course offerings, partnerships, non-traditional modes of learning, flexible lifelong learning initiatives etc. In the case of affiliating universities, their role in promoting the concept of academic autonomy for colleges and in providing academic leadership for quality enhancement is being emphasized.

The various dimensions of changing conditions and emerging trends discussed above - starting from 'mass higher education of comparable quality' to 'new models of management and performance evaluation'- have brought both quality and standards of higher education to the forefront. The need to move from 'ensuring minimum Quality and Standards' towards 'assuring higher Quality and Standards' is apparent. Today, performance evaluation, accountability and higher standards have become watchwords in any discussion on revamping Higher Education.

1.4 Employability Scenario in India

The services sector has been the growth engine for India's economy. Its share has grown to around 52% in 2004-2005 from 41% in 1990-91. The key growth factor has been the shortage of right skilled talent in major markets of the world and its abundance in India. The road ahead is not expected to be

smooth with rising wages and retention challenges, driven by shortages of 'employable' workforce.

The education system has to be aligned to employment trends. The Indian education system has had its focus on scholastic achievements with little focus on skill development. Shaswat Kumar (2006) feels that developing the right core skills at early age is important for long-term employability. Research shows that threshold skill levels in language, cognitive ability and ICT literacy help the individual absorb domain inputs rapidly and be employable.

In October 2006, Ram Shriram, a founding board member of Google Inc. said that the company faced the challenge of finding candidates with the right skill sets in India, when compared to other parts of the world. He cited the shortage of web development skills, web design technology professionals and the need for more talented middle-level managers.

Analysts pointed out that these remarks were a further indication of the impending talent shortage in the Indian IT sector. NASSCOM had estimated that by 2010 India could face a shortfall of 500,000 IT professionals. It was believed that this could seriously threaten India's position as a leading provider of IT and ITES services.

According to NASSCOM, every year over 3 million people (graduates and post graduates) are added to the workforce in India. Of these, only 25

percent of technical graduates and 10-15 percent of other graduates are considered employable by the growing IT and ITES sectors. Even after employing these graduates, most companies have to spend considerable amount of time and resources on their training so as to develop the skills required by the industry.

With the talent shortage resulting in increasing salaries and high attrition rates, some experts cautioned that India could lose its competitive advantage in the IT sector. This could lead to a situation where multinational companies might start scouting for alternative locations, if India was unable to meet their growth demands due to the shortage of quality manpower (Indu,P., ICFAI).

According to a report on `Mapping of Manpower Skills for Tamil Nadu-2015' released recently by the Confederation of Indian Industry, Tamilnadu, as many as 43 per cent of engineering graduates are finding it difficult to find suitable paid jobs even two years after the completion of their courses. The CII study, done by ICRA Management Consulting Services (IMaCS), analyses the manpower requirements of the State, factoring in the inevitable employability crisis the engineering talent pool is facing.

The findings of the survey are revealing. According to it, Tamilnadu which produces around 80,000 engineers and 60,000 diploma holders annually in addition to a large number of ITI students, has emerged as the

largest source of technical manpower in the country. However, high levels of unemployment prevail among the new pools.

1.5 External Quality Assurance in India

Like elsewhere in the world, the rapid expansion of higher education in India has been at the cost of its quality. Quality varies widely across institutions. Despite the general deterioration of quality, some institutions like IITs, IIMs, a few university departments and some affiliated colleges have maintained high standards. The deterioration of quality is most glaring in the state universities in general and at the undergraduate level in affiliated colleges in particular. Conventional postgraduate education is also facing crisis and performs extended "babysitting" function because of lack of job opportunities for the graduates in India (Jayaram, N., 2006).

India's standards of higher education compare unfavourably with the average standards in educationally advanced countries. In 1980s, serious concerns were raised about continued deterioration in the quality of higher education. It was found that the built-in controls were not able to ensure quality. Various options were examined. In line with global practices, external quality assurance was conceived in India as a solution (Antony, S., 2002).

In the academic world, one observes many apprehensions about the concepts and processes of external quality assurance. The academics are generally uncomfortable with the managerial perspectives and the market language of quality. The pedagogues of education are sceptical about the

measurability of the intrinsic excellence of educational operations. The external quality assurance mechanisms are perceived as a threat to the autonomy of educational institutions. Some even consider quality as just hype and as a part of the strategies of developed countries to hegemonize the education systems of developing countries. Indeed, the debate on quality sometimes resembles the story of the description of an elephant by five blind men.

Perceptions of the role of the University and Higher Education Institution had also changed by then. It is expected that academic leaders be directly involved in enhancement of quality of higher education and the transformation of society and its economic development through partnership activities and university-industry linkages. In the academic world, quality assessment has traditionally assumed two apparently contradictory objectives: quality improvement and accountability. Universities mostly emphasise quality improvement, which has been a concern for higher education institutions since the middle ages, while the government pays special attention to accountability, aiming at guaranteeing the quality of the services provided to society by Higher Education Institutions. Quality has become the defining element of higher education in the 21st Century.

1.6 Need for the Study

India's burning issue is not that of lack of talent pool, but the lack of talent pool which is on par with quality of world class and employable. Industry

leaders presume that only 15% of the people coming out of Indian colleges are employable. The rest are branded 'not employable' (Ajit Isaac, 2006) not for the lack of theoretical knowledge but for the lack of skills and attitude necessary for doing the job successfully. This is truly a challenge as well as a social responsibility. The Industry leaders are caught in a pincer between rising employment costs on one hand and a 30% rate of attrition on the other. While the need of the hour is to produce employable and quality manpower, the quality of teaching-learning process in higher education institutions is very vital. Quality of teaching depends on the quality of faculty and the quality of students is the fruit of the quality of learning. It may not be fair to fully transfer this responsibility to the Academic Leaders alone; there must be some share of this responsibility owned by the all stakeholders as well.

Hitherto only the academia are playing the vital roles in quality assessment and quality enhancement through quality assessment bodies like National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Board of Accreditation (NBA).The perceptions of academia on criteria for quality of students, faculty and higher education institutions are prevailing in the process of quality assessment in higher education. However, the role of other stakeholders such as industries, students, faculty and alumni are very much limited in the quality assessment process and their perceptions on the criteria for the quality of students and faculty for better teaching-learning process are not considered. Hence, the study of perceptions of all stakeholders on the criteria for quality of faculty and students of higher education is the need of the hour for effective quality assessment of higher education in India.