



Cover Page



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RASHTRIYA UCHCHATAR SHIKSHA ABHIYAN– A BOON FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ASSAM

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Abstract

In the recent few decades there has been a tremendous growth of higher educational institutes (HEIs) in India. Assam, one of the North Eastern states of Assam, too, has taken strides in higher education both in terms of the growth of the number of HEIs and enrolment. But even now, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) remains an area of concern apart from other aspects like quality, equity, accessibility, regional imbalance, etc. But everybody of the modern era will agree that higher education is a potent tool for the individual and social development of a country. Considered a fundamental right in the modern world, education is a powerful instrument to identify, develop and transform the human capacities and potentialities into a skilled human resource. It is against this backdrop that it will be a worthy endeavor to review the state of affairs of higher education in Assam, most particularly to assess the progress made after the initiation of Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), a centrally sponsored holistic scheme for the development of higher education in the entire country initiated by the Government of India in 2013.

The RUSA has brought about tangible qualitative changes to Indian higher education system which is incidentally world's third largest education system. It has come against the backdrop and the realization that merely increasing the number of higher educational institutions and their respective enrolment will not fulfill the national goals without proper attention to quality and its access to all who desire it. Assam boasts of the wide spread network of higher educational institutions in the entire North-Eastern Region of India. The GER of higher education in Assam is 18.9%. The National Policy on Education, 2020 has observed the challenges of access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability faced by the current education system. The 11th Five-year plan recognized two major problems of higher education in Assam viz. low enrolment and regional imbalance. The RUSA was supposed to meet these challenges. RUSA has overwhelmed different aspects of higher education such as finance, research, teaching-learning, equity, infrastructure and innovation in the state HEIs. This present paper is a humble endeavor to throw some light and discuss the role RUSA has played for quality improvement of higher education in Assam.

Keywords: Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), Quality, Access, Equity.

Introduction

Education is the fundamental need of life and its development. In the modern world, education is considered as basic right. Education makes an individual responsible, refined, cultured, dynamic, honest, skillful, resourceful and an enterprising citizen. It is a powerful instrument which develops the personality and wisdom of people, makes them capable of performing certain economic, political and cultural functions and consequently their socio- economic status gets enhanced. Education determines not only the level of prosperity of an individual but the welfare and security of the entire nation as well.

Higher education plays a significant role in nation building. The goals and objectives of higher education are to promote, disseminate and generate knowledge, wisdom, tolerance, adventure, critical thinking and search for truth. Higher education enables individuals to expand their knowledge and skills, express their thoughts clearly, comprehend abstract concepts and theories along with improving their quality of life. Through higher education, a nation can address the issues relating to equality, accessibility quality, values and development. One cannot think of development of a nation without quality development of education, particularly in higher education. Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), a centrally sponsored programme of the Government of India realizes all these aspects and takes a holistic approach towards improvement in all the tangible quality parameters of higher education in India. The present paper proposes to highlight the improvement RUSA has brought about to the scenario of higher education of Assam in general and to the higher educational institutes of the state in particular.



Cover Page



Objectives of the Study

The present paper is designed to fulfill the following objectives.

- To identify the significance of Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan.
- To study about the initiatives taken by Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) in higher educational institution in Assam.

Research Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of information. Primary source includes interaction through discussion and interviews with government officials of education department, academicians, research scholars and students of the state of Assam. Secondary information has been collected from government publications, MHRD documents, Research Journals, RUSA documents, articles, magazines, books, etc. to get the relevant information. Internet and websites were also consulted for this study.

Higher Education in India

Indian higher education (HE) system is world's third largest education system (NIRF, 2015). India has a prosperous and glorious tradition of higher education since time immemorial. The universities occupy a distinctive place in the history of HE. It consists of colleges, universities, institutions of national importance (Such as Indian Institute of Technology, Indian Institute of Management and India Institutes of Science, etc), and autonomous institutions with the status of Deemed Universities. There are 799 universities which includes central university (43), State Public University (329), Deemed University (122), State Private University (197), Central Open University (01), State Open University (13), Institution of National Importance (75), State private Open University (01), Institutions Under State Legislature Act (05), and others (13); 39071 Colleges, 11923 Standalone Institution including Diploma Level Teacher Training (4403) and Institute under Ministries (158) (Educational Statistics At a Glance, 2018).

Despite these achievements the GER of higher education in India during 2019-20 is 27.1% (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2019-20.) Indian GER is not very impressive as against around 75.6% in developed countries. The statistics reveals that only a fraction of population in the age group of 18-23 years is enrolled in higher educational institutions. The country also records a variation on GER amongst different strata of society. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data from 1983-84 to 2009-10 indicates this variation on GER amongst different strata of society. For Scheduled Caste (SC), Schedule Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Class (OBC) GER figures are 14.8%, 11.8% and 22.1% respectively. It is also observed that merely increasing the number of higher educational institutions and their enrolment capacity will not achieve the national development goal without giving priority to quality and its access to all who desire it which was highlighted in the 12th Five Year Plan.

Higher Education in Assam

Assam, the largest economy in the north-east India, has a relatively well developed and diversified educational infrastructure. As per 2011 census, the literacy rate of Assam is 73.18% with male literacy rate of 78.81%. The role of higher education in a state is a crucial aspect. It can produce high level manpower, professionals, technical and managerial personnel, generate new knowledge through research and impart such knowledge leading to development of human resources.

Although, higher education has gradually expanded in Assam since independence, issues involving access, equity and quality still continue to be the area of concern. The higher education of Assam faces various challenges which need to be addressed. The challenges of higher education are the problem of access, equity, standard, falling standard of research, low enrolment, high dropout rate, regional imbalance, problem of infrastructure in state run institutions, shortage of faculty members, financial problems, lack of adequate facilities etc. The GER of higher education in Assam is 18.9% where male is 19.1% and female is 18.3% respectively. (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2018-19). The 11th five-year plan recognized two major problems of higher education in Assam, viz., low enrolment and regional imbalance.

So, higher education in Assam is in need of radical reforms. To meet these challenges, the RUSA, a centrally sponsored flagship, integrated and comprehensive scheme, is the most significant initiative in higher education of Assam.

Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)

RUSA was initiated in 2013 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. RUSA aims at providing strategic funding to higher education institutions throughout the country.

RUSA places greater emphasis on the quality of teaching-learning process in order to produce employable and competitive



Cover Page



graduates, post graduates and Ph.Ds. The scheme focuses on state higher educational institutions and draws upon the best practices from colleges and universities across the nation. It aims to provide adequate opportunity of higher education to socially and educationally backward classes, differently-able persons, promote inclusion of women and thereby improve equity in higher education. RUSA has strong focus on healthy environment at higher educational intuitions which can motivate teachers and students for research and innovative works. Its target achievement was to raise the GER to 32% by the end of XII plan in 2017 (RUSA, 2013) Faculty improvement programme and leadership development of educational administrations are also an important part of the scheme. In order to enhance skill development, the existing central scheme of polytechnic has been subsumed within RUSA objectives.

Major objectives of RUSA

The major objectives of RUSA are to

- i) Improve the overall quality of existing state institutions by ensuring that all institutions conform to prescribed norms and standards and adopt accreditation as a mandatory quality assurance framework.
- ii) Usher in transformative reforms in the state higher education system by creating a facilitating institutional structure for planning and monitoring at the state level, promoting autonomy in state universities and improving governance in institutions.
- iii) Ensure academic and examination reforms in the higher educational institution.
- iv) Enable conversion of some of the universities into research universities at par with the best in the world.
- v) Create opportunities for states to undertake reforms in the affiliation system in order to ensure that the reforms and resource requirements of affiliated colleges are adequately met.
- vi) Ensure adequate availability of quality faculty in all higher educational institutions and ensure capacity building at all levels of employment.
- vii) Create an enabling atmosphere in the higher educational institutions to devote themselves to research and innovations.
- viii) Expand the institutional base by creating additional capacity in existing institutions and establishing new institutions, in order to achieve enrolment targets.
- ix) Correct regional imbalances in access to higher education by facilitating access to higher quality institutions in urban and semi urban areas, creating opportunities for students from rural areas to get access to better quality institutions and setting up institutions in un-served and under-served areas.
- x) Improve equity in higher education by providing adequate opportunities of higher education to SCs/STs and socially backward classes, promote inclusion of women, minorities and differently abled persons.

Primary components of RUSA

The followings are the primary components of RUSA that capture the key action and funding areas that must be pursued for the fulfillment of the targets (RUSA, Draft Guidelines for Consultation, MHRD, 2013, India)

- Upgradation of existing autonomous colleges to universities.
- Conversion of colleges to cluster Universities.
- Infrastructure grants to universities.
- New model Colleges (General).
- Upgradation of existing degree colleges to Model Colleges.
- New Colleges (Professional).
- Infrastructure grants to colleges.
- Research, innovation and quality improvement.
- Equity initiatives.
- Faculty recruitment and support.
- Faculty improvement.
- Vocationalisation of Higher Education.
- Leadership development of Educational Administrators.
- Institutional restructuring and reforms
- Capacity building and preparation, data collection and planning.

RUSA Implementation

Requisite criteria to receive grant from RUSA

RUSA Guidelines mandated that the beneficiary state governments would have to fulfil some conditions to receive grants from RUSA. The conditions to avail of the grants are as follows:

- They would have to create a State Higher Education Council.



Cover Page



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- Filling up of faculty positions
- Having mandatory accreditation.
- Governance and administrative reform
- Academic reform
- State Universities would have to introduce semester system, Choice-Based-Credit System, bring curriculum development and overall admission procedure in a transparent manner. Moreover, each institution will have to prepare an Institutional Development Plan (IDP)

Funding strategy of RUSA

For implementation of plan and programmes at any level of education system fund is considered as the most essential component. Funding for RUSA is shared between centre and state. The funding is provided in the ratio of 60:40 for general category states, 90:10 for North Eastern states, J&K, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, 100% for Union Territories, 65:35 for other states and 50:50 for private aided institutions (Report of MHRD, 2013). The central funding would be norm-based and outcome-dependent. The funding would flow from the Central Ministry through the State government or Union Territories to the State Higher Education Councils. The funding to states would be made on the basis of Critical Appraisal of State Higher Education Plans (SHEPs) which would describe each state's strategy to address issues of equity, access and excellence in higher education.

Initiatives of RUSA in Assam

The Assam State Higher Education Council Bill was passed to undertake strategic intervention for the improvement of higher education in the state. RUSA, a comprehensive, integrated and flagship scheme has been implemented by the government of Assam to ensure access, equity, expansion and excellence in higher education in the state.

Under the Higher Education department, RUSA-Assam plays a vital role in mobilizing education towards development and research through its various key components. In Assam various initiatives have been taken by RUSA 1.0 and RUSA 2.0 under its different components. These initiatives relate to infrastructure grants to colleges, establishment of new model degree colleges, up-gradation of existing degree colleges to model degree colleges, filling up the infrastructural gap of universities.

Some of the initiatives taken by RUSA under the components of infrastructure grants to colleges of Assam are renovation of building, construction of new classroom, digital classroom, sport facilities, construction of health-centres, establishment of laboratory, construction of computer lab, ramp, beautification, e-resource facilities for library, laboratory equipment etc. In Assam, to reduce the regional imbalances in higher education establishment of new model degree colleges at educationally backward districts is another significant aspect. Already a number of model degree colleges across the state have been set up which are functioning well which are expected to meet the challenge of regional or area-based imbalances in respect of the defined parameters of higher education.

Under the equity component some initiatives are taken by RUSA in Assam. Most remarkable among these initiatives are disable-friendly facilities, transportation facility for the female and differently-abled students, finishing school, language laboratory etc. Under disable-friendly facilities various facilities like braille books, wheelchairs, hearing aids, disable-friendly toilets, ramp, audio books, disable friendly equipments, etc., have been provided for differently abled students of higher education. Under equity components, finishing school is another initiative for providing equal opportunities for socially and economically backward students of the disadvantaged groups of the society.

RUSA-Assam has been undertaking various infrastructural development initiatives since 2014 in its 1.0 phase. It has successfully completed various infrastructural development projects in 106 higher educational institutions in Assam. In the infrastructural development activities in RUSA phase 1.0, it has disbursed total amount of Rs. 342 crores to 106 higher educational institutions. These higher educational institutions include 87 colleges, 2 state universities, 5 model degree colleges and 12 new model degree colleges respectively. RUSA- Assam has also sanctioned Rs. 1.5 crore under its equity initiatives component to 29 numbers of beneficiary institutions. In RUSA 2.0 phase, RUSA- Assam has received Rs. 56.7 crore as central share Rs. 5.67 crore as state share for infrastructure grants to 116 numbers of beneficiary institutions. RUSA 2.0 phase also includes 5 numbers of new model degree colleges, 12 number of existing degree colleges to model degree colleges. RUSA 2.0 has also approved Rs. 40 crores as infrastructure grants to 2 numbers of state universities in the state.

Conclusion

Higher education is a crucial input for the growth and development of human resource which can take responsibility for social, economic and scientific development of a country. Higher education also makes an important part of the strategies striving to



Cover Page



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achieve the goals of sustainable development. The vision of higher education in India is to realize the country's human resource potential to its fullest with equity and inclusion. At present, RUSA-Assam has successfully completed various projects in its 1.0 phase. RUSA is playing a significant role to filling up of the gap between theoretical and practical working in the field of higher education. RUSA-Assam also has given the focus on attaining access, equity, quality and excellence in the higher education system of the state with greater efficiency, transparency, accountability and responsiveness. The central and state government fund of RUSA projects has changed the academic environment in RUSA beneficiary higher educational institutions in Assam.

The schemes of RUSA in general and of RUSA-Assam in particular, have ushered in a new era of development for the higher educational institutes in Assam. All important issues of higher education have been addressed by the schemes, most specially the issues of infrastructure, equity, access and regional imbalance. There have been new building blocks, new labs including language labs, new administrative and library buildings, PwD friendly amenities, digital classrooms, video conference halls, etc. which were felt earlier but remained unfulfilled dreams for many HEIs. Many HEIs of Assam now have got new lustre and look. GERs have also taken a step forward apart from other transformations in the higher education scenery of Assam. Funds have been optimally utilized by the HEIs of Assam since RUSA has in place the continuous project monitoring mechanism. It has helped the beneficiary colleges to complete the RUSA specific projects within the time frame. It can be expected that the implementation of National Educational policy, 2020, along with RUSA-Assam, will improve the quality of higher education in Assam and bring about many unforeseen, qualitative changes to higher education in Assam as much as they bring changes to the national counterpart.

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