

New India needs free and quality higher education

(GS Paper 2, Social Justice)

Context:

- At a time when the **demand for quality education and research** in leading universities in India and advanced nations is on the rise, the **staggering tuition fees demanded by universities of repute**, besides deterring the meritorious from pursuing their degrees from world-class universities, create compulsions to turn professions into business propositions rather than opportunities to serve and excel.

Stark example of New York University:

- **Carving out a niche** in the annals of the global education architecture, **New York University's NYU Grossman School of Medicine** announced that from the 2021–22 academic year, it will **pay the tuition fees for all its students admitted** in its MD programme, **regardless of their financial needs**, thereby becoming the first major American medical school to do so.

Scenario in India:

- In India too, the **burden of tuition fees in professional courses is becoming unbearable**. Besides, it is causing a **serious concern of reducing quality professional education** to a commodity rather than the noble service that it ought to be.
- Educational loans, even with government collateral guarantee, are no answer, as the mounting debt of educational loans will cripple the economy of development and public welfare.
- What we need is a **university system that fosters an environment of learning** in which world-quality education can be provided without taxing learners with the burden of tuition fees.

The Nordic model:

- The Nordic countries; Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden provide free higher education to their people, and overseas students were able to study for free until recently.
- In Denmark, however, tuition fees were introduced for international students from outside the European Union and the European Economic Area, in 2006. Sweden followed suit in 2011. Only Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Germany do not charge international students tuition fees.
- This ensures that students receive quality education in the streams that they desire rather than pursuing streams that allow them to earn highly so as to repay their student debt.

How Nordic countries outscore other nations?

- Despite some attempts to impose fees, all these countries are outliers in a world where international students are frequently a valuable source of revenue for institutions.
- All Nordic countries have a strong legacy of equality, extending to equal opportunities in the education system. The Nordic countries have measures in place to promote gender equality and assist students from lower socioeconomic categories to gain access to higher education.
- It is no wonder that these countries continue to figure in top of the world happiness index (Finland at No.1, Denmark at No. 2, Iceland at No.4, Norway at No.8 and Germany at No.14, as per the World Happiness Index 2022).

It reshapes student choices:

- A ray of hope for evolving a progressive university system in professional education has been provided by NYU's Grossman School of Medicine.
- In its announcement, the NYU had pointed out the fact that "overwhelming student debt" is reshaping the medical profession in ways that are bad for the health-care system.
- Such debts prompt graduates to pursue high-paying specialties rather than careers in family medicine, paediatrics, and obstetrics and gynaecology.
- The lead taken by the NYU is bound to inspire many other leading universities to consider and value the student's intellectual acumen rather than financial investment.
- But then, universities need funds for education and research.

Roadmap for India:

- Education is a noble service and an investment to charter a bright future for humanity. If students pay for education, they would be forced to earn from the degrees they acquire. The profession then becomes a privilege to earn rather than a privilege to serve and excel, as it ought to have been.
- There is a strong case for reviving philanthropy and community support for higher education in India. Corporates, generous alumni, and people at large can join in to create strong philanthropic support for higher education and make quality education tuition-free.
- The government, for its part, should be generous enough to declare such philanthropic donations to the cause of higher education and research tax-free, now that the treasury is full of funds from the ever-growing list of income tax and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) payers.