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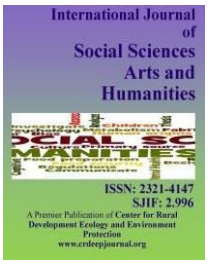

Full Length Research Paper

Issues and Challenges of Higher Education in India: With Special Reference to Mizoram

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ABSTRACT

This paper following a descriptive survey method attempts to examine some of the issues and challenges of higher education in India with special reference to Mizoram. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources and analyzed by employing simple descriptive statistics such as percentage. The findings were: (i) uneven access and equity in higher education among regions, states, sections and genders (ii) as per assessment of NAAC, only 25% central and 27% state universities received 'A' or higher grade; and only a handful of universities and colleges were selected under the scheme of University with Potential for Excellence (UPE) and Colleges with Potential for Excellence (CPE) respectively (iii) library issue still persists in more than half of the colleges of Mizoram as 52.38% of principals rated them as satisfactory only, (iv) majority of the college teachers use conventional method of teaching (v) GER of higher education in Mizoram is much below the level of national average (vi) a slight increase in the budget for higher education was made in the last few years (vii) there is lack of adequate and qualified faculty in the colleges of the state, of the 181 contractual and part-time teachers, as many as 88 (48.62%) are without a SLET/NET (viii) huge disparity was found in terms of regular faculty between city and town/district colleges in the state. The gap is to the extent that the English department of a certain district college was found taking care of 5 (five) part-time faculty of which only one is with NET while a city based college with 9 (nine) faculty in that department (ix) till the end of 2nd cycle assessment of NAAC, the overall grade of the colleges in the state fell within the ranges of C, C+, C++, to B, B++ with one exception to A. More expansion of higher education without compromising the quality should be made. The existing institutions of higher learning should also be strengthened by providing adequate human and material resources by the concerned department for improvement of quality of education. Teachers in the colleges of Mizoram should be encouraged to use ICT based teaching by providing proper facilities by the department of Higher and Technical Education for effective teaching-learning. All the qualified contractual and part-time teachers should be regularized and the unqualified ones should also be encouraged to clear SLET/NET within a stipulated time. Efforts should be made by the concerned authority to remove disparity between the city and town/district colleges by providing regular faculty to the latter. Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of each college needs to intensify its activities for improvement of quality education in Mizoram.

Introduction

In our national development process, education system has a very important role to play, especially the higher education. A higher education institution is a place where new ideas germinates, creative minds converge and interact with each other, synthesize information and construct vision for new realities. Higher education provides opportunities to people to develop critical thinking and problem solving abilities and thus enable them to face challenges in life. It provides specialized knowledge and skills to contribute national development. The 21st century is the age of liberalization, privatization and globalization. Knowledge is the key to this age. The more knowledge one has, the more empowered one is. The role of Indian higher education in this emerging scenario of "knowledge" is not only very crucial but also multifaceted because creation of new knowledge primarily depends on strengthening the education system, academic restructuring, promoting new frontiers of research, innovation, up-gradation of technology, transfer of technology, sharing of

expertise, training and knowledge management. It is a well known fact that phenomenal growth has taken place in Indian higher education in the post-independence era. However, in spite of this fact, the overall condition of higher education in India is not very impressive in terms of quality in particular. The present Gross Ratio Enrolment (GER) for higher education in the country is only 24.5% - male: 25.4%, female 23.5% (MHRD, 2017). This clearly reflects that about 75% of the young Indians who are in the eligible age group (18-23) of receiving higher education are still left out of the system. This is not a healthy indication and indeed poses a huge challenge before the entire nation and therefore there is an urgent need for inclusion of those excluded from the system to achieve the envisaged 30% GER by 2020. Hence, in this study, an attempt has been made to examine some of the issues and challenges of higher education in India with special reference to Mizoram.

Objectives

1. To study the development of higher education in India.
2. To discuss the issues and challenges of higher education in India with special reference to Mizoram.
3. To suggest some measures to meet the issues and challenges.

Methodology

As the study proposed to examine the development, issues and challenges of higher education in India with special reference to Mizoram, the descriptive survey method was employed. The primary as well as secondary data were used to analyze the problem. The primary data were collected through a questionnaire from 21 principals of Government colleges functioning under the department of Higher and Technical Education where only general education is imparted while secondary data were gathered from the official website of the MHRD, UGC, All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), related research work, journals, news papers, books, etc. The data were analyzed by employing simple descriptive statistics such as percentage.

Development of Higher Education in India

At the time of independence, there were only 19 universities and about 500 affiliated colleges in the entire country. There has been a tremendous expansion of higher education in India after independence. During 1951 to 2001, the number of universities increased from 28 to 266, colleges from 578 to 11,146, teachers from 15,000 to 39,500, and students from 1.74 lakh to 83.99 lakh. But Indian higher education has expanded at a fast pace both in private and public sectors including Mizoram by adding 533 universities, 27,927 colleges and more than 24 million students during the last few decades. At present, India has 789 universities, with a break-up of 47 Central, 359 State, 123 Deemed and 260 Private (UGC, 2017). The number of universities has increased more than 28 times just from 28 in 1951 to 789 in 2016. The figure of Institute of National Importance such as IITs, NITs, IIMs, AIIMS has also gone up to 92 in 2016 from just 1 (IIT,Kharagpur) in 1956. The number of colleges has also witnessed as many as a 64 - fold increase from 578 in 1951 growing to 39,071 including 1800 exclusive women's colleges in 2016. Now, Indian higher education system is the third largest in the world in terms of number of students next only to China and the United States of America with 34.4 million (344 lakh) enrolment of students (male: 18.5 million—54%, female 15.9 million—46%) and 1.33 million i.e. 13.3 lakh regular and 0.11 million i.e.1.1 lakh temporary teachers in 789 universities and 39,071 affiliated colleges spread across the country. With all these institutions, nearly 86 per cent of students are enrolled in bachelor's degree programmes with about 74 per cent enrolling in three-year B.A.; B.Com. or B. Sc. degrees. One-sixth of all Indian students are enrolled in engineering/technology degrees. Education, medicine, agriculture, veterinary science and law all together accounts for less than 10 per cent of total enrolment. About 12 per cent of students pursue post-graduate studies whereas only 2 per cent are enrolled in doctoral degree and other diploma programmes (Sarkar & Choudhary, 2015).

Issues and Challenges of Higher Education in India

Access and Equity

As stated earlier, the growth and expansion of higher education in India has been tremendous since independence and especially during the last few decades it has been remarkably fast. However, the expansion has not gone quick enough while comparing to ever growing young population of the country. Although the GER in higher education has considerably increased, it is still not only far below the average 45% GER of developed countries but also below the global average of 30 %. GER. The GER of India is even far below those of the emerging nations' such as China (29%) and Malaysia (40%). Moreover, it has been uneven and as a result of that there is wide disparity among the different regions, states and sections of society. According to AISHE (2016-2017), GER of some of the states and union territories such as Tamil Nadu (46.9%) and Chandigarh (56.1%) is much higher than that of the GER of Bihar (14.4%). Similarly, there exists a huge gap between the GER of male and female across the country. When the GER of male is 25.4 %, it is 23.5 % for female. According to a report of Annual Status of Higher Education (ASHE, 2013) in States and Union Territories, the GER in rural areas - 13.9% is not even the half of the GER of urban areas - 32.5%. One obvious reason for this kind of situation can be non-availability of proper facilities of higher education in rural areas of our country. The Ramamurthy Committee (1990) in its report had strongly pleaded for giving all support to rural universities and institutions. However, even now the idea of rural universities/institutes is being implemented on a limited scale only. Hence, gaps in access to higher education between rural and urban areas still exist (Siddiqui, 2010). Further despite many attempts to improve the access and outreach, social disparity persists in higher education. For instance, the enrolment of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) remained low over the years. As per MHRD data, the GER of SCs in higher education stands at 19.9% (male 20.8% and female 19.0%) while that of STs is 14.2% (male 15.6% and female 12.9%). There is an urgent need to remove the inequality that exists among different regions and different social groups.

In 2008, UGC proposed to establish model degree colleges in 374 backward districts of the country where the GER in higher education is lower than that of the national average of 12.4% to provide higher education on the matching share of capital

expenditure between Central and State Governments in the ratio of 1:2 (i.e.1/3 UGC: 2/3 State Govt.). For Special Category States, the ratio is 1:1 i.e. 50 UGC: 50 State Government (MHRD, 2008). However, according to a report released by MHRD, 155 proposals have come so far from various states, of which 86 have been sanctioned, 33 rejected while another 36 proposals are being processed (Basu, 2014).

During the 12th Five Year Plan, the government has a target of achieving 30 per cent GER. In view of this, UGC launched a national higher education mission called Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhhiyan (RUSA) in October 2013 to achieve quality higher education with access and equity. Under this scheme, a number of higher education institutions across the country including Mizoram have received financial assistance from RUSA for development of infrastructure. If RUSA scheme is successful, it will certainly help in ushering quality improvement in higher education.

The Hindu (2013) report says that by 2020 the average age of India would be 29 years and India would become world's youngest country with 64 per cent of its population in the working age group. It is very significant because it is happening at a time when the rest of the world including China, India's greatest rival is ageing. International Labour Organization (ILO) also predicted that by 2020 India will have approximately 116 million people in the working age group (20-24) as compared to China's 94 million only. Further, it is estimated that average age in the US, Europe and Japan by the year 2020 will be 40, 46 and 47 respectively as against 29 in India. In fact, in the coming 20 years, the labour force in the industrialized world will decline by 4 per cent, in China by 5 per cent, but in India it will increase by 32 per cent. So the kinds of role that China played in the last generation could be India's in the next. But the question is does India have the ability to equip the people to take advantage of this demographic potential. If India fails to equip them, then this demographic dividend will be demographic disaster due to undereducated, unemployment and frustration. As pointed out earlier, at present only 34.4 million young people of India are in the higher education system. So, expansion of education is essentially necessary to take the advantage of the 21st century and this is the biggest challenge that India faces today.

Quality

There is no doubt that the country has witnessed a massive expansion of higher education in its long 70 years of independence. However, quality remains one of the major concerns in a competitive global scenario. The then President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, in his couple of speeches also expressed concern over the quality of education in institutes of higher learning. Although there is no exact definition of quality education, it could be put as- By quality education it would mean a system of education where the best of candidates are selected, the best of teaching equipment and infrastructural support are made available to the institutions, an atmosphere of academic pursuits of excellence takes place without the outside influences and pressures, and that corruption does not eat away the fabrics of the system (Rajesh, 2013).

It has long been debated on the quality issues of higher education in a number of seminars and workshops organized at international, national and state level across the country to sensitize all the stakeholders about the status of higher education and to bring a transformation in the entire system, yet not much change has taken place. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) grade is a clear reflection on where we stand. As per the (NAAC, 2015) report, only 25% of the central and 27% of the state universities assessed so far received 'A' or higher grade. Out of the accredited universities, only 15 of them have been selected under the scheme of University with Potential for Excellence (UPE). As for college, only 124 colleges could manage to get a berth in the UGC's list of Colleges with Potential for Excellence (CPE). The quality of Indian higher education is, further evident from the fact that not even a single university from India features in the top 200, while quite a good number of universities from China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea are in the list. India's leading university- the Indian Institute of Science is closer to the top 200 (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2017). The reasons for poor performance of Indian higher institutions in global rankings could be attributed to a number of factors such as lack of dedicated and qualified faculty, lack of proper infrastructural facilities, inadequate research funding and lack of a culture of quality research work.

The education commission of India (1964-66) popularly known as Kothari Commission recommended that at least 6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) should be spent on education. The commission agreed that it would be costly for a poor country like India, but warned that not spending would be even costlier. Though the recommendation was accepted by the government, the GDP has never reached the proposed target of the commission due to lack of political and financial commitment. The GDP of 4.57 % in 2013-2014 is the highest ever figure achieved so far. The education budget of this financial year 2017-2018 is only 3.7% of GDP, a 0.05 % rise from the previous year's budget of 3.65%. Overall, the Union Budget pegged an outlay of Rs. 79,685.95 crore for education sector, up from Rs. 72,394 crore in 2016-2017—a 9.9% rise. Of the total outlay, Rs. 46,356.25 is for school sector and the rest Rs. 33,329.70 is for higher education (Union Budget, 2017). Although the allocation is substantially raised, when it is examined in relative term, this rise may not be sufficient to keep pace with the increasing demand for higher education.

The above data reflects that education has never been a priority area of funding of successive governments. Quality of education depends on quantity and quality of human as well as material resources available in the institutions. But today, we are lagging in both. So, what was predicted by the commission some 50 years ago has come true now? Further, there has been disparity in funding pattern in respect of different types of institutions of higher education. While funds are pouring to educational institutions established by the central government, the state universities are starving for funds. There has been a report that some of the state universities were not even able to pay the salaries of the teachers on time. Under such circumstances the falling down of quality of education is quite inevitable.

Further, India's funding in Research and Development (R&D) has been always very low compared to some developed and emerging countries such as USA, China, Japan, Singapore, South

Korea and UK. As per a report of Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, India spent only 0.85% of GDP in 2015 in R & D while it was 2.1% for China. In 2013, it was 2.74% for USA. The report further says that for Japan, South Korea, Singapore and UK it was 3.54%, 4.29%, 2.18% and 1.70% of GDP respectively in 2014. According to a report of (MHRD, 2013) India contributed only 4.36% of the global research output in 2013. India needs more funding in research not only for competing with the emerging nations but also for its own growth and development, and if so research contribution will be more and also find higher place in global ranking.

Faculty crunch, lack of dedicated and qualified faculty; and lack of proper infrastructural facilities affect the quality of higher education in India. Many undergraduate and post-graduate departments in colleges and universities are functioning with less than 50% of the total sanctioned faculty strength. Even institutions of international repute like IITs are working with more than 30% faculty positions lying vacant in most of the departments (Sarkar & Choudhary, 2015). It has already been stated that at present more than 1 lakh temporary teachers are engaged in colleges and universities across the country. A study conducted by NAAC after assessing a number of institutions reported that 66% of the institutions accredited have less than 80% of the sanctioned strength and 57% of the faculty do not have research degree (Ph.D.) or the qualifications prescribed by the UGC (Varghese, 2010). Research and teaching are complementary to each other. Research broadens the mental horizon of the faculty and builds academic confidence of the teachers and thus enhances the quality of teaching. Research, therefore, should be an integral part of all higher educational institutions of the country.

Majority of the undergraduate colleges do not have adequate ICT (Information and Communication Technology) based teaching facilities and as such teachers are compelled to compromise with white board and marker. ICT is virtually unknown in most of the colleges located in rural and backward areas (Kurup, 2010). Although teaching, learning and evaluation accounts for 35% of the NAAC accreditation score in the affiliated colleges, teaching largely continues to be teacher-centric and one-way communication. Classroom interaction and discussion is very less in our approach of teaching. Moreover, our libraries are ill equipped in terms of books, availability of computers and internet provision. Therefore, our higher education suffers from quality.

Mizoram Scenario

Higher education in Mizoram started with the establishment of Aizawl Evening College, now Pachhunga University College (PUC) in 1958. At present, there are two universities namely Mizoram University (Central), Tanhril and Institute of Chartered Financial Analysts of India (ICFAI), Aizawl.

Now, altogether there are 28 affiliated colleges in Mizoram of which Higher and Technical Institute of Mizoram, Lunglei is a private college and PUC is a constituent college of Mizoram University. The Institute of Advanced Study in Education (IASE) and Hindi Training College (HTC) are the only two training institutes in the state. There is a constituent college of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry of the Central Agricultural University, Imphal. Besides these, Mizoram has two polytechnic institutes at Lunglei and Aizawl. These two institutes are however, affiliated to all India Council of Technical Education, New Delhi. As per the (Annual Report of Mizoram University, 2014-2015), of the 28 colleges, with the exception of three, all others got recognition under 2 (f) and 12 (b) of the UGC Act 1956 and are eligible to receive financial assistance from the UGC.

Issues and Challenges

The issues and challenges of higher education in Mizoram are not exception to that of the national scenario. They may be taken up as under for discussion:

Expansion and Infrastructure

Like other states of India, Mizoram has also witnessed rapid expansion of higher education, college education in particular during the last few decades. A number of colleges were established in smaller towns of the state and even in many localities of Aizawl, the capital city. Most of these were suffering from a pattern of poor planning and capital deficiency. Though, initially private, the colleges were subsequently taken over by the government resulting into huge financial burden on the state government. Due to lack of financial assistance for development works from the government, most of the colleges in Mizoram had poor infrastructures such as building, library, until some years back. It appears that now those problems have been solved to some extent. When asked, almost all the principals expressed that during the last few years they received financial assistance from the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (MDoNER), UGC or RUSA and as such now they have their own Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) academic buildings, administrative blocks and libraries. However, library issue still persists in more than half of the colleges of the state as 52.38% of the principals rated their college library as satisfactory only. Further, majority of the principals reported they do not subscribe sufficient academic journals.

More than 90% of the teachers use conventional method i.e. lecture in the classroom due to lack of availability of ICT based teaching facilities in the colleges.

Faculty Position and Qualifications

At present, there are 21 government colleges offering general education in Mizoram. A total of 766 teachers are found working in these colleges. Out of 766 teachers, 585 are in Arts and Commerce streams of which 491 are regular, 8 contractual and 120 part-time and the rest 147 are in Science Stream of which 94 regular, 18 contractual and 35 part-time teachers. Of the 491 regular teachers in Arts and Commerce, only 88 (17.92%) of them have research degree (Ph. D.) and the remaining 403 (82.08%) are without the degree. Out of the 94 regular teachers in science, 23 (24.47%) are with Ph. D. degree and the rest are without it. Altogether 181 teachers are found working on contractual and part-time basis. The study further reveals that of the 181 contractual and part-time faculty as many as 88 (48.62%) are without a SLET/NET - Contract: 9, Part-Time: 79 (Principals Govt. Colleges, Mizoram 2017) i.e. they do not fulfill even the minimum qualifications for maintenance of standard in higher education prescribed by the UGC. This is indeed a serious limitation. From the above discussion it can be

inferred that there is lack of adequate and qualified faculty in the colleges of the state.

City and Town/District Disparity

There is a wide gap in terms of regular faculty positions between city and town/district colleges in the state. Almost all the colleges located in Aizawl are manned with adequate faculty, some of the departments even have as many as 8-9 teachers, while except one, all other colleges in different districts and towns of the state do not have required number of regular faculty with the exception of one or two departments in a few colleges. Another very interesting finding is that the English department of a certain district college is presently taken care of by 5 (five) part-time faculty of which only one is with NET but at the same time a city based college has 9 faculty in that department. In light of this, one can deduce that this disparity is an ironic situation, a lopsided set-up. Until and unless this and other similar types of issues are addressed through a proper transfer and posting regulation or policy of government, quality in district and town colleges will remain severely affected.

Gross Enrolment Ratio

Although, there has been massive growth of higher education in the state in the past few decades, the status of enrolment of students is not very impressive. As per the Mizoram University Annual Report of 2014-2015, a total enrolment of 16,194 is recorded. The Annual Report reveals enrolment in six small town colleges too as low as 276, 233,132, 86, 63 and 31 respectively. The present GER of higher education in the state is only 21.3% which is still much below the national average of 24.5% (AISHE, 2015). This really contradicts the high literacy percentage (91.58%) of the state. It appears that the low enrolment of students in majority of the colleges in districts and small towns accounts for low percentage of GER in the state.

Funding

Higher education has not been in the list of priorities of the successive governments in the state. In Mizoram, the percentage of fund allocation for Higher and Technical Education Department is less than the national average. According to an investigation, fund allocation for higher education in the state is less than 2% of GNP/ GDP (Malsawma, 1993). Further, a study of the fund position under this department for the last ten years (1998-99 to 2007-2008) shows no significant increase in the allotment of budget in the state. In Mizoram maximum budgetary allocation goes to salary component and as such only a little amount is left for development works (Sangkima, 2010). A slight increase in budget for higher education has, however, been reflected in the past few years. The total budget for higher education in 2016-2017, 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 was 12808.04, 17705.04 and 17860.59 (Rs. in lakhs) respectively (Budget, Finance Department, Mizoram, 2018). This rise is, however, not adequate to meet the rising needs for higher education in the state. This could probably be the reason that state government is not able to fill up the posts which have been lying vacant for several years by recruiting regular faculty.

Quality

NAAC grade is a clear reflection of quality of education. In Mizoram, out of 21 government colleges offering general education 19 of them have been so far assessed and accredited. Of the 19 colleges, 2nd Cycle assessment of 11 colleges and 3rd cycle assessment of 1 college has also been completed and accredited. In assessment of both the cycles, the overall grades of the colleges fell within the ranges of C, C+, C++ to B, B++ with one exception to A. This indicates that Mizoram still has a long way to go for academic excellence. Hence all the stakeholders have to make concerted efforts towards promoting quality of education in the state. Along with this, the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of each accredited college after taking into consideration of the Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) of the college has to intensify its activities for further improvement of quality of education.

Suggestions

In the line of the findings of the study, the following few suggestions may be placed:

1. More expansion of higher education should be made to reach the un-reached and to include those excluded with well qualified faculty and proper infrastructure to help remove regional, social and economic disparities
2. Filling up of all the vacant posts on regular basis within a stipulated time with qualified and dedicated persons.
3. All the qualified contract and part-time teachers engaged in different higher education institutions across the country should be regularized in a phase wise manner.
4. More funds should be made available for improvement of academic infrastructure.
5. Rural and urban institutions should be equally treated by the government for balanced development of the country or state.
6. More Institute of National Importance such as IITs, IIMs should be established at suitable places.
7. Faculty should be encouraged to go for research work (Ph.D.) for academic growth and for the benefit of the students and society.
8. Mizoram government should have a proper regulation or policy of posting and transfer.
9. Transfer of teachers from the colleges where there are more faculty than the required numbers should be made to colleges where there are less number of regular teachers to bridge the gap of faculty positions between the city and town/district colleges of the state.
10. ICT based teaching facilities should be made available in all the institutions of higher education and the faculty should also get acquainted with the latest trend of teaching method.
11. Libraries must be automated and equipped with computers that support high speed internet connectivity.
12. As per the UGC guidelines faculty should make his or her service available to the college at least for five hours a day.
13. IQAC should intensify its activities in the institution for improvement of quality of education.
14. University and college authority should take proactive steps, rather than waiting to receive, in tapping into the funds, resources, and schemes

offered by the central government and other funding agencies.

15. Community colleges should be established at suitable places where students can have a lot of vocational training, and if they have tremendous academic potentials they can join college for higher studies.

Conclusion

After Independence, there has been tremendous expansion of higher education in the country. Now, Indian higher education is the third largest in the world in terms of students next only to China and USA with 34.4 million enrolments of students. As a result of fast growth, the GER has considerably increased. The expansion has, however not gone swift enough in relation to the growing population of the country as the GER of students of higher education in India is still below the global average. Moreover, it has been uneven and as a result of that there exists huge disparities among the different regions and social groups. The GER of some of the states and disadvantaged social groups is much below the national average. There is need to remove the inequalities by formulating suitable educational policies and programmes. On the other hand, another concern of higher education is its quality. The quality of higher education has been questioned within and without the country over the years. It appears that expanding access poses a challenge to the quality of higher education. Its quality is clearly reflected from the NAAC grading and International Rankings of universities. Higher education institutions in India suffer from shortage of both quality materials and human resources. The same can be said of Mizoram's position. Library facilities in the colleges of Mizoram need to be augmented by way of providing computers, broad band connections, Xerox machines, etc. for students use. Modern teaching infrastructures should be provided to the colleges so that teachers are able to gradually switch from conventional mode to ICT based teaching to make the teaching-learning more effective. All the qualified contractual and part-time teachers should be regularized within a stipulated time. Concerted efforts should be made by the concerned authority to bridge the disparity between the city and town/district colleges by providing regular faculty for balanced development of the state. When these deficiencies are properly taken care of, only then can quality education in higher education in Mizoram be ensured.

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