

Against Neoliberal Assault on Education in India: A Counternarrative of Resistance

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The Indian State has been demonstrating its unwavering commitment to private capital and its neoliberal offensive. The education and health sector reflect its anti-people orientation along with other anti-working class measures such as the doing away with old pension scheme, privatisation of airports, neglect of farmers resulting in over 1.5 lakh suicides across country between 1997 and 2005 (Sainath, 2007), etc. On the education front the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in a full Planning Commission held on 13th September 2007 showed his commitment to privatisation by stating that “we also need to recognise the role currently being played by the private sector and the policy design must factor this in” (The Hindu, 2007). A leading weekly then revealed that the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has been trying to moot private partnership in government schools (Raman, 2008). These developments have been taking place along with number of measures that the government has been adopting (Kumar, 2008) to masquerade its real neoliberal face.

These developments are nothing to be surprised at because they are part of the global campaign of the neoliberal capital. Capital constantly needs to expand itself was acknowledged by Marx when he wrote in Communist Manifesto that “the need of constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (Marx and Engels, 1984, p.34). While the countries of the South have been witnessing it in form of structural adjustment, globalisation and now neoliberalism, the countries of the North had been under constant attack of neoliberal capital. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund and even United Nations facilitated the incursions by private capital in the countries of the South (see Leher, 2008; Mora-Ninci, Carlos O. and Domenech, Eduardo, 2008; Kumar, 2006a). On the other hand, in countries such as UK, the neoliberal campaign began with the Margret Thatcher regime (Regan, 2007), destroying the remnants of welfarism. Though the

large scale process of state withdrawal began across continents during the neoliberal regime from early 1980s, the pre-neoliberal regimes were not socialist regimes but were rather representing the particular epochs of capitalism in those countries, whether UK (Cole, 2008) or India (Kumar, 2006b). It is important, therefore, to understand the education policies in conjunction with the trajectory and stages of development of capital in a country.

Located within a space where capital marches unbridled modifying all possible spheres into profit generating commodified zones, education system in India is under tremendous attack. This attack, which emanates out of the state withdrawal and its substitution by the corporate houses as new rulers, produces much serious ramifications given the dismal and discriminatory condition of education in the country, which is still struggling to make its citizens literate (which means to learn to read and write one's own name). This new phase, located at a particular moment in the trajectory of capital's march, is characterised by the neo-liberal assault.

In this moment of crisis discourse and actions about *alternatives* as well as corrective measures have emerged. Institutions have emerged as *saviours* in this time of crisis – advocating use of legal means to ensure 'equity' in schools. Their initiatives grope for clauses in documents to ensure equality and quality as if those policies are shorn of class character. What kind of alternatives do these groups call for? They are organisations which are driven by the idea that improvements can be brought about within this system. Issue of equality can be resolved without addressing the sources of inequality. Schools, therefore, become autonomous agencies of change and transformation rather than centres which reproduce already existing inequality. Capital is not the issue for them. In other words, world can be changed, i.e., the world of social sector, without challenging capitalism, which is considered as *given, immutable, inevitable* reality. This has been perhaps a general problem with the liberals across the globe. One can, in fact, replicate what McLaren says about US to Indian situation to a great extent. Like American liberals, the Indian counterparts call for capital controls, controls in foreign exchange, better wages, end to informalisation, safeguard the public sector companies etc. However, they are few who would demand the abolition of capital itself (McLaren, 2005, p.23). Their activities have not only redefined the notion of equality but they have also helped establish that there is no

alternative to capitalism and whatever can be achieved in terms of changes within schools, it will have to be within capitalism.

The Tragedy of *Alternatives*: Furthering the Idea that *There is No Alternative*

Alternative is the buzzword. Some believe that there is a need to “do politics without having to fight for power” (Ferreira, 2006, p. xvii), organise forums such as World Social Forum, which they argue will not change the system because that change is to be effected through the society. The forums “will have a lot to contribute to that endeavour, but its position cannot be central – and far less directive - in the political action necessary to build that new world” (Ferreira, 2006, p. 20). There are others, in field of education, who believe that running alternative centres of education will transform *in their own small way* the existing maladies of the education system. Hence, in India we have had experiments such as Hoshangabad Science Teaching programme, Eklavya, Digantar, etc. Where do they stand now? Then there are a number of elite schools which have been trying to develop alternative curriculum and classroom transaction methods. How far does it convey its effectiveness? In a certain sense 'alternative' as a term is seldom being used in terms of a tool that organises people for resolving the educational inequality in schooling system or to end discrimination in access to educational facilities. It is rather an action or a series of actions that isolate education from the system, social relations and capital-labour conflict. The situation has become even more serious with the onslaught of neo-liberalism.

Apart from the schools, the *alternatives* in fights against the system have also emerged. One of the obvious grounds for these alternatives was the legacy of new social movements, which generally pick up one aspect of the reality and see it in isolation from the larger picture. Consequently, emerge organisations which believe fight against inequality can be carried out through legal means, which obviously implies as a thumb rule that the fight has to be carried out within the prescribed legal limits. Some of such fights have been about abolition of child labour, educating the freed child labour and reservation for poor in private schools. (It is not being asked as to what becomes of the 'liberated' children once they are not child labours. Such questions can be answered only if the possibilities to provide these children a life at par with other children of well off families are there.) It is lack of dialectical

understanding that transforms education into an autonomous agency capable of bringing radical social transformation[1]. It is ignored that the “reality is more than appearances and that focussing exclusively on appearances, on the evidence that strikes us immediately and directly can be extremely misleading”. The problem can be understood only if it is seen as a process and with other related elements into account. “...understanding anything in our everyday experience requires that we know something about how it arose and developed and how it fits into the larger context or system of which it is a part” (Ollman, 2003, p. 13).

Even some of the most radical alternatives are not able to overcome these problems. As every other alternative they tend to get fixed in the realm of identities, reifying them and making them the basis of social relations. Hence, instead of class there are multiple subjectivities shown as representing social relations. The dilemma before such initiatives, therefore, is always in terms of attaining ‘immediate’ goals and seeing the ‘immediate’ in disjunct with the ‘long term’ goals of transformation. Hence, ‘immediate’ gets limited to the ‘appearance’ and the locational dynamics of the problem in ‘real’ is lost. It also entails the dangerous process of co-optation for such initiatives, which believe that radical transformations can be brought about through advisory committees constituted by the State, without movements and mobilisations. This, tragically, happens despite the fact that in post-independent India the suggestions for anything which goes against the interests of the state have never been implemented as policy.

The Absence of Class and the Terrain of Struggle

One of the much frequently visited debates in Indian context has been that of non-significance of ‘class’ and significance of ‘caste’ as the most significant category of social division or form of social relation. However, it has also being argued that changes are taking place within the caste structure (Gupta, 2001; Singh, 1996). The discourse on caste as located within the realm of capitalism is almost negligible in India and therefore, it remains the basic structure of society to many. As caste always remains outside the ambit of capitalist mode of production in analysis, it also emerges as a powerful identity, which determines and influences development of theory as well as practice.

Looking at the way caste identity has appeared as a significant factor in national politics, it has become easier to decipher the actual form of changes that have taken place. The emergence of elite among all castes (which could very well be identified with parallel class positions), especially among the so-called Backward Castes and Dalits (literally meaning ‘oppressed’), has shown how capital uses the existing identities to sustain and expand itself. *The direction in which Dalit politics has moved recently has been that of co-optation into the larger system of capitalism. In terms of ‘inclusion’ of hitherto unrepresented social categories into the dominant forms of capital accumulation it can be said that there has been a democratisation of opportunities to access the realm of competition.* In other words, it is expansion of capital through bringing into its life-giving ethics of competition more people. However, it would also mean that the assertion of Dalits and Backward Castes should not be read into too much as emancipatory or liberation from drudgery. It is only becomes a substitution of forms of drudgery.

The educational debates in India have been reading too much into the identities, taking them as the actual social relations. Consequently, there is an overwhelming dominance of multiple subjectivities in their discourse, wherein class is *just one of them*. As identities are temporal and in constant flux and affecting so much the rule of capital, it becomes difficult for the discourses to even consider the correlation between capital and knowledge. One obvious result of such a discourse has been misreading of class and a virtual negation of class conflict in society as a determining category of educational policies and systems. Even if class is talked about, they are not grounded in, as McLaren says, “the labour-capital dialectic, surplus value extraction, or the structure of property ownership, but instead refer to consumption, or job, income, and cultural prestige” (McLaren, 2005, p. 19). Kelsh and Hill (2006) identify such a trend with the predominance of Weberian notion of class. They argue that

in the place of the Marxist theory of class, the revisionist left has installed a Weberian-derived notion of class as a tool of classification useful only to describe strata of people, as they appear at the level of culture and in terms of status derived from various possessions, economic, political or cultural (Kelsh and Hill, 2006)

These tendencies have been fatal for the struggle to develop and create a revolutionary critical pedagogy as the opposition to capital gets reduced to a liberal, social democratic position which wants to live within capitalism with minor modifications to evade temporal possibilities of strike against capital.

One of the most radical initiatives in Indian education discourse at the moment is the demand to establish a Common School System, which will provide equal educational opportunities to all children. However, even this discourse becomes limiting in its approach as it falls in the same trap of liberals and social-democrats as mentioned above. It stops short of actually diagnosing the actual roots of inequality and discrimination. The arguments are taken even up to the point of identifying the Indian State as responsible for the debacle. But beyond this identification, there is a vacuum. The discourses do not reflect on how capital-State-knowledge production matrix create the kind of educational inequality that exists today.

Globalisation and Neoliberalism – What it Means for Masses

Globalisation has been interpreted in different ways. It has been argued that presently globalisation is altering the character of economy world over and therefore it is a departure from the past but, Nayyar argues, “this presumption is not correct. Globalisation is not new” (Nayyar, 2006, p. 71; Sen, 2002). Whether it has been the expansion of international investment flows, “explosive growth in international finance” or “integration of international financial markets” similarities (as well as some differences) can be traced between the current phase as well as the late 19th century/early 20th century (Nayyar, 2006, p. 72-85). “The similarities are in the underlying factors which made globalisation possible then and now. The differences are in the form, the nature and the depth of globalization during these two years” (Nayyar, 2006, p. 78). If it has been seen as the phenomenon that has connected people globally through markets, then it is also seen as a process of homogenization of choices (Kumar and Paul, 2006a). It is argued by many that new opportunities have been created as the market expanded. Strong defences of globalization and capitalism have also emerged in recent past. Norberg argues that capitalism is the only option for development because it gives one liberty to choose and even the poor will be benefitted if the true agenda of global capitalism is pursued. The need is for ‘free capitalism, which exists “when politicians pursue liberal policies and entrepreneurs do

business” (Norberg, 2005, p. 29). In Indian context, the scholars, ‘in defence of global capitalism’ believe that

there has been no attempt to sell reforms to the poor, the beneficiaries. Consequently, reforms have been perceived to be top down, with a pro-urban, pro-rich bias. Myopic governments at the Center and the State have been driven by populist considerations. Major beneficiaries of true reforms will be unorganized labour, small farmers, efficient trade and industry and consumers... (Debroy, 2005, p. 14).

Like other committed soldiers of free market and capitalism, who while claiming to be poetic, humane, pro-poor, rationally try to bring the benefits of market to everybody, Norberg powerfully expresses his fascination for the potential miracles that market can do (Norberg, 2005). The examples of the way BPOs brought jobs and high salaries are often cited in this context.

On the other hand, there are scholars trying to humanise market and rule of capital when they argue for an open society (meaning basically capitalism) where trade and exchange benefits can accrue to poor as well (Sen, 2002). Markets are not the culprits for inequality, he argues, because they have their own potential for development. “Even though the operation of a given market economy can be significantly defective, there is no way of dispensing with the institution of markets in general as a powerful engine of economic progress” (ibid). The question is not just whether the poor, too, gain something from globalization, but whether they get a fair share and a fair opportunity (ibid). However, it is extremely difficult to believe that the market would provide ‘fair share and fair opportunity’ to the poor. We also have evidences which indicate that in an economy where markets have an uncontrolled freedom it becomes difficult to control accumulation of wealth and ensure that the public expenditure on education, health etc., is maintained and improved. The recent developments in the education sector in USA (Farahmandpur, 2006; Gibson, 2006), Britain (Hill, 2006) and in Latin America show how markets have compelled the States to curb expenditure on education.

The pool of scholars who speak in favour of humanising the rule of market/capital has increased in recent past. Another such scholar advocates strongly the cause of market when he says that

... I believe in privatisation (sell off, say, government monopolies to private companies), but only if it helps companies become more efficient and lowers prices for consumers. This is more likely to happen if markets are competitive, which is one of the reasons I support strong competition policies (Stiglitz, 2006, p.xi).

However, globalisation, in the present form, has had to face stiff resistance. And this emanates from the kind of uneven developmental consequences that flow out of it.

Available evidence suggests that the last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a divergence, rather than convergence, in levels of income between countries and between people. Economic inequalities increased during the last quarter of a century as the income gap between rich and poor countries, between rich and poor people within countries, as also between the rich and the poor in the world's population, widened. And income distribution widened (Nayyar, 2006, p. 91).

In the contemporary times, dominated by the neo-liberal capital, it is inconceivable to achieve the kind of institutional arrangements that Sen imagines. For instance, the framing of an education bill that provides leverage to private schools to operate as they wish is just another example of a system where market is allowed to function without controls. In fact, it results in sharpening of educational inequalities. What can be more illuminating in this direction than to watch the Indian Government argue for an enhanced role of private capital in the secondary education sector (Kumar, 2006) given the widely known fact that the economic difficulties do not allow a great number of children to proceed with education even when the education provided by the government, though termed free, involves a great deal of investment (Tilak, 1996).

If insatiable appetite of capital is not the problem how does one explain the widening inequality in India and mass scale informalisation of the labour force. If one looks at the urban sector, the post-liberalisation phase has resulted in large scale casualisation of the work force and there is absolutely no economic security. For instance, when the Delhi Electricity Supply Undertaking was privatized and electricity supply taken over by the Reliance and the Tata groups while many people were thrown out of their jobs, the jobs of collecting meter reading etc., have been handed over to casual workers. Government is disinvesting in the public sector enterprises and the State institutions, handing them over to private companies, for example the garbage collection and cleaning the Ring Road in Delhi has been handed over to private companies. No

wonder we have an ever inflating informal sector, which is hardly governed by any labour laws that would safeguard the worker's interests. A recent study by the UNDP's Human Development Resource Centre estimates that the percentages of informal employment among total workers is a whopping 91.7%, whereas this in the case of males is 90.1% and among females is 95.3% (Sastry, 2004, p. 28). On the other hand, the rural India, which has seen tremendous migration over the years as reflected in its population, is no better placed. While certain regions have seen extensive incidents of suicide, there are other regions where underdevelopment persists though market has made its inroad in a strong way with the State withdrawing to accommodate them[1]. Even small and marginal farmers now look forward to commercializing their agricultural production expecting to improve their economic plight, which has negative impacts on livelihood of people. Markets are everywhere now and they function on the basic logic of profit-making. This has made the majority of Indians vulnerable.

The current phase of globalization is characterized by the neo-liberal capital's assault. It excludes the vast mass of people from the basic facilities that they require for survival. Schooling gets privatized, State fails to make any commitment to educate the children and water, land, forests and other resources are thrown open for sale and purchase in the market. How will the issue of *accessibility* be addressed in a society and economy that is dominated by market? How will the problems of *ownership* and *sharing* be resolved in a society where the collectives and collective symbols are being broken up into fragments? Neo-liberalism has brought forth before us such pertinent questions and unless education is located within this larger context of how the policies of the State change as per the desires and designs of the capital, one will be at loss of explanation to understand why the State which promised and saw Common School System (even in its incomplete form) as an equalizing instrument in education up to 1986 not only begins wholesale delegitimation process of the full-fledged government schools after that but also refuses to pass legislations to make elementary education free and compulsory. It also remains a challenge for those arguing whole-heartedly in defence of capitalism to explain why in a country where unemployment is rising, casualisation of labour force is taking place, education and health infrastructures are in shambles, the emphasis on privatization under various nomenclatures continue to dominate the State policies.

Neo-liberal-globalisation has brought along with itself a package which is against those who lack purchasing power. On the other hand it also concentrates this purchasing power in the hands of a few. In the name of globalization, it is the interests of the capital that occupies the centre stage, whether it is the debate on technology, availability of new facilities [read 'products'], or the economic growth and the climbing of Sensex. Ultimately, who benefit are obviously those who invest and those who can buy. The fact that in the age of globalization solidarity of the marginalized and workers is curtailed not allowing any mobilisation for transformation is never even acknowledged. Their rights are trampled as the owners of capital demand deregulation and liberalization of labour laws and labour market. More than holding spears at each other's heart the anti-globalisation activists need to understand that capital is responsible for the systemic deformations that we experience today and it is ultimately the private capital which dictates the rules of living according to its own motive of profiteering.

The debate between the 'market fundamentalists' and the liberal-welfarist scholars, who want globalization with a human face, has the danger of getting our discourses trapped in the viciousness of a reproductive logic, which fails to transcend the 'given' context of capitalism. It does not try to critically evaluate the *role* and the *rule* of capital, which by its natural logic of evolution takes such a vicious form in the age of neo-liberalism. To put it squarely, capital has always been on the lookout for surplus generation, only the forms change or the intensity differs. Rather, historically one needs to look at the "continuities in capitalist mentality and practices", if one has to understand the dynamics of capitalism and the current phase of so-called globalization.

The current offensive of capitalist logic into all realms of social life undermine many of the legitimation functions of the state which have provided citizen loyalty for the accumulation patterns of the capitalist system. That demand that everything be done through the market (that college tuition not be subsidized by the state, that legal aid should be abolished, public housing discontinued, and health care provided through the market) all represent attacks on programs which have broad support. But the self-confidence with which market ideologists attack any sense of public space, of solidaristic provision of services and shelter from the relentless individualistic values of the market, represents a measure of defeat of democracy. Similarly, devolution of service provision... from the federal to the state to the local levels, and then to the individual procurement based on ability to pay, undermines the limited solidarities which hold society together.

These processes have little to do with globalization, and a great deal to do with the victories of capital over labour, and the resulting damage to the rights of citizenship (Tabb, 1997).

But, then the obvious question is how to curb the offensive of capital? Many would argue that in the current phase of capitalism it has become extremely difficult to counter the power of capital. Tabb argues that the idea of state's powerlessness is "a powerful tool of capital". It is not powerless but rather collaborative. The state wants to protect the money fleeing to the tax havens and to offshore banking centres when it can very well penalize the banks for not providing information on tax capital transfers.

It is the governments of the advanced nations, especially the United State and Britain which have encouraged deregulation. This was a political choice and not a technical necessity". In fact, "it is time for greater clarity in our critique of the basic workings of what are called "free markets" but are in reality class power (Tabb, 1997).

The Neo-liberal Capital on Offensive

As indicated above, the current phase of globalization is represented by the offensive of the neo-liberal capital. It has been argued that it is "impossible" to conceptualise Neoliberalism theoretically because: (a) it "is not a mode of production"; (b) it is "inseparable from imperialism and globalization; and (c) its roots are "long and varied" (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005, p. 02). Works by different scholars show that "neoliberalism is part of a hegemonic project concentrating power and wealth in elite groups around the world, benefiting especially the financial interests within each country, and US capital internationally. Therefore, globalization and imperialism cannot be analysed separately from neoliberalism" (ibid, p. 01). Globalisation is nothing more than the "international face of neoliberalism: a worldwide strategy of accumulation and social discipline that doubles up as an imperialist project, spearheaded by the alliance between the US ruling class and locally dominated capitalist conditions" (ibid, p.02). As its most basic feature it uses quite systematically the State power to "impose (financial) market imperatives, in a domestic process that is replicated internationally by globalization" (ibid, p.03). McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005) put it very succinctly when they define neoliberalism as

a corporate domination of society that supports state enforcement of the unregulated market, engages in the oppression of non-market forces and antimarket policies, gust free public services, eliminates social subsidies, offers limitless concessions to transnational corporations, enthrones a neomercantilist public policy agenda, establishes the market as the patron of educational reform, and permits private interests to control most of social life in the pursuit of profits for the few... It is undeniably one of the most dangerous politics that we face today (p.15-16).

Neoliberalism, indeed, is a political project pursued through the dexterous use of ideological apparatuses and all possible means of coercion and consent. State serves as the most obedient agent of capital in these times. As Clarke (2005) puts it:

...the neoliberal model does not purport so much to describe the world as it is, but the world as it should be. The point for neoliberalism is not to make a model that is more adequate to the real world, but to make the real world more adequate to its model. This is not merely an intellectual fantasy, it is a very real political project. Neoliberalism has conquered the commanding heights of global intellectual, political and economic power, all of which are mobilized to realize the neoliberal project of subjecting the whole world's population to the judgment and morality of capital (p. 58).

One of the arguments put forth by the critics of neoliberalism is that there is a general withdrawal on part of the State in the neoliberal era. However,

taking share of national income spent by government as a simple measure, there is little sign that governments have retreated. In general, in rich industrial countries, the share of government expenditure tends to be around 45 per cent. What is important is what government spends its money on, whether on defence or health, on social services or prisons (MacGregor, 2005, p. 143).

Education in Neoliberalism: State as the Agency of Capital

The current avatar of capital, in fact the current politics of capital, is manifested in Neoliberalism and it becomes important for us to understand what it does to social sector and society at large because it has affected education adversely world over and India is not an exception. However, it is different. The difference lies in the fact that neoliberal assault on education in West began after they implemented a schooling system, which made education accessible to all (which is now being dismantled with the neoliberal onslaught). In India, when the millions of poor children and girls were still being denied access to elementary education the assault landed on them. The phase of making education available to all children never came here, and with

neoliberal capital in offensive, it has become impossible. Hence, the situation becomes worse. In other words, the impact of neoliberalism on education in particular and society as a whole affects masses in worst possible manner in India.

Giroux argues that

neo-liberalism attempts to eliminate an engaged critique about its most basic principles and social consequences by embracing the 'market as the arbiter of social destiny'. Not only does neo-liberalism bankrupt public funds, hollow out public services, limit the vocabulary and imagery available to recognize anti-democratic forms of power, and produce narrow models of individual agency, it also undermines the critical functions of any viable democracy by undercutting the ability of individuals to engage in the continuous translation between public considerations and private interests by collapsing the public into the realm of the private (Giroux, 2004, p. 494).

The experience unleashed has been such that even in the western societies, leave aside the Latin American experience (Saad-Filho, 2005, p. 222-229), serious thought has been given by post-modern scholars like Zygmunt Bauman who argues that it is no longer the colonization of the 'private' by the 'public', rather it is the 'private' which is colonizing the 'public'. "The opposite is the case: it is the private that colonizes the public space, squeezing out and chasing away everything which cannot be fully, without residue, translated into the vocabulary of private interests and pursuits" (Bauman quoted in Giroux, p. 494).

Within this new space, defined by an ever increasing domination of a hegemonising meta-discourse, that uses all possible instruments of state apparatus and the strength of capital to diminish the presence of alternative discourses, education has become one of the most significant sites of contest and struggle. It needs to be noted here that neoliberalism is different from the classic liberalism of the mid-19th century in the sense that the latter "wanted to roll back the state, to let private enterprise make profits relatively unhindered by legislation" whereas the former "demands a strong state to promote its interest" (Hill, 2004). It is this difference that makes the activities of the State resemble the interests of private capital. What can explain the situation much better than the fact that the legislations which the Central Government formulates "promote privatization and 'corporatisation' of school education" and franchises parts of the education infrastructure to corporate or religious bodies (Sadgopal, 2004, p. 38), leave aside the fact that it closes down its own schools, sells

its assets, and deliberately allows the government schools to deteriorate, which then gets replaced by the fee-charging private schools (Kumar, 2005a; Sadgopal, 2006a, p. 23).

Today neo-liberalism is creating a common sense that “education should be divorced from politics and that politics should be removed from the imperatives of democracy” (Giroux, 2004, p.495). And if we try to locate this in Indian context we find that education is seen largely as an isolated governance issue which has no place in the political priorities of the State. Hence, questions such as finance crunch and feasibility/viability argument dominate the discourse on education though we have examples of countries poorer and/or bigger than India having tackled their educational issues in a much better way. The tragedy of this country has been that though great hullabaloo is created at the rising growth rate of Indian economy the State is not able to contribute anything substantial to the education sector. It is still ‘strapped’ of basic resources and remains in a perpetual state of neglect, which, lamentably, is now done as part of State’s formal decisions.

At another level, discourses have been constructed by the judicial system in favour of privatization and the academia now is all out to establish that student’s politics is essentially harmful for the students as they destroy the ‘academic environment’[3]. The student’s politics, which has the history of resisting the proposals of massive fee-hike in many universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University, has been curtailed and rebuffed as ‘violent’, ‘indecent’ etc., even by the academics, leave aside banning elections to students unions in many States. This has been going on together with judiciary favouring the private capital. In August 2005 the Supreme Court of India through its judgment made it clear that (i) “private presence in higher education is inevitable”; (ii) the “private players must be given the right to ‘establish and administer’”; (iii) hints at viability for a high-fee paying system; (iv) ‘appropriation’ of seats by government is taken as nationalization; and (v) “the right to regulate must be exercised in a manner that implies reasonable restriction, that does not question the foundation of private provision of educational services” (Chandrashekhar, 2005, p. 99). Hence, what we come across is a situation where the campaign to promote privatization continues at different levels while dissent and protests are simultaneously discouraged and ruthlessly suppressed. No doubt, the larger conceived

strategy is to delegitimise the voices of protest and resistance through using all means – from mass media to bureaucracy and market.

The neoliberalism, as argued above has resulted in “utter” privatization and

offers absurd solutions to collective problems, such as suggesting that the problem of water pollution can be solved by buying bottled water. Thus, non-commodified public spheres are replaced by commercial spheres as the substance of critical democracy is emptied out and replaced by a democracy of goods available to those with purchasing power and the increasing expansion of the cultural and political power of corporations throughout the world(Giroux, 2004, p.497).

In the sphere of education in neoliberalism “pedagogy both within and outside of schools increasingly becomes a powerful force for creating the ideological and affective regimes central to reproducing neo-liberalism” (ibid, p. 494).

Welfarism, the façade of capitalist state?

One of the most serious concerns among the progressive educationists of the country has been regarding the ‘non-committal’ attitude of state towards educating all children irrespective of their social and economic background. The state also does not differ with them and therefore institutes different schooling systems for different sections of population. And it pleads for mercy because it cannot do much because of resource crunch. While expressing their concerns the educationists fail to understand inseparable linkage between the education policies and interests of the dominant classes. The question of equality in society is linked to the way societies are configured and unless that configuration is altered, it will be difficult to effectively implement the equality principle. The brief interludes, which they generally see as the permanent character of the state, such as the comprehensive schooling phase in UK or the phase of state rhetorical commitment to common school system in India, are in fact nothing but reflections of particular requirements of state at a particular juncture. For instance Cole (2008) writes that “given the political volatility of the period after Second World War, the creation of the British welfare state may be seen as a compromise between capital and labour” (p.01).

Similar analysis can be undertaken in the case of India. The post-independence India and the emphasis on so-called mixed economy (see Kumar, 2006c) was a necessity of

the Indian ruling class. The orientation of the education policies, at least in rhetoric, was typical of a welfare regime which had a lot of promises for people but nothing in actuality. Those promises remained unfulfilled is evident from the fact that even now, after half a century of post-colonial experiences the actual realities such as standard of living, landlessness, unemployment and inequitable access to education and health is the order of the day. In the case of UK while there was a brief interlude of welfarism, cut short by the neoliberal onslaught, in the Indian case even that brief interlude had been absent. In other words, *the need to educate all children in a schooling system that is non-discriminatory and offers equal educational opportunities of comparable quality never emerged as a political priority in India, even when the Constitution was being framed (see Dhagamwar, 2006). And there is a need to understand and acknowledge it in order to understand the political economy of education. In other words, it is an issue which needs to be grounded in the actual material conditions and must not be seen as divorced from class interest, politics-class relationship or ignore the trajectory/movement of capital, its corresponding interests over different periods of time and the changes in education policy. And the consequences are there when one sees the massive increase in budget heads of sectors such as military and defence and decline in the budget of education.*

The state withdrawal from certain sectors for the private capital to flourish also raises the important question of why has there been an absence of such a perspective in Indian education studies. The changes occurring in the sphere of education have been seen largely in terms of changes in policies and policies are seen as isolated from the interests of the ruling class and its politics of domination and hegemony. It is about the vantage point from which one looks at the developments. Will it be the vantage point of the working class or the vantage of the ruling class interests and directed discourses? The 'progressivists' must decide on their vantage point which must also determine their methodological orientations. The neoliberal onslaught on education in India has not only commodified education but has created a host of institutions to produce knowledge congenial for the new economy; it is promoting this economy through fostering an undemocratic ethos which has demeaned institutions such as Parliament, Central Advisory Board on Education etc.; and has not successfully created discourses in its own favour but has also manipulated the *alternative* discourses on education within a framework suited to its own ends (see Kumar, 2008).

In such a situation the issues of resistances and, therefore, understandings become of paramount importance.

The decline in expenditure has not been because the government suddenly became poor or because the requirements of schooling outstrip its financial capabilities (as it often tries to convey). This decline has been in consonance with the demands of the private capital as well as the larger conglomeration of the ruling elite. It is part of a well thought out strategy reflected in, for instance, the principle of public-private partnership which has come to dominate the development strategy of the State (Kumar, 2006a). The funding, for example, by international funding agencies has increased over years (see Kumar 2008). And so has been the integration of India in the global discourse of state withdrawal and wholesale privatisation. The direct repercussion of such policies can be seen in the status of education in India, wherein the posts of teachers are lying vacant and the teaching-learning infrastructure is insufficient (see Kumar 2008).

The most recent survey by Government of India shows that there is a direct correlation between the capacity to spend and attendance of children in schools. Though there is a need to be cautious about how far can be the MPCE a determinant of one's economic condition but it does provide us with a hint about the economic status of the population. And the statistics shows that the attendance percentage in schools improves as the monthly per capita consumption expenditure increases (see Table 1).

The need is to democratise the accessibility to education in real terms. Despite the rhetoric of people's participation in education management, the system remains hierarchised. It would remain so also because knowledge production and education process are not contextualised in the processes of production and social relations emerging out of them. Quite evidently, it cannot even be expected out of a capitalist system. Once education gets commodified the interest of capital remains in only maximising its surplus through it. While schools become centres of reproducing existing social relations and producing uncritical mechanical beings who serve the system, the democratisation of access remains a non-agendum for capital till it does not directly affect its aim of profit maximisation.

Table 1 Current attendance rates in educational institutions by age group and household monthly per capita consumer expenditure class

MPCE* class (Rs.)	5- 14 (Urban)			5- 14 (Rural)		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
less than 335	68	68.5	68.3	65.7	57.5	61.7
335 – 395	71.1	73.7	72.4	71.6	67.1	69.3
395 - 485	80.3	79.4	79.9	76.3	68.3	72.4
485 - 580	89.3	87	88.2	77.1	69.3	73.4
580 - 675	90.3	88	89.2	81.6	75.2	78.5
675 - 790	90.6	90	90.3	83.3	77.1	80.4
790 - 930	94.5	94.6	94.6	86	78.3	82.4
930 - 1100	97.3	96.2	96.8	87.9	81.8	85.1
1100 – 1380	98.3	97.9	98.1	91.1	86.5	89
1380 – 1880	98.7	99.1	98.9	93.9	89.4	91.9
1880 – 2540	98.6	98.4	98.5	94.9	93.8	94.4
2540 & above	97.7	98.3	98	96.4	95.2	95.9
all classes	89	87.9	88.5	83.5	76.7	80.3

*Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure

Source: GOI (2006b), p. A-27.

One of the obvious developments due to the situation described above has been the burgeoning of private schools in urban as well as rural areas. Some studies have pointed out that “access to school in urban areas is largely through private schools” and

even in rural areas, poorly monitored government schools have created a good field for the new private schools. However, cost remains an excluding factor for private schooling. The very poor are dependent on government schools and in fact can generally access only the government primary schools seen to be the worst in the sector (De, Noronha and Samson, 2002, p. 5235).

What one comes across then is that students access private schools even though they are not only poor in infrastructure (poorer than the government schools in most of the cases) but even the teaching-learning is worse. In states such as Bihar one finds

nearly every village having some sort of private school or ‘tuition centres’ where the students, who can afford to pay the fees (which is not very high compared to the urban private schools but is definitely higher than the local government schools), flock in great numbers.

Many analysts and scholars have treated these developments as indicator of a general ‘hunger for education’ among people. Everybody wants to send their children to school because education is seen primarily as a source of upward mobility (Kumar, 2006c) and if it fails to deliver that due to various reasons, such as bad quality of education or the larger logic of the capitalist economic system that flourishes on minimizing its costs of production, by employing less people and at lower costs to maximize profiteering, a sense of disenchantment also seeps in the general psyche, which get reflected in the relapse in illiteracy among other things.

Producing Machines, Not Critical Beings: The Neoliberal Education

Recent developments in education sector have seen an emphasis on skill development, as a means of enhancing human capital. This emphasis has a major bearing on the conceptualisation of education, its aims and goals. Direction to the discourse tends to show that (1) education must also help in finding livelihood; (2) critical consciousness is secondary to information generation; and (3) knowledge can be seen as two disjunct possibilities of ‘practical’ and ‘theoretical’ knowledge. Literature generated with these orientations in education has been produced by UN agencies, World Bank and Indian Government alike. For instance, one of them argues that

most human capital is built up through education or training that increases a person’s economic productivity—that is, enables him or her to earn a higher income... Governments spend public funds on education because they believe that a better-educated population will contribute to faster development. Employers pay for employee training because they expect to cover their costs and gain additional profits from increased productivity. And individuals are often prepared to spend time and money to get education and training, since in most countries people with better education and skills earn more. Educated and skilled people are usually able to deliver more output or output that is more valuable in the marketplace, and their employers tend to recognize that fact with higher wages (Soubotina and Sheram, 2000, p. 35).

Education, thus, is losing its critical edge as it becomes nothing more than a mechanistic process as well as an instrument of producing 'professional' beings geared to sell their labour as and when required. However, the idea of education as a tool to enhance productivity has its own inner contradictions such as what if the economy is not able to absorb the new productive workforce that is generated as shown by the increasing unemployment in the country?

The only apprehension emerging out of this tendency in education is that it would reproduce the existing social relations (which Bourdieu analysed so appropriately, see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) much more easily[4]. However, movements against the system emerge despite the efforts to mechanise and objectify the education process, when the crisis of capitalism becomes acute enough and uncontrollable.

Educational Deprivation?: It is the Logic of Capital

At such a juncture, it becomes crucial to understand and conceptualise the reality which may appear to be located at two different levels but are in fact united as a part of the larger system. For our conceptual clarity, let us look at these two different levels taken in abstraction: (1) the discrimination within society reflected in the school and education system at large bears semblance of the unequal social relations such as in the case of girl child (Chanana, 2006); (2) the policies of the State, which, during the era of welfare State were supposed to rectify many of such maladies, have rather been perpetuating the inequality in education in the age of globalization dictated by the neo-liberal capital. In fact, discrimination is being institutionalized (Kumar and Paul, 2006, p .253-289). Therefore, what one comes across is a system where the poor, SCs, STs and girl child are deprived of education because they are the most marginalized in the larger society outside the school as well. Similarly, at the macro-level the policies of the State have very clearly spelt out that for the out of school children 'other' methods of education will be followed. Hence, comes the non-formal methods and the recent government programme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Why can't the formal schooling system that already exists be strengthened so that every child gets education of comparable quality?

These two levels also unite because they are components of the same reality. If one brings down the abstracted conceptual categories to reality it becomes clear that the

Indian State has always lacked interest in implementing the paradigm of equal educational opportunities of *comparable quality* for every child. Though scholars have tried to explain this failure as ‘lack of political will’, ‘problem of financial crunch’, ‘low growth rate’ etc., what one finds is that many nations in the world, despite their low growth rate, effected laws of compulsory and free education for all. Secondly, ‘lack of political will’ is not something that is constituted in isolation but there are interests that constitute a ‘strong’ or a ‘weak’ will. Why does it happen that the Central Government takes half a century to enact education as a Fundamental Right and then decides not to pass a central legislation in Parliament for free and compulsory education (Goswami, 2006), but takes decisions about investments worth crores of rupees in construction of infrastructure for Asian Games or Commonwealth Games at a wink of an eye[5]. Before liberalization the logic of resource crunch many a times emanated from the fact that the growth rate of Indian economy was too low but now when the growth rate is being touted to be above eight percent even then the same situation persists.

Education in Historical Location of Capital

The situation at the ground level was not extraordinarily positive prior to the neoliberal offensive. The differences prior to the liberalization of the economy and after the introduction of the process can be identified as follows:

1. there is a clear change in the policy discourse towards neoliberalism[6]; and
2. there is a clear translation of this shift in practice through reducing the role of State and institutionalising inequity in education.

Prior to the onset of economic liberalization the committees appointed by the government made certain ‘pro-people’ recommendations and though they became part of NPE (National Policy on Education) they were never implemented. There is a shift now as we find many of the committee’s recommendations being implemented and in fact, they are dug out from the past as justifications for the present policies (as is the NPE-1986 or the Saikia Committee often cited as justifications for non-formal methods, state withdrawal to formulate central legislation on Right to Education or implementing ‘education cess’ as part of taxation, respectively). The earlier committees which have been celebrated as the alternative such as the Kothari

Commission (Education Commission 1964-66) have been seen and analysed uncritically by the educationists. They forget to correlate the need and character of capital at a particular conjuncture and the policies put forth by its agent, i.e., the state. One needs to understand the complex trajectory of capital and the way state's understanding and policy on education changes (see Kumar 2006b for details).

Coming to frequent references to past committees and policies, as principles taken out of a particular concrete historical situation and placed in another completely different historical conjuncture, we need to pay some attention to the fact that the education policies and discourses are products of their own historical milieu. Scholars argue about the positive aspects of the Kothari Commission and the NPE-1986 and they demand that many of their recommendations be implemented but what skips their attention is a very basic principle – *the education system serves the need of the ruling elite in every society. It is never an anti-systemic force. It becomes so because of the larger political economic reasons. The transplantation of the welfare state principles in a neoliberal state is an impossibility but, then, that does not mean that we stop fighting for the spaces that develop criticality. However, unless a larger political perspective is put forth it will be difficult to have any social movement that can force the State, at this particular historical conjuncture to expand itself when the private capital wants the complete, limitless freedom to expand.*

While the National Policy on Education 1986, considered to be the last of the National Policies that had retained the flavour of equality through its emphasis on CSS (Common School System), also *acknowledged that the elementary school education of comparable quality will not become available to all children of India in the 6-14 age group (Sadgopal, 2006b) and recommended strongly the non-formal education techniques. These two sides of the same document are not essentially contradictions but we need to locate it in a context when the Indian economy was in transition. And the twin principles in the policy represented that transition. The new age of a modern economic system based on professionalism, and a strengthening voice against what used to be called the license raj was strengthening as the new generation of political rulers in form of Rajiv Gandhi had occupied the throne at Delhi. Even if he cannot be taken as a success story (though the picture might have been different had he not been assassinated) he was the political leader who had set the tone for expansion of the*

capital as we see today. He introduced reforms in certain sectors, such as electronics and telecommunications, automobiles etc., and eased tax rates. From this point of view his 1985/86 budget was a landmark. Thereafter, he exempted a number of industries from licensing,

large business houses regulated by the MRTP (Monopoly and Restrictive Trade Practices) and FERA (Foreign Exchange Regulation Act) legislations were encouraged to participate in a number of high technology industries; limits on foreign exchange for import of raw materials were raised, and tax concessions for the corporate and urban upper-middle classes were introduced (Frankel, 2005, p. 586).

It needs to be understood that what appears as 'contradiction' is not necessarily a 'conflict' but it also, in many cases, shows the 'transition'. Hence, what becomes important for the analysis of the education policy is the relevance of the larger political economy which makes us understand why the Kothari Commission, Parliamentary Committee of 1967, NPE-1986, Ramamurti Committee, or the post-liberalisation State policies have their own particular characteristics. They are, after all, not so much an exercise of individual craftsmanship but rather documents emerging out of respective historical needs.

Pauperisation, Neoliberalism and Education

The much touted above eight per cent growth of Indian economy has not resulted in any major benefits accruing to the majority. The landless agricultural labourers, the small and marginal farmers and the daily wage workers as well as the section striving to meet their basic needs through employment in this age of globalised world order, none of them have gained from the new economy that has come into existence. The Government of India estimates that

the unemployment rate went up between 1993-94 to 2004. On the basis of current daily status (unemployed on an average in the reference week), during the reference period, unemployment rate for males increased from 5.6% to 9.0 % in rural areas, and from 6.7% to 8.1% in urban areas. Similarly, unemployment rate for females increased from 5.6% in 1993-94 to 9.3% in 2004, in rural areas and from 10.5% to 11.7% in urban areas (GOI, 2006a, 208).

On the other hand there has been tremendous commercialisation of the agriculture sector. The stress on growing cash crops led the farmers to opt for loans from a

variety of moneylenders – from banks to the pesticide shopkeepers. However, it has had tragic consequences as the agricultural productivity did not match the amount invested in agriculture and the farmers were compelled to commit suicide. The investments in agriculture have substantially gone up while the rate of return has come down. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh, where thousands of farmers committed suicide, the share of agriculture in the gross state domestic product has come down from 53% in 1960-61 to about 13% in 2002-03 but the workforce in agriculture declined only marginally. Thus, the population has been sharing the declining income from agriculture. On the other hand, the area under cash crop cultivation has grown but the yield has gone down. “With a high cost of cultivation, diminishing productivity and low returns, it becomes difficult for farmers to withstand crop failures” (Rao & Suri, 2006, p. 1547). The result has been suicides on mass scale in states of Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Maharashtra and Karnataka as well. The agricultural models of post-Green Revolution have crumbled under the heavy weight of the neo-liberal attack (see Kumar, 2006b).

The market is there, everywhere, meeting one in every nook and corner. Now one need not go to the designated geographical location of exchange to experience it, it has penetrated deep inside every household. Education, considered to be State’s responsibility, is being thrown open to market. But can the majority of Indians buy it? The answer is obviously a big No! given the condition that: farmers have been committing suicide (Sainath, 2005); workers are beaten mercilessly when they protest against their employers (Kumar, 2005b); the Government of India’s Economic Survey shows that the unemployment is rising (GOI, 2006a); there are still a great number of people trapped in the viciousness of poverty (see Kumar 2008 for details); the Mushars in Bihar remain stagnantly trapped in the viciousness of their educational deprivation (Kumar, 2006c); there is ever serious problem of hunger staring the poor people (Patnaik, 2007); and 21.8% of the Indians live below poverty line, as per the Planning Commission estimates[7] in March 2007 (based on 2004-05 survey). With this situation, it is not at all surprising that a large section of people do not attend schools due to direct economic reasons. In this context when educational status of masses is being determined by their economic status the situation would alter only with a new framework where surplus maximising interest of capital is not the key determinant of educational accessibility.

Resisting the Neoliberal Assault

As of now the neoliberal assault is not simple and straightforward as a street battle. It is conniving, dexterous and powerful. It creates institutions for its own justifications, such as the burgeoning centres of research in contemporary India at the moment (see Kumar, 2007) and the growing power of the non-governmental organisations as alternatives to class based movements. The power of capital is bolstered by a range of forces which will have to be countered and resisted at different points in the battle and in different ways. Among those, who in one or another way strengthen the campaign of neoliberal capital, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the institutions managed directly by the state, the *non-Marxists* and the *anti-Marxists* are the significant ones. While the NGOs serve the indirect institutions of the state and the global capital working among people on the guidelines provided by them (through funded projects of *intervention*), it is also important to differentiate between the non- and anti- Marxists. There is a big category of people who call themselves progressive, democratic and secular (whom I call *non-Marxists*) and believe that the situation can be improved without organised working class struggles and many a times consider the government committees to be useful institutions to effect changes. However, they become extremely uncomfortable with the issue of class. Many of these people are also for transformation through non-class institutions such as NGOS. On the other hand, there are people and institutions who are outright *anti-Marxists* and believe that it has outlived its utility and options need to be located within capitalism to make it more humane (and here they may be sounding similar to the *non-Marxist* category, the difference being they are outright and have no qualms about maintaining the democratic, secular, progressive façade). Lastly, the state does not require any mention. It functions through its own programme of consensus and coercion to ensure that the interests of private capital remain paramount.

In the current phase of capitalist development even those who stand in opposition to market and privatization of education are not able to locate these aspects of such a system. 'Capital' as the determinant of inequity in education is, therefore, missed out. To understand the State's refusal to legislate a Central law, or implement Common School System must be seen in context of a State driven by an ever powerful and dehumanising capital. Hence, any effort to change the system would entail: (1)

understanding the transforming character of education policies in context of the changing forms, needs and requirements of the capital; and (2) developing an understanding that such a system can be reformed only if there is a strong resistance based on this understanding. The possibilities of ‘entering the system’ to bring about change are not only bleak but inconceivable at the current juncture. It is also impossible because firstly, the State has full control over its apparatuses and becoming a part of it to radically transform it will be unacceptable to it; secondly, the ‘pressure’ on State can be exerted only through a powerful popular mobilisation on the issues; thirdly, the mobilisation as well as the work by the representatives working within State structure need to have a clear understanding about the character of the State and the origins of a dehumanising and inegalitarian education system.

Within this larger framework, as a counter resistance to the tendencies of objectification of knowledge and shrinking critical spaces of engagement, it is important to reclaim even the social and cultural politics as the site of “dialogue, critique, and public engagement” so that in “a democratically configured space of the social... the political is actually taken up and lived out through a variety of intimate relations and social formations”. Culture becomes even more important as a site of new pedagogical possibilities to create new spaces of resistance under neo-liberalism, which destroys the ethos of dialogicity and therefore criticality by dissolving the “public issues into utterly privatized and individualistic concerns” (Giroux, 2004, p.499). However, while culture becomes an important site of resistance it needs to be carefully treaded due to the fear of relapsing into the graveyard of *postmodern fantasmas*. This can be done if we locate different sites of struggle as components of a singular system, where the economic, social, political and cultural coalesce into one singular mode of production.

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Notes

[1] See for instance myopia inbuilt in the Report of NCERT Focus Group on Systemic Reforms for Curriculum Change. It argues "to position the school as an institution that brings about social transformation and becomes a place for the realisation and

protection of children's rights where equity and justice as enshrined in the Constitution are realised” (NCERT, 2005, p.18).

[2] Bihar which is among the most backward states of India, in terms of poverty, insufficient (read 'no') industrialization, virtually absent health and other infrastructure, etc., has also begun privatization. Recently, an alliance of the right wing came to power and began wholesale privatization of health sector among others.

[3] Rajasthan High Court in 2005 directed the State government to ban elections to unions of students, teachers and employees in educational institutions. It also expressed its concern over the declining academic standards because of campus politics (The Telegraph, May 06, 2005).

[4] This does not imply that there is no alternative. We have seen in history that at different points of time, the discontentment does culminate in movements that transform the character of the State or at least compel the State to acknowledge the deficiencies of the capitalist system. What can be more immediate as example than the recent movements in France by students, or other popular movements in Latin America and many other places.

[5] By some estimates the budget of the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games had soared and the projection touched Rs.5,165 crores (\$11.53 billion) as per a report of the Standing Committee on Human Resource Development has said (Indiaenews, 2006).

[6] Documents of the central government such as the Tenth Five Year Plan, the Task Force Report titled India as Knowledge Superpower – Strategy for Transformation, the National Human Development Report, 2001, the Report of the Committee on India Vision 2020 etc., are some examples that allows us to locate this shift in the discourse.

[7] The estimation of poverty undertaken by the Government of India has come under serious criticism from economists (see Patnaik, 2007, p.137-147), The Government has been trying to show reduction in poverty by reducing the amount needed to spend

for basic necessities. Firstly, the amount shown is highly insufficient, for instance as all India average it says that Rs. 356 per month is sufficient to survive. Can those who prepare the estimates live on that amount?

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