

The Charge of Neoliberal Brigade and Higher Education in India¹

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Abstract

This paper looks at the state of higher education in India – in terms of policies and the trajectory that it has taken in the aftermath of neoliberalisation of the economy. Through studying the discourses that construct the edifice of the educational complex in the country, it unravels the dynamics of how economy, politics and education interact. Lastly, it explores the possibilities of countering the neoliberal offensive of capital and create a more egalitarian higher education system.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; higher education in India; capital, labour and education.

It needs no reiteration that educational institutions today have become sites of neoliberal planning and execution of its business game plan. Beginning the argument by assuming this as the given situation, it is important to assess how higher education in one of the ‘booming’ economies (i.e. India) is doing. Privatisation has been on anvil for quite sometime now and it is justified by the argument that it improves the quality of education and enhances the efficiency of teachers as well as students. This phenomenon is visible in the way the spread of private higher educational institutions² has been happening and the way the state managed institutions have been transforming themselves. The private universities are more overtly selling the so-called skills whereas the state run institutions have privatised their non-teaching spheres and also begun cutting down the costs involved in hiring the faculty through contractualisation/ casualisation of the teaching labour force. The Universities have become a marketplace in a neoliberal world.

Beyond simply generating more income, higher education has become a target for marketization agendas since the 1980s. Universities are urged to adopt commercial models of knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance, accounting, and management organisation... These measures threaten what many people value in universities (e.g., the scope for critical analysis and broad social access)... (Levidow, 2007, p. 238).

The Minister of Human Resource Development, Kapil Sibal, who took over after the General Elections of 2009, which represents a new phase in advance of neoliberal capital through its aggression and consensus (Kumar, 2010a), speaks out what is best in the interest of capital. He has been also very active in charting out the map of India's educational landscape in such a way that would not only establish firm control of capital over the syllabi and academic transactions of universities but has also initiated measures to change laws, draw linkages between industry and university as well as schools and came down heavily on issues of unionisation of teachers, among other things. He has been the most swift and ingenious representative of neoliberal capital and his thoughts reflect what neoliberalism desires. He wants the education system to be a training ground for capital's requirement. So he says that:

The education-employment gap is our biggest challenge at the moment. And unless we deal with it expeditiously, we are going to have whole generations of students who will not be empowered to participate in the economic activities and be a part of the economic prosperity of India. So that's why I have committed that by the end of this academic year, we will have a National Vocational Education Framework in place, where we will actually introduce through a framework vocational education at the high-school level (after class VIII³), which will then seamlessly integrate into vocational training in the polytechnics. This, in the future, should be embedded in engineering institutions. So, that's the framework we are preparing and we are working very hard on that" (Sibal, 2010).

The need for vocationalisation of the education system emerges because "the nature of technology has changed and so has the nature of learning, but our educational institutions haven't kept pace with that" (Sibal, 2010). He feels that "one of our biggest challenges is to make that dissemination of knowledge at the university level relevant to the employer" (Sibal, 2010). The same Minister had set up a committee to suggest how the higher education could be rejuvenated (GOI, 2009). And the committee endorsed what the state wanted – to provide for mechanisms, which would control the education system in a much better way, and to take care of the leakages that happen by way of generating critical ideas and understandings.

Capital is in firm control of the overall education system and higher education in particular. It has on its side all the voices who have been talking about capitalism with a human face. Hence, capital has a huge contingent to its side – from those who have a perspective quite similar to the postmodernists when they celebrate, mindlessly, diversity as a synonym of democracy, to those who support the moves of capital under

slogan of ‘something is better than nothing’. This slogan emerges in a situation of scarcity and accumulated failure to attain basics of human development such as egalitarian educational opportunities. The state (through its ‘enlightened’ bureaucracy; NGOs, campaigns of ‘progressive’ liberals, and international development agencies) have been arguing that instead of contesting the entry of private capital and withdrawal of state one should make use of whatever is being done in education sector, irrespective who does it and without asking why it is done. The logic is that in a situation when crisis of educational attainment is so huge, it is better to accept any programme/funding/initiative that comes. This huge contingent of intellectuals and activists do not seek ways to transcend the rule of capital. Poverty and inequality appear as issues that could be resolved under the existing regime. While they become the dominant discourse with enactment of laws and policies that seek to make capitalism more humane and livable, they have also weakened the voices of resistance by this act of arguing in favour of how the rule of capital can become better. In this situation it seems like difficult times for people favouring critical engagement with the issues that confront them and society at large. Building the working class struggle through constant redefinitions has become essential to address the issues within the education system.

The situation appears dismal as far as question of democratisation of everyday life within higher education is concerned. The student union elections are banned in many universities such as Jamia Millia Islamia and Patna University. The state has devised a way to depoliticise students union elections and make it into a mere instrumental exercise of voting, shorn of politics, through a Supreme Court judgement that upheld the Lyngdoh Committee Report (written by a retired bureaucrat) on how to conduct student union elections. Through this committee, the intervention of the state through the administrative machinery of the university has increased and in universities such as Jawaharlal University, which has been upheld as an unique exercise in student unionism, new forms of censorship and administrative interferences have emerged. These developments run counter to the idea of a democratic and just practice of unionism. For instance one of the clauses of the new rules defines an age bar for students to contest university elections. This clause is effectively based on a fallacious premise that every Indian gets an equal opportunity to come to higher education and they do so without any economic, social or cultural constraints. The truth is that the

social and economic context of students (read *caste and class*) does not allow them to uniformly access the formal education system at the same age. Hence, the delay in entering the university system on account of social and economic marginalisation is completely neglected by this regulation. The University of Delhi tried another step in the factoryisation of university system by proposing to have a biometric attendance system for teachers, 'No work no Pay' orders are passed in Delhi University when faculty members go on strike. Universities in the name of streamlining impose mechanical, standardised systems of entrance examinations. There is a very long list of how the control over methods and of teaching and academic engagement and the disciplining of students continue on an everyday basis. Neoliberalism presents itself in diverse ways in these locations, through *consensus* as well as *coercion*. Resistances have paved the way for negotiations, which in the longer run have added to the weakening of labour struggles against the onslaught of capital.

The Idea of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has been studied extensively at global level. However, there have been relatively few studies in the Indian context (Sadgopal, 2010; Kumar, 2010a, 2010b) drawing linkages between neoliberalism and education. This has been a reflection of how social sciences in the country have been geared towards understanding this problem. And it has also to do with the political orientation of the disciplines. The literature on neoliberalism analyses it at a general level (Harvey, 2007) as well as in particular contexts of its impact on education (Ross and Gibson, 2007; Hill and Kumar, 2009; Hill and Roskam, 2009; Kumar, 2009). Neoliberalism is seen as a stage in the development of capital, which travelled through different phases to take the current avatar in order to expand and sustain itself.

At a much more general level it is seen as a "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007, p.2). This, neoliberals argue, can be done by minimising the role of state as an agent of people and, instead, making it a facilitator for expansion of the rule of capital. In this sense, capital, through the state, uses all its resources and structures at its disposal to achieve its expansionary project, if need be, to secure and advance the 'proper' functioning of

markets.

In order to achieve its goal “neo-Liberalism gives priority to capital as money rather than capital as production. In a period of rapid restructuring this has the advantage of enabling policies to be adopted which clear the decks, removing subsidies and protection, and freeing up capital from fixed positions. It allows capital to regain mobility, dissolving the spatial and institutional rigidities in which it had become encased” (Gamble, 2001, pp.131-32).

To ensure this mobility of capital it is not only required that the market and state be freed from the many areas into which the Keynesian state had engaged, it but also to create new areas of engagement. These two processes could not be implemented successfully and smoothly without generating a consensus in its favour. Harvey argues that “Neoliberalism has... become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2007, p.3). The capitalist class in power has today an unprecedented control over media and other instruments of consensus creation, which generate an opinion that there is no alternative possible to capitalism.

Neoliberalism across the world has been an effort to mitigate the crisis confronted in the accumulation of capital. It was an effort to alter the balance of class forces (O’Connor, 2010). This

recasting of class relations reconfigured the conditions of profitability in three main ways. The first area was *economic*. Mass unemployment and industrial downsizing undermined the economic power of organized labor... The second area of reordering in class relations was *political*. Capital flow liberalization resulted in freer and greater movements in finance, trade, and investment... The final area of reordering was *ideological*. The new imperialism reestablished American strategic and ideological hegemony (O’Connor, 2010, pp.699-700).

If one looks at the Indian context, the distinction between the organized and unorganized labour seem to be waning as the majority of the workforce now falls under the “unorganized” sector. The working condition here has been extremely poor and the state seems to retain unorganized sector as the largest in employer. The statistics related to 2004-05 points out that (GOI, 2007, p.vi)

- In both the rural and urban areas, nearly 59 per cent of the regular wage/salaried

employees had no written job contract.

- About 33 per cent of the regular wage /salaried employees were temporary employees.
- Nearly 46 per cent of regular wage/ salaried employees were not eligible for paid leave and in the case of casual labourers, nearly 96 per cent were not eligible for paid leave.
- Nearly 55 per cent of regular wage/salaried employees and 96 per cent of casual labourers were not eligible for social security benefit.
- About 63 per cent of the employees had neither a written job contract nor were eligible for the paid leave. The proportions were 71 per cent and 55 per cent for the rural and urban areas, respectively.
- For 88 per cent of regular wage /salaried employees, regular monthly salary formed the basis of payment. In the case of casual labourers, only 8 per cent got regular monthly salary and for them daily payment was the most prevalent method of payment - nearly 51 per cent.

On the other hand, efforts have been made, and quite successfully as well, to ensure a free flow of capital, investment and trade. Anwar Shaikh points out the two axioms of neoliberalism – the globalization of markets and opening up different sectors to them and then creating necessary market-friendly social structures to facilitate the expansion of domestic as well as foreign capital (2005, pp.41-42). He argues that despite opposition “this conception still has enormous authority. It continues to be a major influence in the social sciences, in popular understanding, and most of all, in policy circles. As a practical matter, the powerful nations and institutions supporting this agenda have succeeded in greatly extending the rule of markets” (Shaikh, 2005, p.42).

There have been oppositional forces and arguments to the agenda of neoliberalism. However, the various oppositions have argued along the lines that the so-called developing world is not ready for such kind of policies being forced upon them. Their underlying argument, then, becomes that the necessary competitive conditions have to be created which would come through trade protectionism and state intervention. And, the argument continues, this stage cannot be bypassed because even the rich countries

who advocate free trade went through this stage at some point of time. Defenders of neoliberal theory argue that history never had ‘truly competitive conditions’ and therefore, the international agencies should be used to spread competition across the globe (Shaikh (2005) cites Bhagwati’s (2002) argument in this context). Hence, neoliberalism would say that ‘Let there be competition and let the restrictions on market be eliminated so that free trade could flourish to tackle poverty and underdevelopment’. The other opposition to neoliberalism argues that the market cannot work in a textbook manner because ‘power rules the modern world: monopoly power, class power, state power and the power of the centre over the periphery’ (Shaikh (2005) cites McCartney’s (2004) argument in this case). Under such circumstances using a competitive model will be like forcibly imposing it on certain societies, which would lead to considerable damage. Shaikh argues that

What is striking about this debate is that both sides accept a fundamental premise of neoliberalism. Namely, that given sufficiently competitive conditions, free trade *would* work as promised... It is not the absence of competition that produces development alongside underdevelopment, wealth alongside poverty, employment alongside unemployment. *It is competition itself* (2005, pp.42-43).

Free trade becomes the prescription to foster economic development. However, this doctrine falters due to its "faulty notion that international competition levels the mighty and raises up the weak. Real competition operates quite differently: it rewards the strong and punishes the weak. From this perspective, the neoliberal push for unfettered free trade can be viewed as a strategy that is most beneficial to the advanced firms of the rich countries” (ibid, p.48). The same argument can be seen working within the economy as well, wherein it is suggested that opening up of the economy would pave way for newer opportunities and therefore lead to faster economic development. What this maxim fails to comprehend is that the “opening up” would only give opportunities to those who have the means to make use of those opportunities. The majority does not have those means. This is exacerbated, amplified, because neoliberalism, while working on this premise, also destroys whatever social and economic security people have by drawing them into the ambit of the market. It thereby creates a huge gap of income and well-being within a society.

India remains a good example of that where it has been argued that around 80% of the population lives on Rs.20 (less than half a dollar or below) per day. The deregulation

in the petroleum sector, rising food prices during the last five years, the displacement of millions from their homes in the name of development combined with slow growth of employment has created a stark inequality in society. The rate of growth of employment per annum in the organized sector has been a dismal -0.03% in the period 1994-2007 (in the public sector it has been -0.57% and in the private sector it has been 1.3%) (GOI, 2010a, p.276). "...the unorganised sector refers to those enterprises whose activities or collection of data is not regulated under any legal provision or do not maintain any regular accounts" (Labour Ministry, undated). They are largely private incorporated enterprises. The 1999-2000 data had put the figure for employment in the organized sector as a mere 28 million workers out of a total workforce of 397 million, hence the large chunk working in a situation, which is largely not governed/regulated by any legislation.

Under such circumstances when the expenditure on education and health needs to be increased by the state it has failed to reach even those levels, which were recommended decades ago. Expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP is still around 1.37 % in 2008-09 and on education it has been around 3.01 %.

Education and Neoliberalism in India

The move towards neoliberalism in India had been "partial" in the early 1980s (Harvey, 2007, p.9), however the state moved vigorously towards the policy of disengagement from areas where it had ventured as part of its Keynesian orientation from the early 1990s onwards. It has been this disengagement that has impacted on higher education adversely when it comes to ensuring equal access for each and every individual in the country. This is not to argue that the pre-neoliberal phase aimed at egalitarianism. The inequality in access to education in general and higher education in particular has been there all along as a natural consequence of the way capitalism has evolved in the country.

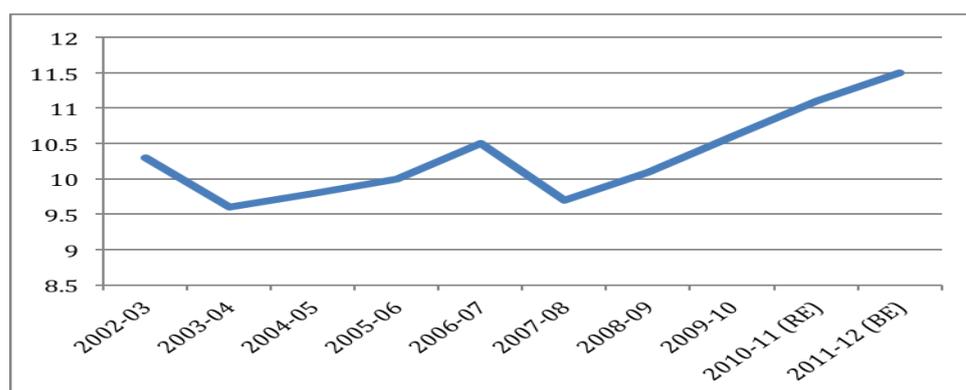
To put it cursorily, the creation of a so-called 'mixed-economy' in independent India was not so much a reflection of post-independent Congress Party leadership's concern with equitable development. Nor was it about striking a balance between the influence of private capital and state as an embodiment of people's will and aspirations. (Surprisingly, this is what every child in India is taught about the economic model that

followed the independence from British rule.) In fact, it was the will of nascent and not so-sufficiently strong Indian capital that was reflected in the kind of economy that emerged. The Indian bourgeoisie dictated to the Indian state to take care of certain sectors where it could not venture – either because it was not prepared to take any risk or because it was in a nascent stage and could not invest such big an amount in long-gestation industries. Hence, post independence, we witnessed nationalization of financial institutions, the state taking over and starting the long-gestation heavy industries and taking care of all those sectors, which required higher investment because of non-readiness of Indian capital. It was by the 1970s that the readiness of Indian capital could be seen as reflected in newer criticisms emerging around the character of the Indian economy. It was seen as suffocating for the investors because of red-tapeism and mechanisms put into place to curb ‘monopolistic’ tendencies. Indian capital was desperate to expand and therefore the rules of the game had to be changed. The process began and one finds changes in policy at different levels from late 1970s and early 1980s onward, which were clear reflections of how Indian capital felt stifled by the restrictions that had come up over a period of time under state led economic management (Kumar, 2006).

One of the repercussions of such a process of change was, for obvious reasons, also reflected in the policy making for so-called ‘social sector’ (I call it so-called because the process of ‘sectorisation’ of policy making leads to an unwarranted prioritization/hierarchisation of different aspects that constitute our life⁴). The promise for a Common School System (CSS), which would provide equal opportunity to every Indian child to access an education of good/similar quality, was shelved along with the promise of a budgetary allocation of 6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for education. These were recommendations made by the Education Commission 1964-66. As part of the new inclination of the Indian state to open up every sector of Indian society and economy to the market (a process which had started gradually from late 1970s and was expedited after 1991) the state sought to withdraw itself from education and health sectors. The arguments had nothing new – the state said that it was not in a position to bear such a huge financial responsibility. Consequently, what we come across in statistical terms is a decline in expenditure on education whereas the need was to enhance it.

The percentage of expenditure on education in the total state budget was 14.1% in 1970-71. This was reduced to 11.3% in 2000-01. It was 10.5% in 2006-07, 9.7% in 2007-08, 10.1% 2008-09, 10.6% in 2009-10, 11.1% in 2010-11 (See Chart No.1 below). This expenditure should be read keeping mind that the state implemented new taxes such as Education Cess⁵ and went for more and funding from international agencies as well. Hence, a rise in expenditure, even if it happens, should not surprise one as an increased commitment of state to ensure that everyone gets good quality education in a similar kind of schooling system or higher education system. This also points to the fact that state would rather ask people to pay if they need education or better health care than treating it as its own personal responsibility and priority. It illustrates how badly it wants to abdicate its basic responsibilities.

Chart No.1: Trends in Expenditure on Education as percent of total expenditure (Central and State governments combined)

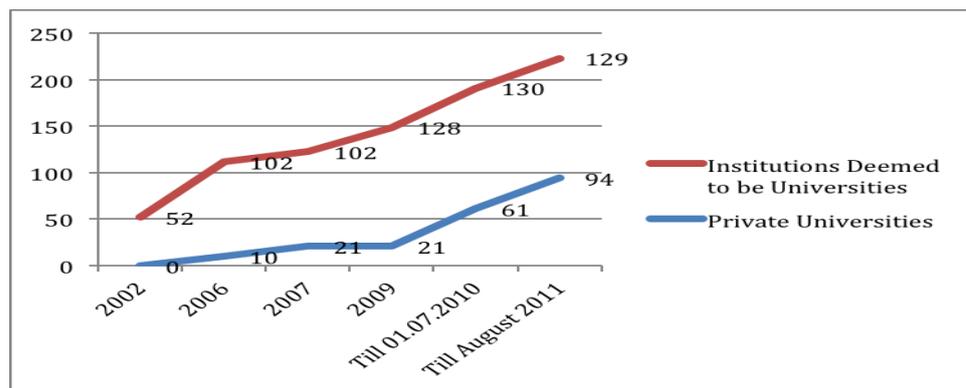


Source: Data released by Economic Survey, Government of India, over recent years

This decline has been accompanied by an increasing role of foreign aid for education sector, especially elementary/ primary education in the country (see Tilak, 2003). The role of private capital has been increasing in school education as well as university education. It has been demonstrated by analysts how the state discourse along with that of the market and the institutions, which encourage increasing role of market, have come to dominate the educational discourse in India (Kumar, 2008). The opening of private universities, the increasing number of deemed universities and consequent increase in enrollment in these institutions is a clear cut portrayal of how private capital has expanded its role in higher education. The number of private universities has been on rise and because the central legislation to allow entry of

private capital directly into the Higher Education is still struck in Parliament, the different state governments have their own legislation that allow private universities to mushroom (the Chart No.2 below gives an idea). This is not to deny that privatization is happening at different levels in Universities such as contractualisation of the teaching force and the non-teaching force apart from the pressure to muster more and more resources from non-state actors.

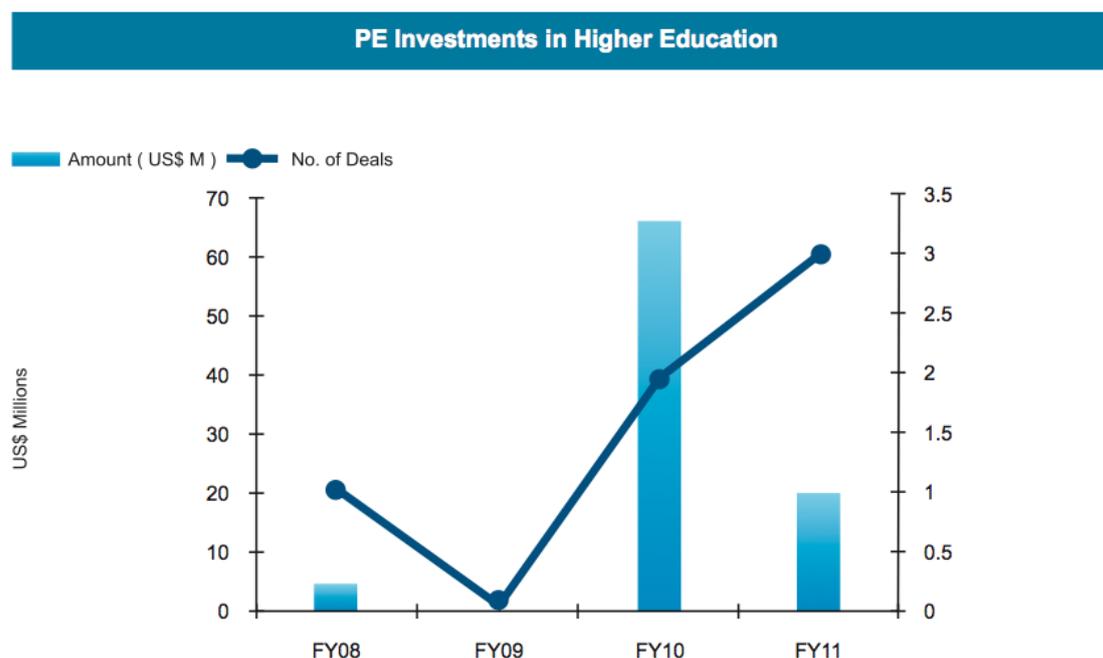
Chart No.2: Growth of private universities in India



Source: University Grants Commission (January 2011; November 2011)

Private capital is awaiting the end of restrictions in education so that it could take advantage of the huge possibilities. “With a population of approximately 540 million in the 0-24 age bracket, it is also the largest education market in the world. The Education sector is the largest services market in India with a market size of more than 450 million students and USD 57 billion per annum (as of 2009)” (Venture Intelligence, 2011, p.15). The private sector recognizes that there is a “significant gap between demand for quality and relevant education and supply” and in this gap lies huge potential for private investment” (ibid, p.16). The confidence of the private capital is boosted by the trends in private equity investment over past one decade in India (as reflected below in the Chart No.3).

Chart No.3: Private Equity (PE) Investments in Higher Education



Source: Venture Intelligence (2011, p.06)

The Triumph of Neoliberalism and the Educational Edifice

While the state opens up new spaces for profit - hungry capital to prey on the masses, the nature of what is to be taught in these new institutions have also been reoriented. Universities are not supposed to be sites of critical thinking. They are supposed to produce skilled labour tailor - made to the requirements of the market⁶. The process of reorienting the institutions are essentially about how well the argument *of capital, for capital*, could be embedded into our everyday thought processes.

The role of the intelligentsia becomes significant here. They become significant instruments that create consensus in favour of capital (Kumar, 2010b). Neoliberal capital has invariably penetrated the intellectual spheres. This role of intellectuals and all those who are keen on ensuring that higher education remains an arena of autonomous and critical thinking will have to be subverted. A subversion that rests itself on the premise that there is a constant battle between labour and capital, which is evident in the arena of higher education as well, will be realized once we decide 'which side are we on'. Sides will have to be taken – we can either be with labour or with capital. There is no 'third way'. And concerns regarding the current role of

academia emerge when they fail to comprehend how academic institutions are located within the circumference of the system's political economy. Terry Eagleton, while reflecting on the recent protests in UK on university tuition fee hike, wrote (2010):

What we have witnessed in our own time is the death of universities as centres of critique. Since Margaret Thatcher, the role of academia has been to service the status quo, not challenge it in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, the free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future. We will not change this simply by increasing state funding of the humanities as opposed to slashing it to nothing. We will change it by insisting that a critical reflection on human values and principles should be central to everything that goes on in universities, not just to the study of Rembrandt or Rimbaud.

The agenda of critical reflection is on downward slide and it not only reflects the unprecedented offensive of capital in its neoliberal phase but also tells a great deal about where does academia itself stands in the battlefield. One evidence of this telling story of how academia gets co-opted is in the way in which certain *moments* are conceived as *totality* in themselves. A large amount of work that has been done within Indian educational discourse has primarily been *reactive*. It has been a reaction to the policy statements of the Indian state. Because *much* of this work has been policy specific response till very recent times there has been hardly any effort to locate the *specific moments* in policy making as moments in the long *trajectory* of how capital has progressed. They have seldom been seen as significant *conjunctures* in the long march of capital and its struggle with labour. Hence, a specific moment such as that of setting up of a Committee under one of the leading scientists who has worked for the popularization of science and scientific temper is not seen within the framework of how capital operates and co-opts voices to generate legitimacy for its functioning. And the sad part is that even those political forces, which claim to stand with labour in their struggle against capital fail to develop such a perspective.

The much-touted Yashpal Committee constituted (in February 2008) to suggest ways of rejuvenating and reorienting higher education in India provided much sought after legitimacy to neoliberal capital's agenda. Because the arguments for encouraging the role of private capital in Higher Education is coated with *apparently* progressive pronouncements about autonomy etc., the document has drawn complements from many sectors (Social Scientist, 2010). The report deliberates on the character of universities, defines their role as centres of knowledge creation, calls for ending the divide across disciplines and asserts the need for interdisciplinarity. The committee

expresses deep concern over ‘cubicalization’ of knowledge (GOI, 2009, p.10), sees the intention of profit making through education as problematic but also believes that “it will be necessary to encourage participation of the private sector” (GOI, 2009, p.34) and argues that foreign universities should be allowed to set up their shops here in India. The report talks about the need to (a) constantly update knowledge, (b) allow some autonomy to teachers, (c) make courses job oriented and university education relevant to the needs of the market, (d) consider the market as a significant determinant of what to teach and what not to teach, and (e) centralise functioning of the university system. Surprisingly, it discusses all these elements in the same vein, that is autonomy of teachers and researchers to create knowledge along with increasing role of market, which are in fact, quite contrary to each other. While it claims to follow the report when it comes to privatisation of higher education and imposing a centralised and highly structured body of regulation and management (through the pending Bill for National Commission for Higher Education and Research), it would define autonomy in terms of asking institutions manage their own finances and by becoming less and less reliant on the state.

The Indian state by clearly spelling out the ‘need’ (?) to privatise education at different points of time through its policy designs and arguments has, in effect, decided that every Indian does not need similar opportunities to get educated. It by very design has been making education not only uncritical and technised but also inaccessible to the masses. The different Committees set up by it headed by ‘respected’, ‘liberal’ intellectuals⁷ have gradually been building the environment in favour of the neoliberal agenda – reflected in the recommendations put forth by the Knowledge Commission, the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) as well as several independent committees set up by the Indian State. The obvious consequences of the last two decades of such a concerted effort at consensus creation has been that we have now documents produced by the Ministries which seem to use the similar idea of making education have ‘relevance’ (to the market). In fact, they would go to the extent of now brushing aside any need to have state provisions for the Dalits (people at the lowest rung of caste hierarchy). A reflection of this can be found in the Mid-Year Financial Review presented by the Finance Ministry which says that

Universities need to be reoriented to the changing situation and demands in the job market. Many universities are simply out of touch with modern systems.

Quality of education and demand-supply mismatch are other issues. While a select number of institutions in the country do offer world-class education, in most institutions the quality of education is quite unsatisfactory without a continuous effort to upgrade standards, teaching methods, content of learning, and quality of teachers. There is also a serious mismatch between institutional output and the demand in the market. In some areas there is a surplus, whereas in many others, shortages are felt. There are some serious mismatches among states. For example, there is high demand for medical and engineering colleges/seats in Delhi. But there are few medical colleges and new colleges do not come up despite the potential for many institutions/hospitals to set up medical colleges. Neighbouring states are capitalizing on this situation (GOI, 2010a, p.51).

The idea obviously is that in the name of quality control and relevance the syllabi and curriculum is being made more market friendly. There are certain courses which may not be that relevant for the market such as many of the existing courses in social science. Hence, it is not surprising that different social science departments within university system today over-exert themselves to prove their relevance. And they do so by introducing newer courses on 'Human Resource Management', 'Diploma in Human Rights', Diplomas that would cater to the already working population (such as Diplomas for already employed teachers to enhance their skills further) etc. Along with this change, in which the academia also assists the neoliberal capital, the other problem has been that of increasing inaccessibility. The fee hike in the Universities, as a consequence of state withdrawal and due to the policy to make those institutions financially *autonomous*, has made them inaccessible to most of the people.

India has a huge population living in poverty. A World Bank document of 2009 points out that, using its definition of \$1.25 as poverty line, around 42% of Indian population was poor (Ravallion, 2009, p.03) in 2005. An Institute of Development Studies research argues that 34.5% of world's poor lived in India in 2008, if \$1.25 is taken as poverty line whereas it goes up to 35% if the poverty line is taken up to \$2 (Sumner, 2012). The figures of the poor within India for 2008 is stated to be 37.4% in 2008 with \$1.25 as poverty line. At \$2 per day as poverty line the figure is astounding 72.4% for the same year (ibid). Poverty estimates released by Planning Commission, Government of India in March 2012 pointed that rural poverty was 33.8% and urban poverty was 20.9% in 2009-10. The press release stated "nearly 50% of agricultural labourers and 40% of other labourers are below the poverty line in rural areas, whereas in urban areas, the poverty ratio for casual labourers is 47.1%" (Planning

Commission, 2012). The Planning Commission in 2011 informed the Supreme Court that the poverty line for the urban and rural areas could be provisionally placed at Rs.965 per capita per month (approx. \$0.6 per day at rate of \$1= Rs.55) and Rs.781 per capita per month (approx.\$0.5 per day), respectively (India Today, 2011).

Given such poverty, if one looks at how much a student has to pay as Tuition Fee in some of the courses in universities managed by the state (which is, even so, much cheaper compared to the private universities), the impossibility of gaining access to higher education for most of Indians becomes obvious. An undergraduate student doing Humanities in Khalsa College would pay approximately Rs.15000 (approx. \$272) per annum and the Science student Rs.19000 (approx. \$345). In a course on gender studies in Ambedkar University the fee could be around Rs.32000 annually (approx. \$581). This fee is apart from some other charges and it also varies across colleges. Most students in Delhi have to stay in flats on rent as hostels are few and a room rent shared with another student could be anywhere between Rs.4000 per month (approx. \$72) onwards. Apart from there are other usual expenditure on items needed for daily survival. When you put this enormous expenditure with the extent of poverty higher education virtually becomes inaccessible to most Indians.

These estimates generated a lot of heat and debate because Government of India, in order to reduce poverty figures, reduced the poverty line to Rs.28.65 (\$0.5 approx.) per capita daily consumption in cities and Rs.22.42 (\$0.4 approx.) in rural areas. This has resulted in an apparent decline in poverty figures. Hence, if an individual earns more than \$15.6 (approx.) monthly in urban India and \$12.2 (approx.) monthly in rural India s/he cannot be termed poor. Given such areas is not considered poor, as per the controversial formula. The Government has unabashedly recommended a hike through the CAGE (Central Advisory Board on Education, which is the highest advisory body for education) Committee on Financing of Higher Education institutions earlier and through the National Knowledge Commission. Its recent advocacy is part of a state policy document:

A viable financing model, with a mix of public and private participation is necessary since India needs large investments in the higher education sector. In order to raise investments, there is ample scope for raising the levels of fees. For students belonging to weaker sections, there can be provision for financing

grants which could be repayable after these students start earning so as to ensure sustainability of the system. (GOI, 2010a, p.51)

India's political arena has always seen battles fought on the agenda of social justice. This battle has been fought on issues of caste as well as economic oppression, which led to different forms of caste based reservations in jobs as well as for entry to higher education institutions. The content of that social justice has altered itself in neoliberal times. The idea itself has become quite slippery for the Indian context. It has slipped conveniently from the welfarist framework to the neoliberal one. And this transition has been facilitated by the way capital has used caste based identitarian politics to its advantage. All political leaders doing caste based identitarian politics in contemporary North India have embraced neoliberal capital with great excitement. The above pronouncement by the Indian state only states this transition. Depriving the 'weaker sections' of educational attainment is no longer problematic. They stand along with others, as equals in the market place, to buy education. The state can at most now arrange for some loans for them, which they must repay after getting employment.

The recent *Report to the People of India* published by the Ministry of Human Resource Development says that "there is a need to promote private investment in secondary and higher education". The participation of the private sector may be in the "educational programmes which have greater employability". In order to facilitate their participation it advocates minimization of "regulatory barriers". It also advocates changing laws to ensure that foreign universities come to India. It also argues for the need to promote private investment through industry- academia partnership, particularly in technical institutions" (GOI, 2010b, p.45). One can conclude that the concern for poverty, gender and caste based inequities no longer constitute the priority of the Indian state and it blatantly proclaims that capital must play an important role in even the basic sectors such as education. This proclamation hardly cares even if conservative estimates say that approximately 21.4% of children drop out of schools because of financial constraints (GOI, 2010c). The 2007-08 figures published in 2010 indicate that there is a direct correlation between purchasing power and educational attainment and the poor (who happen to be lower down the caste hierarchy in many cases) have least purchasing power and therefore low educational attainment (GOI, 2010d). Those who are poor have least access to higher education, whereas those with

money are able to purchase it. Neoliberalism is on the offensive and the educational inequality amply reflects that.

Is there an Alternative?

The assault of the neoliberal capital on education can be combated only with a clarity about how capital operates. It operates at a human cost. For neoliberal capital, the system has to operate according to a design, which operates through an undemocratic and non-participatory mechanism, and it devises ways and means to ensure that its interests get priority over popular interests. The state is, then, an instrument in its hand, which would not mind investing millions to organise events like the Commonwealth Games or allow siphoning of public funds through the spate of scams that rocked the nation during last decade or so. In case of an event like Commonwealth Games justifications were created through invoking ideas of national pride and nationalist fervour, and hardly any political formation (including the Left in Parliament) differed on the issue that the Games were a matter of national pride. Billions are paid off as cuts to parliamentarians, journalists and ministers by telecom companies. Ministry allocations are decided by the corporate houses and governments unabashedly keep expressing their concerns at how they would ensure that the interests of the corporate houses are taken care of and their names are not revealed to the public for being involved in certain types of modus operandi to control governments and institutions of state. Within this context of complete control of corporates over state, education cannot remain an isolated sector with welfarist orientations.

The different actors that constitute the educational edifice – the teachers as well as students along with the other kinds of workers – need to recognise the nature and magnitude of assault that they are confronted with. A common ground needs to be forged on which the resistance would build itself and this common ground has to emerge from the class consciousness of the different constituents. The transformation will have to be grounded within the labour-capital conflict and teachers as well as students will have to wage a struggle that strikes capital at moments and places wherever possible. Universities remain a unique workplace in a certain sense because they train the workers and produce foot soldiers for the system to exist. It is the site where labour-power for neoliberalism is produced. In this sense it is a crucial site for capital to ensure its sustenance and a weak link as well where those involved in this

reproduction may strike at the weakest link. It is also unique because it has the potential to generate a certain amount of criticality to question and dissent. However, this becomes possible only if the teacher recognises itself as ‘labour’ and, therefore, positioned against ‘capital’. But for this strike to happen the realisation that the different constituents of the university system are workers will have to happen first. Being such a vital instrument for the system, universities will have to be transformed into centres of resistance. This will also induce a certain kind of crisis for the system – because the attack would be happening from within.

Notes

1. I would like to thank the reviewer for comments
2. The number of Deemed Universities (these are universities not fully managed and run by the rules passed through the legislative bodies but they are institutions which are granted autonomy by the Section 3 of University Grants Commission Act, 1956 in not just setting course work and syllabus but also in setting its own guidelines for the admissions, fees, and instructions to the students) has increased 52 in 2002 to 130 in 2010; number of private universities has grown from 10 in 2006 to 61 in 2010 (UGC, 2011, p.3-4). The number of Central Universities (which are set up by an Act of Parliament and fully funded and managed by the state) and the State Universities (which are set up by an Act of provincial assemblies and fully funded and managed by the local government with help from the Central government) has shown an increase but not in the same proportion as the private and deemed institutions.
3. The Indian schooling system is from Class I to Class XII, ideally, after which the students make to universities/colleges. There is no age specified for entry into schools except in some states such as Delhi where it is 3 years to get entry into Nursery. Some institutions put a minimum age for entry while many do not.
4. ‘Sectorisation’ here refers to the process by way of which the economy and the society is divided into sectors to such an extent that they fail to look at the interconnections between the different parts of an individual or community’s life. The dialectics of how the welfare of the parents and children cannot be tackled by two different departments of the ministry because the condition of one impinges on that of the other. Similarly, marginalization as a concept cannot merely be dealt by the fact that you make a separate ministry for tribals and scheduled castes (the lowest in caste hierarchy) because their interests are also affected by what happens in the larger economy and society. Sectorisation fragments our existence and prevents us from seeing the connections between the fragments that constitute the whole.
5. Education cess is a tax that is levied as part of income tax collected by the Indian state. It is currently 3% of one’s income. The logic given for such taxation is that the money collected will be spent on funding education from state coffers. In fact, it is an example of how state has abdicated its responsibility to educate people as a duty rather than asking people to fund their own education.
6. It is not only university education which is being tailor made but even the school education as the Minister of Human Resource Development highlights and has been quoted above.
7. These intellectuals have been essentially anti-marxists with a strange tradition of being exponents of scientific temper and rationality that ultimately coincided with the intentions and designs of a market economy. In fact, it would be interesting for researchers to work on the biography of some of such intellectuals

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