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rethinking education and democratization of the public sphere in India*

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Democratization has brought about a tremendous impact on the rigid social structure in post-colonial India. Modern education has been a key factor in transforming society, especially the deep-seated traditions of social inequality and harsh realities of discriminatory practices. Given the deepening and widening of inequality in the post-reform era, this paper seeks to explore the significance of rethinking the critical realm of education in transforming India's public sphere as a vital tool for the democratization of society and a proposal for an inclusive knowledge system.

Keywords: democratization of higher education, governance of universities, inclusive knowledge system, inequality, public sphere in India

Introduction

The new socio-political circumstances of post-colonial India have had a tremendous impact on the normative conditions for the institutional procedures, structural properties, and designated practices of constitutional and democratic processes. As a template of modernity, educational institutions were sought to have been tasked with rewriting India's cultural identity, building new imaginaries of the nation-state and improving the well-being of citizens. While it is true that the actual situation has not improved much despite many efforts since India's independence, an onslaught of structural reforms since the 1990s in the wake of globalization has transformed India's education system. In addition to quantitative expansion, new (external) modalities have exerted pressure on universities with new regulations, cost recovery, academic and curricular re-arrangements, credit-driven assessment, and quality improvement. This new order of academic governance that is operating through the hidden curriculum, underpins how India's current ruling regime controls the future of the vast demography of educated unemployed youth. The growth of private provision of education has arisen in response to the demand for access that is far away from the ideals of scholarship, humanism, and civility and has intensified educational inequality. It is deeply worrying that the tactics of the ruling dispensation are designed to exacerbate the existing crisis and destroy the social architecture of the education system to serve its narrow political agenda. As a result, universities across India have become ideological warzones, pitting stakeholders and the public against one another at different paces and scales. Regretfully, the power that comes to occupy education today is conceived of patriotism and market determinism and hardly defines the political will to invent citizenship preferences and establish new social relationships for the service of the democratization of the public sphere. The critical voices that are emerging from Indian university campuses – reflecting the possibilities of discussing, evaluating and expanding the meaning of citizenship, a mobility matrix and a new political community – hold significance at a time when education policy is diverted towards skill development for market expansion. This paper draws readers' attention to

rethinking the critical realm of education in transforming the public sphere as a vital tool for the democratization of society and for an inclusive knowledge system. With the help of historical explanation, it aims to critically expose how the coupling of the market economy and ideological indoctrination in education truncates the possibilities for the democratization of the public sphere.

Conceptions of Education and the Public Sphere

Education is integral to social transformation. It inculcates the habit of morality and is essential for the everyday functioning and progress of society. In a modern social setting, learning morality as a collective enterprise is mediated by educational institutions. In search of truth through advancement by scientific enquiry, education cultivates a new value system for reflecting on and participating in the political process. These social obligations cultivate democratic culture (Ottaway, 1968). With the democratization of the Indian education system, there is a move to foster citizens' aspirations and learn from the diverse circumstances of their lives. Hence education is both constitutive of and constituted by the cultural process within, as well as by the structural forces outside the system. The education system in established democratic societies is more of a consequence of than a precondition for maintaining social status (Habermas, 1989). It is a type of cultural institution that supports the intellectual voices of people through deliberations and other forms of expression, performance, considerations and discussions of the problems of the times (Goldfarb, 2012). Instead of being framed as singular expressions, discourses around education are embedded in complex relational networks that are both inter-subjective and public (Somers, 1995). Therefore, education occupies a distinctive place in the public sphere that is unlike other forms of public goods.

As a normative condition and collective orientation, conceptual explanation on public goods deserves special attention in the evolution and the transformation of the public sphere. The benefits that are accrued and shared across the social spectrum that are not diverted to a particular individual or group constitute public goods. The non-rivalrous and non-excludable character accounting for those public benefits which are created in privately owned institutions especially philanthropists, is highly appreciated. Indeed, the basic feature of public goods is always maintained and nurtured by the modern state. As education is sought to function as a public good in a democracy, the state not only expands educational provision and opportunities but also works to address the important issue of equality that is desirable for advancing democracy and justice. The state counts every available public resource meant for the expansion and improvement of human capabilities. In the educational processes, the public character has to be upheld not only in terms of inputs and approaches but also practices and outcomes. State-owned and state-funded institutions hold their power in the education system to create conditions for pedagogical and curricular practices and help to maintain the public character of knowledge (Smith, 2003). Access to education improves human capabilities that are determinants of assessing individuals' well-being as well as achieving public goods (Sen, 1999). Democratic interventions to attain the social goals of education help constitute universal knowledge (Marginson, 2012). Adaptation of inclusive strategies in education recognizes the place of different cultural communities and their diverse qualities of intellectual dispossessions. Sustenance of these institutional apparatuses and sharing of power, knowledge and ideas in the educational system can strengthen students' critical reflection to act as informed citizens collectively. A new circumstance born out of this transformation becomes an epistemic site to understand the critical relationship between education and the public sphere. A democratic society like India needs to retrain a robust system with the institutional arrangements to ensure inclusive, quality and affordable public educational provisions for all.

Transformation of the Educational Sphere

Throughout history, education has been extremely diverse and – at the same time – integral to the larger process of socioeconomic and cultural transformation. In the post-colonial world, education and a political awakening demonstrated a complex matrix of power and ideology in the making of modern subjectivities. Under British rule, the colonial reformist agenda was slated to be widening the gap between the real-world experience of students and the valid and useful knowledge being imparted to them. Historically, the continuity of this gap was also sought under the checks of empire, class, caste and gender. The hegemony of the colonizer negotiated with multiple agendas and interests of the colonized by adopting a new mode of governance, technicalities, a network of ideas and culture in education. But Indian traditions of caste hierarchy and its exclusionary practices prevented the institutional process to popularize literary culture and its public character. It was well-known to insiders within the upper castes but closed and kept secret from outsiders who were historically devoid of the requisite skills and institutional arrangements. As these exclusionary practices were not well appreciated by the native intellectuals, there were contestations within India among the privileged minority class and marginalized majority communities (Bhattacharya, 1998). Deep-rooted historical problems such as regionalism, communalism and caste-based discrimination were kept outside of the ambit of educational discourses and practices (Altbach, 2012). Colonial modernity hardly paid attention to the diverse range of cultural learning sites and their educational practices. Instead, their focus was on the role of teachers' perceptions of 'order and discipline' (Kumar, 2007). The dominant cultural tradition that followed the Brahmanical mode of learning was not only intellectually weakened but it also maintained exclusivity (Béteillé, 2010). Power and domination were central to how educational discourses were organized to exclude marginalized groups from accessing education. Practically speaking, because of the cultural embeddedness of power, the goals of education failed to evolve into an ideal form of instruction for any particular group (Tschurenev, 2019). The governing elite in post-colonial India has inherited a colonial legacy that has sustained these coercive policies for enormous material benefits and administrative authorities (Pels, 1997).

The post-colonial state of India set the educational goal to recognize and acquire diverse cultural sensibilities as a common good for its citizens. However, the historical absence of enlightened public opinion was burdened by the traditional order on the one side and colonial rule on the other. Following independence, different shades of structural transformation in educational policy discourses were rarely informed by a reflexive process to account for whether access to teaching and learning and participation in knowledge production opened our minds and widened our intellectual horizons. The political economy of education has gradually shifted to the mode of privatization and commercialization against a backdrop of a market economy and globalization. The privatization of education is highly regarded by private enterprises as they attract capital investment and profit-making (Newfield, 2008). The increasing rate of private investment in the educational sector was considered a positive sign of economic progress (Tilak, 1991).

There is not much regard for the institutions that nurture and maintain the public sphere today. The negligence of educational institutions is not merely a response to the economic downturn. Had that been the case, with the general trend of economic recovery as a desirable goal for any nationalist economy, the crisis of the education system would have been resolved by now. However, educational needs and priorities are determined by a long-standing economic crisis. Does economic managerialism take into account how educational needs dictate the nations' budgets? Although it is very hard to dismiss the public nature of education, its historical role and institutional processes,

there has been a deliberate effort to downplay the significance of higher education. It is the market economy that dictates and redefines education as a private good to create new conditions for profit-making and accumulation.

Regulatory mechanisms have begun to dictate the nature and disposition of power, authority, regulations, and patterns of funding in education. The relationship between the state and education is more complicated today than before because of the complex assemblages imposing a new mode of academic governance. As a consequence, public-funded institutions struggle to balance adherence to different regulatory mechanisms set by the state and the autonomy of the institution. Moreover, some of the social concerns such as legitimacy, public resources, academic activities, and accountability have complicated the relationship between the state and education. It is quite evident that state-run education is under-resourced and lacks public funding, but the very state that provides education keeps demanding that institutions demonstrate accountability and adhere to academic standards (Austin & Jones, 2015). The controlling of institutions with managerial techniques is suggested to be a magical solution to the systemic problems that education faces overall. This structural shift in education is designed "as much as possible to approximate private and profit-making corporations, regarded as models of efficient organization based on the discipline of the market" (Heller, 2016, p. 2). But, the models of governance adopted in educational institutions both in the public and private sectors are less likely to deliver a qualitative improvement in academic standards (Vali, 2013). Hence, the government of the day, through the work of regulatory bodies, has created new sets of problems for education. Eventually, it delegitimizes the power of the government to make possible reform in education directly.

The economic logic of education on the demand side is driven by the scale of the rate of growth. The state's retreat from the financing of higher education in the public sector and encouragement of the private sector to meet the growing demand (Tilak, 2013) has brought about a clear ideological shift in the state apparatus (Velaskar, 2016). Reconstituting subjectivities through new modes of networks and financial transactions appropriate for the market forces has caused the policy of social equality in education that advances social justice to be subverted (Lall & Nambissan, 2011). The market-driven audit culture that dominates the present policy design not only restructures the institutions and technicalities of education but also redefines the role and status of stakeholders. Internally the mode of teaching, learning and assessment has undergone structural change because of the influence of market forces.

The art of learning is subverted into a continuous mode of assessment and surveillance in the minds of both students and teachers. Its market logic has pushed students and their families into a huge debt trap by exacerbating the cost of education. As a consequence, education has become a big business enterprise that claims to offer added value to the so-called education services in India (Kapur & Mehta, 2017). Harnessing the private sector for public goods in this context is problematic even though India had a tradition of philanthropy. We struggle to recognize public investment in education as a social investment which will yield future rewards in the shape of increased income flows generated by more graduates entering the labor market, as well as the qualitative transformation that will take place within India's favorable demographics. The new economic arrangement of privatization in education neither benefits the nation's highly hyped demographic dividend nor facilitates equity across unequal groups. Moreover, private investment in education may not promise appropriation of reasonable economic return (Gurukkal, 2018). With the retreat of public funding and a policy for privatization, a myth is perpetuated that a high rate of return can be anticipated as a result of the rate of investment. The perceived quality of education

that is on offer from a burgeoning private education sector has led to ever-growing household spending on private education, especially on private coaching. Under the pretext of reform, commercialization is being enforced at a time when the educational aspirants of marginalized sections of the population have gradually begun to be represented in educational institutions because of the equal opportunity measures guaranteed by the constitution.

The idea of autonomy and inclusion intrinsic to the progress of India's education system is thwarted today. Recently, universities, educational institutions, research centers and other public places have become warzones of competing ideologies where multiple forms of violence have been unleashed. The direct attacks by decision-making bodies and the centre of power on university campuses have shrunken dissenting voices from institutions of learning, especially institutions of higher education as legitimate spaces of democratic thinking. Fundamental forces, with the tacit support of the ruling establishments, have downsized the public reputation of leading academic institutions across the country. Similarly, attempts have been made to limit the freedom of expression and other democratic rights of university teachers by allegedly imposing the rules that are framed as the controlling of bureaucracy. Under these rules, any form of criticism against the ruling dispensation naturally invites legal ramifications. Educational spaces become sites of protests to shield public education and keep it central to India's democracy. In order to divert public attention from this uproar, the authorities have been busy producing news reports of 'granted' autonomy to a selected group of universities by making other universities inferior. This was "after taking away the right of universities to decide on basic aspects like an appointment, admissions, or syllabi in the first place and appears to be swiftly referring to the devolution of financial responsibility" (Sundar, 2018, p. 48). A large segment of academic decisions collectively taken by the teaching community, including what to teach and research, have been dictated by the forces outside of it and have ended up as disputes in court. The reflexive and critical minds who were creatively engaged in their vocation as academics in educational spaces have broken their silence to voice the public concern, yet they have retained academic logic to ensure that educational spaces do not become propaganda machines of the government of the day. The public intellectuals who are directly engaged in the parliamentary democratic process have been alarmed by the political vendetta of the ruling establishment towards publicly-funded institutions (see Tharoor, 2018).

The democratic state currently is in deep crisis as it deviates from the social imaginaries structured around egalitarian principles. It has failed to captivate something that the educational system deemed to do. These are not just the technicalities of education which may turn against the theories of knowledge or the diverse nature of society, but fundamentally a form of life that evolves and is nurtured within the system (Visvanathan, 2013). Hence, the reason for failure is an intellectual one and the key to overcoming this crisis is a revival of critical reason – a science driven by ethics. The solution to the crisis lies in the application of social critique of the democratic institutions from within. The potential of cultivating the habits of equality of opportunity in education, even if it is only a gradual process, will serve the interest of all (Young, 1989). These constraints in no way undermine the general contribution of education to the developmental process of the nation. But what needs to be understood is that the multitude of structural operations has left little room for visualizing and practicing education in its true form.

Equal access to public institutions by culturally and socially unequal social groups is a real challenge for policymakers because of the prevalence of discriminatory practices. Given the structural inequalities based on caste, gender, tribes, religion and regions and various forms of discrimination, new forms of inequality are reproduced in formal educational spaces (Altbach, 1974; Nambissan &

Srinivasa Rao, 2013; Singhal, 1977). Though a formal guarantee of equal access is necessary, substantial concerns about the enabling conditions for realizing inclusion and equity are neglected, including epistemological exclusion (Devy, 2017). Indeed, the institutional responses, social arrangements and support systems in the educational system can create an enabling environment (Bhushan, 2016), for example through affirmative action policies. But the persistence of sociological problems such as the questions of equalizing access (Hasan & Nussbaum, 2012) and strategies of inclusion, (Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013) or categorical inequalities in education (Samaddar, 2016) have yet to become a site of critical learning informed by democratic and egalitarian values. A critical orientation to our analytical tools on these unstated discrepancies can expose the hidden operations of traditional authority, the hegemony of the state, and market forces.

Conclusion

The structural locations of exclusionary practices and possibilities for inclusion are still a critical site for policy intervention in education as a political commitment scripted in India's constitutional democracy for the service of its citizens. The quest to expand public provision and to make education accessible for all then becomes a significant concern for our collective responsibility and demands political intervention. The adaptation of the new set of social and institutional arrangements becomes vital for the educational system to navigate and creatively engage with the diversities brought about by improved access. Moreover, we need to further investigate discursive practices within the educational system that are influenced by varieties of knowledge systems and pedagogical interventions. Current practices are yet to recognize their wider scope beyond the immediate conceptions necessitated by market logic. While rethinking the purpose of education for the service of the public sphere, public discourses should be oriented towards the democratization of institutional spaces. Considering democracy as a political manifestation of the scientific method, a culture of learning and critical enquiry into pedagogical interventions can together produce public goods in education and strive for an inclusive knowledge system.

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