

The Destruction of Education*

Prabhat Patnaik

The NDA government's appointment of hack loyalists to important positions in the sphere of education has rightly raised concerns about the damage being done to the education system. But this is not the sole source of danger to the system. The era of globalization of capital brings in its train a process of destruction of education, of which in the Indian context the intrusion of communal-fascism into the sphere of education is an important additional ingredient. This process of destruction, its "how" and "why", has to be understood in its totality.

Terry Eagleton, the British literary theorist, narrates an interesting anecdote. During a visit to South Korea where he was being shown around a university by its CEO (that is how administrative heads of universities are designated these days), after seeing the swanky gadgets and the gleaming laboratories, he wanted to see where the "critical studies" departments were located. The CEO looked baffled, turned to his aide for enlightenment without success, and then promised: "we shall look into the matter!" All over the world, the role of education for critiquing existing structures so that a more humane society can be built is being undermined. And the chief means through which this is effected is the commoditization of education, and the associated processes of its privatization and conversion into a sphere of profit-making.

Of course the private institutions who sell "education" as a commodity for profit, would claim that they are not actually profit-making entities, since their profits are ploughed back into the institution itself. But capitalist firms also plough back their profits, and this does not prevent their being called profit-making. So there is nothing particularly virtuous about ploughing back profits. Profits remain profits whether or not they are ploughed back; and institutions earning profits remain precisely that. They cannot be called non-profit-making just because they plough their profits back into themselves.

One implication of the commoditization of education has been well understood and much discussed, namely that it excludes those belonging to non-affluent households from getting an education. Of course neo-liberal spokesmen advocating commoditization of education suggest that even those belonging to non-affluent households can access education by taking student loans; but in a society with no guarantee of employment, education financed by student loans can be the precursor of mass student suicides caused by loan default, exactly the way that there have been mass peasant suicides over the last decade and half. And this very risk involved in taking loans, namely that the resources for paying them back may not be available when the time comes for doing so, would significantly deter potential students from non-affluent families from adopting this course. The conversion of education into a commodity sold by private profit-making institutions therefore has the effect of denying it to the vast majority of potential students in India, all those from non-affluent backgrounds.

But it has two other implications as well which are no less important. One is the destruction of quality. In general, education becomes a commodity when the product of education, i.e. the person into whom education enters as an input, becomes a commodity. Now, of course, educated persons have been looking for employment in

the “job market” for a long time; so, the “educated”, it may be thought, have become commodities for a long time, and there is nothing new about what is happening now. But this is not true. A commodity is characterized above all by the fact that for the seller it is not a use-value but a pure exchange value, the equivalent of a certain amount of money, or of a certain magnitude of command over other commodities. If the person into whom education enters as an input becomes a commodity, then that person too sees education not as a use-value but entirely as an exchange value, i.e. entirely as something that enables him or her to obtain a certain sum of money on the market. And this is what has been happening of late, which underlies the commoditization of education.

In short, when education is commoditized, it ceases to play the role of making students curious, or inquisitive or excited by the exposure to the grand world of ideas. It makes them look upon education as a capsule which they must imbibe so that they can command a better value on the job market. Commoditization of education destroys creativity, originality, and any desire to go beyond the given, among the students. Since going beyond the given is the hallmark of creative thought, commoditization of education destroys creative thought. And interestingly, such commoditization proceeds at a much faster pace, with far greater virulence in the so-called “newly-emerging” countries like India than even in the traditional bastions of capitalism, the metropolitan countries. This is partly because the former are characterized by a much more aggressive, socially climbing, and politically weighty urban middle class, and partly because, the slate being “cleaner” in the former, new “characters” can be written with much greater ease upon them.

The other implication of commoditization of education is to make its products, the “educated”, into socially insensitive and completely self-absorbed entities, incapable of any sympathy for the toiling masses. This characteristic in fact comes particularly easily to the “educated” in a society like ours which has been marked by millennia of caste oppression and institutionalized inequality, and where looking upon the toiling masses as “inferior” is almost a habit acquired from birth.

All these characteristics of commoditization of education serve contemporary corporate capitalism well. The massive squeeze on the working people through the expropriation and displacement of peasants and petty producers, and through an increase in unemployment, underemployment, disguised unemployment, and casual employment, which also has the effect of keeping down the real wage rate of even those few, the so-called “organized workers”, who have not yet become victims of “labour market flexibility”, does not generate the massive resistance it could and should, because it does not attract the requisite support from a socially insensitive and educationally-dumbed down urban intelligentsia. (This insensitivity would doubtless change when the middle class itself is hit by the crisis, which is both inevitable and imminent; but even when this happens, the commoditization of education would still act in the direction of dampening resistance).

But even though commoditization of education serves neo-liberal capitalism well, by generally keeping down any intellectual challenge to it, in a period of crisis, such as now, the resistance of the working people builds up nonetheless. To meet this resistance, an alliance with “communal-fascism” becomes necessary for the globalized corporate-financial oligarchy. Such a “corporate-communal alliance” is precisely what underlies the present NDA dispensation. The engineering of

“communal” riots, and the bringing about of a “communal” polarization in crucial regions of the country such as Uttar Pradesh, together of course with the massive bankrolling of its election campaign by the corporate-financial oligarchy, is what brought the NDA to power in 2014. And having come to power it is busy trying to pay back its corporate patrons through cuts in welfare expenditures on the poor, through the “land grab” ordinance (which has already been promulgated three times in contravention of all parliamentary procedures), and through imminent legislation enforcing “labour market flexibility”. As a part of this alliance, the “communal-fascist” forces also get the opportunity to bring their personnel and their ideology into the education system.

The destruction of education in short occurs from two directions, the commoditization of education, and the “communalization” of education. The co-existence of these two tendencies in the sphere of education is the counterpart in the realm of education of the corporate-communal alliance that is holding sway in the sphere of the polity. And there is no contradiction between these two tendencies, of commoditization and “communalization”.

This may appear strange at first sight. Are we not supposed to be in a “knowledge economy” for which a revamping of higher education is required? And surely such a revamping cannot occur if Hindutva pebbles are being put into the heads of the “knowledge gatherers”, if the distinction between mythology and history is being obliterated, if a contempt for the poor and the marginalized is being implicitly inculcated in them. Surely it is in the interests of corporate capital itself to rein in the Hindutva forces and arrest the process of “communalization” of education.

This argument however, and indeed much of the talk of a “knowledge economy”, misses an important distinction, namely the distinction between “knowledge” and “skills”. “Knowledge” in the sense of a critical engagement with the world of ideas is not what corporate capital in countries like ours wants. The absence of such knowledge may hold back fundamental research in the natural sciences, but then we can always import the products of such research from the metropolitan countries. Neither corporate capital of the country, nor imperialism, is particularly interested in the promotion of fundamental research within the country, the former because it considers such research unnecessary (it prefers to import the outcome of such research from the metropolis), and the latter because it is interested in preserving the intellectual hegemony of the metropolis (and the intellectual parasitism of countries like ours upon the metropolis). And as far as the social sciences and the humanities are concerned, knowledge in the sense of a critical engagement with the world of ideas is a positively dangerous thing from the perspective of the corporate-communal alliance, for it can only breed Marxist, Ambedkarite, progressive-nationalist, secular-democratic, and women’s liberationist ideas, all of which appear, both to corporate capital and to the Hindutva forces, as part of a “red menace”. (It is interesting that the Ambedkar-Periyar Study Circle, which the Chennai IIT briefly tried to ban to placate the ministry of Human Resource Development, was portrayed in some quarters as being a “red outfit”.

Corporate capital requires “skills” (as distinct from “knowledge”) which should be available cheap. International capital requires “skilled personnel” in countries like ours who can boost its profits by the lower wages they get compared to similar skilled workers in the metropolitan economies. But the development of “knowledge” in the

sense of having institutions where students engage critically with the world of ideas, is distinctly unwelcome, even though the jargon continues to be about the coming into being of a “knowledge economy”.

It is significant that almost every document prepared by the NDA government on education emphasizes the need for privatization, and for a “public-private partnership”. This is precisely because privatization of education sits well with the “communalization” of education.

There is a further point here. Both in the government sector, where the “fiscal crunch” is adduced as the reason, and in the private sector where profit-making demands it anyway, the tendency is to have untenured, temporary, or “guest” faculty that is paid a pittance but is worked intensively. The tendency in short is to have a dualism within the faculty, with a few well-paid professors on the one side and an army of underpaid “subaltern” teachers on the other. This again works well for the corporate-communal alliance: the well-paid professors, thrilled with their salary and status and scared of losing them, would be circumspect about adopting any critical stance vis-à-vis the establishment; and the overworked “subaltern” teachers would be victims of insecurity anyway and hence easily cowed down. The erection of such a conformist, dualistic structure however only contributes further towards a destruction of education.

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