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HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEMOCRATIC IDEALS: DISRUPTIONS AND DIRECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The kind of society one wants entirely depends on the kind of education we have. Education and society are dynamically interactive and interdependent. To reimagine the interconnectedness of democracy and education, one must make an earnest attempt to explore some of the variations played on the theme of an education over time and how these variations affect our debates over the structures and purposes of liberal learning. The Enlightenment age was instrumental in transforming and revolutionizing the idea of higher education by basing it on scientific inquiry, broadly focussing on training the individual in general competence, the thoughtful citizen and the cultivated person. It holds that the highest purpose and goal in life is to enquire, to create, to search the riches and achievements of the past and then try to internalise the part that is significant and relevant to us, and then to carry that quest for understanding further in our own way. It is this idea which is under siege today at the cruel hands of private capital and it is this idea that needs to be protected to ensure a progressive and liberal ethos based on the basic of democracy – freedom, equality and justice.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, Education, Interdependent, Enlightenment, solidarity, civic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

ne must look into the real face of India that has probably gone out of our imagination, before reimagining the concepts like real education or real democracy. The National Census Report 2012 reveals that more than half of India's homes have no toilets and 17.8% of India's population has access to none of the specified assets like house, water facilities, electricity, cooking gas, television, telephone, vehicle and banking facilities. Another study based on a survey across six States has found that almost 50 per cent of our children under-five suffer from moderate to severe malnutrition. On June 09, 2011, our Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, calls these new findings a 'national shame'. Before that Arjun Sengupta report released in 2007 informs that an overwhelming 836 million people (76%) in India live on less than Rs. 20/ a day. The report also suggests that the gap between the rich and poor has grown even wider since the adoption of neo-liberal policies in 1991. Let me add here that in Europe, nearly 2.7 dollars are spent on a cow every day. Probably poor people of India would prefer to be reborn as American cows in their next birth. Another sad tale is that of the farmers. According to the govt. records, nearly two lakh farmers have committed suicide since 1997 driven by debt and distress. And it took our Prime Minister 10 years to think that he needs to visit *Vidharva* to see for himself the plight of these farmers, whereas when the sensitive index of Bombay Stock Exchange fell in 2007, it took our Finance Minister just two hours to pick up the flight and land in Bombay to hold the hands of the weeping billionaires and soothe their nerves.

If one watches the debates and discussions on various TV channels; one finds very virtually no discourse on the pressing issues of sanitation, malnutrition, education, poverty alleviation, growing inequality or other welfare schemes. All the discussions just centre around the dichotomy of subsidies versus stimulus - a lamentation for the govt.'s reluctance to reduce the subsidies extended on food, fertilizer, diesel or other social welfare measures, and the failure to extend stimulus to the corporate sector in the forms of cheap loans, easy land acquisitions and environmental clearance. In fact the debates on corporate media start several weeks prior to the presentation of the union budget and the neo-rich, English educated managers and prophets of a Brave New World founded on the ethos of market economy engage in preparing adequate ground for a 'positive directionality' in the policy framework that would favour only the growth of the industry, GDP and Sensex. It is quite obvious from the discourse on TV channels that the whole idea of a genuine democracy – for the people, of the people and by the people – is under silent siege. This is nothing but a complete distortion, abdication and betrayal of all the sacred ideals of democracy by the Nero's in power. The policy makers have completely forgotten even the Father of the nation's politics of wiping the tears of the common person. It is ironical indeed that whereas the recent events in the Arab world and the other parts of the world lend legitimacy to the fact that more and more individuals desire to live in democratic societies than ever before, the democratic societies all over the world are facing a continuous distortion and disruption of the very basic character of democracy.

DISCUSSION

To reimagine a genuinely democratic future for all citizens, one needs to reimagine democratic ideals in the light of the relentless onslaught from neo-liberal ethos. But reimagining is merely the first step in a two-step process. In my view the focus on education, especially on higher education, is precisely the right place to begin the process of reimagining and recreating a truly and genuinely democratic culture of learning and societies. As Noam Chomsky has said, there has been a general assault in the last 25 years on solidarity, democracy, social welfare, anything that interferes with private power, and there are many targets (Chomsky, web). One of the targets is undoubtedly the educational system, besides of course the other sectors like health, energy, transport and even the water. The expansion of neo-liberal capitalism globally suggests a dangerous turn that threatens both the substance of democracy as fundamental to the most basic freedom, equality and justice. When the nation states seem to be in complete grip of these big corporation, as revealed in Radia tapes, politics as an expression of democratic struggle is disrupted and ethical responsibility appears irrelevant. This paper tries to address the fundamental shift in society regarding how we think about the relationship between corporate culture, higher education, and democracy. Specifically, it argues that one of the most important indications of such a change can be seen in the ways in which one is currently being asked to rethink the role of higher education. Underlying this analysis is the assumption that the struggle to reclaim higher education must be seen as part of a broader struggle, and at the heart of such a struggle is the need to challenge the ever-growing discourse and influence of neo-liberal ethos.

The kind of society one wants entirely depends on the kind of education we have. Education and society are dynamically interactive and interdependent. What and how the institutions of higher education teach has enormously complex and far reaching impacts on the entire society in general. In her essay, "The Crisis in Education" (1958), Hannah Arendt wrote: "Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it... whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world..., but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world and building a new scientific mind—a mind that consciously reasons and behaves its way into creating a sustained constructive human presence on the earth (196). This presence is not only manifested by "scientific and social literacy, but by ecological integrity, economic vitality and social equity" (UNESCO, 2005). To reimagine the interconnectedness of democracy and education, one must make an earnest attempt to explore some of the variations played on the theme of an education over time. One must also need to understand how these variations have affected and continue to affect our debates over the structures and purposes of liberal learning. Since there can be no finality about such an idea, as it continues to reinvent itself with the changing contexts, the search for an ideal both substantive and unifying still goes on, along with the belief that only such an idea should guide the forms and reforms of our education system.

Historically speaking the foundation and the institutional structures, practices and courses of study legislated for the medieval universities enable us to somehow generalise some conception of a university. This idea of education in these centres was more or less religious in nature. This idea promoted virtue and moral values as it imagined life as a whole, as a community. The individuals were valued only as parts of the whole, with no value or sanctity of their individual self. The students were educated and trained to uphold the various socio-cultural structures constructed to support the principles of the 'greater whole'. It set a

very high value on the life of the mind and made its continuing cultivation throughout life a principal objective of their social and cultural organisation. Its curriculum was predominantly humanistic. One of the distinct features of the medieval education was to define essential knowledge by mastering already existing truths rather than as a process of making new or original. The second feature was the manner of achieving such knowledge through the recovery and understanding of the texts of classical antiquity. Finally each text or subject was interpreted and understood from the same set of values upholding the unified social and cosmic whole. We can find traces of this kind of education in ancient Greek's Classical School of learning and Indian education system. Indian education system, with its monastic orders of education under the supervision of a guru, was a favoured form of education for the nobility and the working class of the Shudras was generally deprived of educational advantages. The important medieval centres of learning in ancient India were Takshila and Nalanda, with their main focus being the study of topics such as *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, Buddhist literature, logic, grammar, etc. The *Manusmriti*, the *Arthashastra*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were among the influential works which reflect the outlook and understanding of the man and nature at the time.

The Enlightenment age completely transformed and reshaped the existing idea of education. It was Francis Bacon who was instrumental in revolutionizing the idea of higher education based on scientific inquiry. It is this idea of education and society that, over a period of time, has come to shape the idea of collegiate university and its functions in training the individual in general competence, the thoughtful citizen and the cultivated person. Despite sharp differences and variations, this has broadly become the most acceptable and authentic interpretation about the purpose and meaning of education. It holds that the highest purpose and goal in life is to enquire, to create, to search the riches and achievements of the past and then try to internalise the part that is significant and relevant to us, and then to carry that quest for understanding further in our own way. The purpose of education from that point of view is just to help people learn on their own since it is the learner who is ultimately going to achieve something in the course of learning. And it is entirely up to him to decide what his goals are and how he goes on to achieve that and produce something new and exciting in the process.

The idea of education, which was in fashion in a way in the medieval period has again gained a central position in the neo liberal mode of education. This is the idea of indoctrination. This idea is based on the premise that young people have to be placed into a framework in which they learn to follow order, accept existing structures and framework and don't challenge them at all. After the student activism of 1960's, there was a great concern across the education circles that the young students are getting into a dangerous frame of too much freedom and becoming undisciplined as a consequence of this liberty. Some people blamed it on too much of democracy whereas the others went to the extent of calling it the crisis of democracy. This set into motion the entire process of measures taken to turn the education system towards more controlled, more indoctrination, more vocational training, more loans and debts which traps young people into conformity and guarantees good social behaviour. This idea is just the opposite of the idea of enlightenment. And there is a constant struggle that goes on between these two ideas of education. In the enlightenment model we train people into pursuing interests which are close to their hearts and producing real research and innovation by the inculcation of the urge to challenge, to question the doctrine, to challenge authority and to use imagination freely at their personal level. All changes and shifts in human and societal evolutions namely scientific revolution, industrial revolution, green revolution, information revolution, French revolution and Russian revolution have happened as a direct consequence of such an idea. That is what precisely education should mean. However, the other model of indoctrination pursued vigorously in the contemporary times teaches one to conform, to be obedient and to fulfil the roles assigned to him. It does not teach him to shake the structures of power and hegemony.

Today education is often discussed in terms of WTO and GATS dictates which describe higher education as a non-merit good, not a worthwhile capital for social purposes. This is absolutely absurd. Education must have value in itself and must not be measured strictly through growth in economic or GDP terms. Only this kind of education can have an impact for ushering in a peaceful, progressive and truly democratic world. If we look it in terms of cost and benefits, there is going to be a huge adverse impact on the basic character of our education and research. Whether it is scientists, engineers or philosophers, all of them were able to create and discover something new and exciting because of the public sector support. A public education system is based on the principle that you care about the 'other'. It also provides a secure and free environment for intellectual activity that creates new possibilities in the form of new technology and new socio-cultural patterns of society based on equality and justice. If there isn't a lively cultural and educational system which is geared towards independence of thought willing to take creative exploration, to challenge accepted beliefs, then there can be no science, no technology and no economic gains. So, cultural enrichment and public education are very essential for the betterment of the existence.

However today there's a huge effort to try to undermine this in the name of privatization. To try to privatize aspirations also means that you're totally controlled. Private power has its own logic and direction, everyone else has to subordinate himself to it. That's one of the reasons for the attack on the public education system, and it goes right up to the universities. In the universities there's a move toward corporatization with a more flexible work force. That means undermining security. It means have cheap temporary labour like part time teachers, guest teachers, contractual staff and teacher assistants who don't have to be paid much and who can be thrown out easily. When public funding gives place to corporate funding, there's a definite shift in the quality of research as well. A corporation is not likely to fund research for public welfare. Corporate funding is an investment intended to make personal profit. That is why there's a striking tendency for corporate funding to institute more secrecy and short-term applied projects for which the corporation has proprietary control on publication and use. As Milton Friedman correctly says that the board of directors of a corporation actually has a legal obligation to be a monster, an ethical monster.... They're not supposed to do nice things.... You don't expect corporations to be benevolent any more than you expect dictatorships to be benevolent (qtd. in Chomsky, *web*).

If democracy is to remain a defining principle of education and everyday life, it is essential to challenge this unethical encroachment of corporate power. The most important effect of private education is the undermining of the conception of solidarity and cooperation. I think that lies at the heart of the attack on the public education system, the attack on social security, the effort to block any form of national health care, old age pension, secure service conditions which have been going on for years. And, in fact, across the board, and it's understandable. If you want to regiment the minds of men just as an army regiment does, you've got to undermine these subversive notions of mutual support, solidarity, sympathy, caring for other people, and so on and so forth.

Though during the course of my intervention I have completely ignored the decentring impulse of postmodern philosophy in trying to locate a central idea of learning, I cannot resist referring to the great postmodern thinker, Derrida, who also sees the promise of democracy as the proper articulation of a political ethics and, by implication, suggests that when higher education is engaged and articulated through the project of democratic social transformation it can function as a vital public sphere for critical learning, ethical deliberation, and civic engagement. For Derrida, the university should be a place of unconditional dialogue, critique, and critical resistance "to all the power of dogmatic and unjust appropriation (Derrida, *web*)". It is only under such circumstances that the meaning and purpose of higher education redefines the relationship between knowledge and power on the one hand, and learning and social change on the other. In doing so, higher education represents the possibility of retaining one important democratic public sphere that offers the conditions for resisting the increasing depoliticization of the citizenry, provides a language to challenge the politics of accommodation that connects education to the logic of privatization. At stake is not simply the future of higher education, but the nature of both existing modes of democracy and the promise of a democracy to come when:

A new form of domination is emerging in our times that breaks with the orthodox method of rule-by-engagement and uses deregulation as its major vehicle: 'a mode of domination that is founded on the institution of insecurity – domination by the precariousness of existence.' (Bauman, 68)

CONCLUSION

To conclude I suggest that educators, students, and society at large will have to provide the rationale and mobilize the possibility for creating fresh possibilities of resistance. We all need to come together. We all need to come together to defend institutions of higher education as indispensable to the life of the nation and people. These institutions have to be the sites to engage in the experience of real democracy. In the face of corporate takeovers, the ongoing commodification of the curriculum, and the transformation of students into consumers, bureaucratisation of the higher education, only a collective struggle can re-establish and reassert the crucial importance of higher education in offering students the skills they need for learning how to govern and take risks, while developing the knowledge necessary for reasoned arguments and social action, particularly the idea that as citizens they are 'entitled to public services, decent housing, safety, security, support at hard times, and most importantly, some power over decision making.

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