ONLINE EDUCATION, DIGITAL CAPITALISM AND
EQUALITY IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Today's education system is designed to deprive the poor of education rather than to educate them, and the only function of this system is to maintain the interests of the upper and middle classes and help them stay in their positions.

- J. P. Naik

Why is the Indian state unable — or unwilling — to deal with the high and increasing illiteracy, Low school enrollments, high dropout rates, and rampant child labour?

- Myron Weiner

I

The introduction of the New Economic Policy in the early 1990s and certain imperatives of globalisation made India succumb to the international pressure and extend her economic activities beyond the national borders. A lot of water has flowed since it was realised that globalisation is not just economic openness, economic interdependence and integration with the world economy. Now, globalisation is increasingly being seen as free flow of information, technology, ideas and identities, barring regional and national boundaries.

However, this so-called free-flow has not been that free, as the dependence of the weaker nations over the technologically equipped nations has increased manifold, resulting into asymmetrical and skewed developmental pattern. As compared to primary education, higher education is more susceptible to market forces and prone more to the forceful intervention and manipulation.

The economic system does not simply commercialise education by making it a commodity; it also shapes the content and form of education, and the institutions that impart higher education.[1] India's higher education has been facing serious challenges pertaining to equity, quality, access, resources, etc. Increasing privatisation of higher education can hardly be useful in resolving these problems. Given that the idea of privatisation largely draws upon the sentiment of profit, there is "little evidence to show that the Indian private sector institutions have done much to upgrade quality and standards to cater to the educational needs of our less well-off families."[2]

II

1)   **Instrumentalist-Functional Approach** : This is a tradition approach : "Though e-learning offers ease, flexibility and the ability to remotely access a classroom in the student's own time, learners may feel a sense of isolation. This is because learning online is a solo act for the most part, which may give the learner the feeling that they are acting completely alone. As technology progresses and E-learning benefits from the advancements being made, learners can now engage more actively with professors or other students using tools such as video conferencing, social media, and discussion forums amongst others."[3] Many developing countries and traditional scholars subscribe to this approach.

2)   **Moral-Reformist Approach :** AIFRTE - NEP 2020 vigorously promotes online and digital education at all levels of education as a parallel and often as alternative to regular formal education. It conceives online and digital education as a strategy for curtailing dropouts and for

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[1]**References**

 Janadhyala B G. Tilak (Ed.) (Ed.), *Higher Education in India : In Search of Equality, Quality and Quantity* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2013) 465.

[2] Samuel Paul, "Internationalisation of Higher Education: strategic Implications" Janadhyala B. G. Tilak (Ed.). *Higher Education in India: In Search of Equality, Quality and Quantity* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2013) 454.

[3]

 https://www.talentlms.com/elearning/benefits-and-drawbacks-of-online-learning

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providing education to the disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). However, according to the National Sample Survey (NSS) data (2017-18), only 8% of all households with members aged between 5 and 24 years have both a computer and an internet connection; only a little over 15% of rural households and 42% households in the urban areas have access to internet services (including through cyber I or neighbouring homes); among the poorest 20% households, only 2.7% have access to a computer and 8.9% have access to internet facilities. The rising cost of smartphones and other devices along with that of the cost of data renders online education way beyond the capacity of the masses.

3)   **Politico-Dialectical Approach :**

Drawing largely upon Marxism, this theory demonstrates "how communication and culture are material practices, how labour and language are mutually constituted, and how communication and information are dialectical instances of the same social activity, the social construction of meaning. Situating these tasks within a larger framework of understanding power and resistance would place communication directly into the flow of a Marxian tradition that remains alive and relevant today".

Given that communication has always been embedded into structures of inequality in class societies, any thought pertaining to the use of technology in communication and its relation to the idea of dissemination of ideas and education calls for critical reappraisal. Also, given that educational policy and institutions in any given society are an organic outgrowth of the social structure, introduction of new technology in the field of education also calls for reconsideration of the educational policy *vis-à-vis* new technology.

Looking upon the pandemic as an opportunity to mint, the tech utopians wasted little time in promoting the move to online teaching as a permanent solution to the various problems of higher education. For example, the National Education Policy, 2020 looks up to online education as a tool of providing education to all: "New circumstances and realities require new initiatives. The recent rise in epidemics and pandemics necessitates that we are ready with alternative modes of quality education whenever and wherever traditional and in-person modes of education are not possible. In this regard, the National Education Policy 2020 recognizes the importance of leveraging the advantages of technology while acknowledging its potential risks and dangers. It calls for carefully designed and appropriately scaled pilot studies to determine how the benefits

of online/digital education can be reaped while addressing or mitigating the downsides. In the meantime, the existing digital platforms and ongoing ICT-based educational initiatives must be optimized and expanded to meet the current and future challenges in providing quality education for all."

New communication technology, which has forced the Indian education system to embark on digital learning, has grown as part of digital capitalism, which itself is an attempt to overcome the deepening crisis in capitalism. Indian education system, which has already been mired into varying kinds of inequality marked by caste, class, patriarchy, etc. is bound to suffer further erosion, if it continues to be dominated by new technologies. It is necessary to situate the debate on online education beyond the context of digital divide and situate it in the context of digital capitalism.

III

For admission to degree courses in 45 central universities in India this year'. The Central Government has announced to conduct the Central University Entrance Test. This exam is being hyped with the catchy slogan 'One Nation, One Examination'. All the students in the country will be given equal opportunities and facilities, said the government. Educationists concerned about the education of the general public in India have raised many questions about the examination and its claims; But their voice was not heard.

The Indian elites are not interested in India's educational woes. They believe that the problem of our children has been solved through multi-level educational institutions. Because modern education is an instrument of capitalist modernisation and since the Indian elite has to deny such the fruits of such modernisation to to these masses, the elites preferred restrictions on the spread of education. By designing many schemes such as spending less on education; encouraging educational institutions to operate along caste boundaries; lowering the quality of government education; strict examination system, encouraging privatization of education, favoring multi-tiered school system, the educational aspirations and, alternatively, upward mobility of a large section of the society were controlled.

The Indian education system is suffering from a double crisis - qualitative and qualitative! This is, primarily, due to India's unique social structure. "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

was the advice given by Winston Churchill to an international organization preparing to save capitalism in peril. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued in the *Communist Manifesto* that capitalism encounters a crisis and it overcomes such crisis. Overcoming such a crisis, the system proves itself again like a snake that is cast off its dead skin.

Nearly 84 percent of households in India experienced a decline in their income during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the epidemic became an opportunity for Indian capitalists to make money in the time of disaster. This time, it was seen how irresponsible this class, which leads the society, can behave during a disaster. During this period, the number of billionaires in India increased from 40 to 142.[4]

The experience of several Indians during the COVID-19 period has been very traumatic. Indian businessmen-capitalists, who lacked in innovation and creativity, looked up to the COVID-19 period as a great opportunity. During this period, India's online coaching industry grew massively. Founded in 2011, India's edutech company Byju's has become the world's largest online education company in a short span of time. It is especially remarkable that it has expanded during the COVID-19 period! A total of 10 crore students are studying from Byju out of which 65 lakh are fee paying students on an annual basis. Byju's has more employees than any public university in India.

One wonders how this company, which was established in 2011, has reached such a sky high in just eleven years. The rise and development of a company like Byju's has not happened suddenly. Before the establishment of Byju's, the private tutoring industry in India was well-established. Poor quality education system in India has been the cause of huge growth of private tutoring industry. A few years ago, a survey of the educational status of 128 countries conducted by the UNESCO showed that India was ranked 105th in educational development.

In the wake of such widespread failure of education, the tuition industry in India flourished. Only two countries in the world have more students of educational age (30 crore)

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 https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-s-billionaire-count-at-142-in-2021-84-households-see-income-decline-122011700601_1.html

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than India. According to the "Global Education Census Report (2018)", India has the highest number of private tuition students in the world (57 percent of total students). This number is increasing day by day. The turnover in the private tuition and coaching industry is approximately one and a half lakh crore rupees.

Various entrance tests have given impetus to this industry. Various types of competitive admission processes have been rationalized in India in the name of convenience and quality. Admission to courses like medicine, engineering, law, management and medicine are done through various entrance tests. These entrance tests nullify the 10th and 12th standard examinations conducted by various state boards. As a result, schools and junior colleges built with government grants have now turned into ineffectual skeletons. Entrance examinations have superseded these institutional mechanisms. Since the marks in these exams are not considered for admission, students have begun to prioritise these tests (especially 12th).

As these entrance tests are based on multiple-choice questions through online mode, theoretical and practical knowledge acquisition processes are excluded and knowledge is converted into information and information is converted into different pieces. Consequently, emphasis is laid on recitation rather than scientific understanding of various concepts, their interrelationships and applications. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), which are supposed to be the best engineering institutes, have not produced scientists of international calibre because the admission process for the institutes is based on memory. This method of learning, based on mechanical recitation, benefited the middle class and upper middle class children more.

Any kind of centralisation in India is likely to complement the elites. Regional-level elites and non-elites are more likely to be distant from or deprived of central power. It is self-evident that any entrance test is going to be difficult for the students affiliated to different regional boards of different states in India. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) students have topped the NEET exam results. Ever since the announcement of the 'Central University Entrance Test' through online mode for admission to degree courses in central universities, the business of coaching classes for this test took off overnight.

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In the states like Tamil Nadu and elsewhere too, there has been an increase in the flow of students to junior colleges affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education. Even among the schools and junior colleges affiliated to this board, the proportion of unaided institutions is high. For example, a total of 20 schools are affiliated to this board in Nanded districts. Out of these, only 3 schools are aided.

Justice and equality in education cannot be guaranteed without democratising the admission process! The school was closed immediately (even before the national lockout) as soon as the COVID-19 virus spread. This decision was immediately applied to the whole of India. Schools were closed for almost eighteen months. A total of 25 crore students from one and a half lakh schools in India were affected by this school closure.

Student population in India is larger than the population of many countries. Only three countries in the world have more population than India's total student population.

There was only one comforting thing about the COVID-19 virus. That is, COVID-19 did not affect children. Previous pandemics have shown that school closures have been able to contain and postpone the peak of an epidemic. But this does not necessarily apply to the COVID-19 virus. Of the total COVID-19 deaths worldwides, the share of infant death was only 0.2 percent. Therefore, the initial decision to close the school had to be re-evaluated.

The widespread school ban has had an adverse effect on the children of the poor and their parents. The School Children's Offline and Online Learning (SCHOOL) report on a survey of 1,400 primary school children in India has just been released

This report discusses the adverse effect of school ban on these children. It showed that only 8 percent of rural children were able to receive virtual education. Also, 37 percent of children were not getting any education during this period. Half of the children could not read words except for a few words. Only 24 percent of children in urban areas have the capacity to receive virtual education on a regular basis, while 8 percent in rural areas. The main reason for this is that more than half of the households do not have smartphones. Additionally, lack of internet connectivity and lack of money to buy data matter.

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The UNICEF fears that the longer the children stay out of school, the less likely they are to return to school. Also, the longer they stay out of school, the more vulnerable they become. Children learning through virtual systems have increased rates of neck, shoulder, wrist and eye pain. Many institutes have expressed concern about the impact on the mental health of students during this period.

Since the pre-COVID-19 period, capital investment had increased after the introduction of new technology in the education sector. During this period, the profits of the companies providing virtual education were very fruitful. The COVID-19 has become a 'disaster asset' for these companies. Academic capitalism has flourished throughout the world during this period. Investments in the online education industry in the US stood at Rs. 1,35,000 crore; by 2025, it will increase to Rs 26,25,000 crore. Byju's is the world's largest company in India founded in 2011. Today, the assets of this company are Rs 1,35,000 crore. The family wealth of Ravidran Baiju, owner of the company Baijuj, has increased to Rs 24,300 crore.

India occupies prominent place in the educational market. It has the highest number of people in the age group of 5-24 in the world. India's virtual education market is second only to that of the US. The turnover of virtual education companies in India 2021-25s is going to be Rs. 20,900 crore. In the year 2020, the profit of the company Byju's alone was Rs 2,800 crore. Compared to 2019 (Rs 1,341 crore), this profit was almost double. Byju's registered customer-students are 5 million; While students who are actual customers are 35 lakhs. In fact, the *Niti Aayog* of the central government has entered into an agreement with the company Byju's. During the layoffs, there has been a massive increase in customers of companies other than Byju's. This is a form of academic capitalism.

In fact, it is very possible for the government to provide the facility of providing education through virtual means. There are many companies that provide virtual education only on the curriculum made by the government. If the government can design curriculum; it can also create best videos based on that curriculum. Many aspiring teachers have created curriculum-based videos on their own. If these teachers had been properly trained, the government could have produced better videos than those of the Byju's. But that didn't happen. Rather, the government policy is to give free rein to private companies in the education sector. As soon as

we have a syllabus, copies are supplied to the private companies and the guides are marketed before the textbooks are made available. China has recently passed a law banning the private tuition industry with an investment of Rs 9 lakh crore.

The Indian government has laid undue emphasis on making structural changes in schools. Just by providing only television sets, many state governments have declared several schools as 'digital schools' without providing basic facilities to them. Hence, 'Digital School' signboards suddenly appeared on the abandoned buildings of government schools with no access to playgrounds, libraries, laboratories, and even toilets and drinking water.

Students diverted to the so-called digital schools do not have such facilities. During the pandemic, there did not seem to be much preparation at the school level beyond disinfecting the children's hands and the school.

Conclusion

Given that Indian education system suffers from many serious shortcomings, introduction of online education may generate new divide. Moreover, dominance of the market in the field of online education will cause marginalisation of the disadvantaged. The state needs to develop the public sector so as to democratise online learning.

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