

Globalization and Indian Higher Education¹

Prabhat Patnaik

Former Professor
Centre for Economic Studies and Planning
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi &
Former Chairman
Planning Board, Kerala

Abstract

This article argues that the recent measures adopted by the Government of India towards globalizing the higher education sector is actually a move intended to accelerate the process of privatization, in accordance with the interests of global capital. It would eventually undermine the autonomy of public universities and lead to their gradual decline. It would also jeopardize the federal structure of the nation. In the social plane, it would help reproduce the backwardness of the socially deprived groups by derailing the existing reservation norms.

Keywords: Globalization, Higher Education, commoditization, homogenization, hegemonization, Hindutva nationalism, intellectual parasitism.

The recent attempts to undermine the autonomy of the universities has developed into a matter of deep concern for all of us in India. This question should be discussed in the context of political economy, the context of the changes that has occurred in society at large, and its implications on higher education. Let me begin by referring to Gandhiji. At the time of the Civil Disobedience Movement, when Gandhiji asked students to abandon educational institutions – their colleges, Universities and so on – he had a correspondence with the God. God asked him whether this is a country having so few educated people, and as a result instead of promoting that few who were getting educated, asking them to continue with this education, you are asking them to leave their universities and colleges; this is something which does not make any sense. Gandhiji's reply was interesting. He said that the persons who were getting education in India were getting educated in order to become basically servitors of the British Raj. What we want in India is not that kind of education, but of a different kind. There are two prepositions in Gandhiji's remark which are particularly import-

¹ This article is the transcribed and edited version of the speech delivered by Prof. Prabhat Patnaik in the national seminar on Federalism and Democracy in Indian Higher Education in the Context of the Scrapping of UGC organized under the auspices of E.K. Nayanar Chair for Parliamentary Affairs, Kannur University, on 10th October, 2018.

ant. The first is that the kind of education we get is not independent of the objective of the education system, of the structure of the education system, within which this education is being imparted. In other words, Education is not some kind of a homogeneous thing which can be imparted by a private institution, public institution, or by any kind of institution, be it foreign universities, it is not as if it is a homogeneous thing and as a matter of fact the objective of the education system, the structure of the education system and the kind of education that had been imparted, they all constitute one interrelated whole, which can be in the interests of the people of the country. And of course the second proposition which Gandhiji actually implied is that the kind of education that had been introduced in British India is not in the interest of the people; that it would be better for those who get this kind of education should abandon their institutions and come out in the streets and participate in the movement. For those people Gandhiji set up a whole lot of specific institutions like the Kasi Vidyapeet and Gujarat Vidyapeet which were trying to develop a very different, alternate, system of education.

After independence there were many things wrong happened in our education system; we know that our public education system has for quite some time been in tattles. We know a large number of unfilled positions in public universities; we know that state governments for instance have been extremely starved of funds; so much so that sometimes posts remaining unfilled is a deliberate decision on the part of the state governments in order to save their budgetary resources. Once I was in the UGC committee, dealing with the requirements of various Economics departments, Head of one of the publicly funded University Departments told us that they actually have only three faculty members to run the Department – with MA, MPhil and PhD programmes – and they normally ask students to read on their own. Sometimes universities carry their programmes through the system of appointing temporary ad-hoc faculties, which is now very common, and which is a way of saving budgetary resources, but in fact it is a violation of the principle of equal pay for equal work. This has been going on in public Universities now and this is developing as a real crisis in the public education system. But the problem with such a crisis needs to be resolved within the system and, the alternative is, quoting Gandhiji again, implies shifting the nature of the education system itself. In other words, compared to the post-independence period, the objective of the education system, its structure and orientation, would be geared towards providing, in the words of the organic intellectuals, fodder to globalized capital. Now in the more recent period we have been moving to an education system which provides fodder for globalized capital but that fodder is filled with ideas of Hindutva. We have in fact a Hindutva infused commodity being produced through the education system which would be of use to globalized capital.

This does not mean that the entire set of products of the education system that exists or is moving towards one in which all are going to be employed by globalized capital. No such possibility exists. But the point is that this is the kind of vision which trends home our education system now and there is no conflict between that vision on the one hand and putting all kinds of ideas of Hindutva nationalism into the minds of the same students on the other. I would come back to this question of nationalism later on and the kind of nationalism that is being imparted, the kind of nationalism for instance which underlies in the directives to the universities by the MHRD that they must all celebrate the surgical strike deal, that kind of nationalism is completely compatible with the production of products as commodities in this new education system which is informed by the requirements of globalized capital which does not of course mean that all these products are going to be employed by this globalized capital. But, none the less, the education system that is being fashioned is one which is informed by that kind of concoctors.

What are the implications of this kind of objective fashioning of education system and how does it contrast with the previous system? The first thing of course is that if you have the education system been geared towards producing foddors to globalised capital, in that case this fodder is producing in the form of commodities. That education system is one that is going to produce people who look at their value, who look at their achievements, in terms of the amount of money they command in the market. A commodity has a very specific meaning and that meaning is that the commodity, for the producer of this commodity, for the seller of this commodity, only that presents a certain amount of money. The person who owns Walmart is interested only in the amount of money that Walmart is earning; as a result, production of students, the production of the education system as commodities, basically means converting them into beings who look at their self world, their achievements, in terms of money that they command; this is something which we see in our daily life, in newspaper reports, of how a fresh IIT graduate or a IIM graduate has landed a job with one and a half crores of annual salary. This is supposed to be a tremendous achievement, an achievement of that institution, that it actually produced somebody who could grab a job with one and half crores. That is what I really mean by the production of commodities, and that is held up as a model for a glorious achievement; that an actual producer has a commodity which has such a high value. Now, interestingly, we get an idea of the education system which is to produce people who are commodities in that sense and thus one of the first implications of an education system geared towards producing for the globalised capital.

The second thing of course is that there has to be a homogenization. Globalised capital is globalized. So it would like those com-

modities being produced by the Indian education system would be no different from the commodity being produced, let's say, by the Belgian education system or the Chinese education system, or some other so that they can be compared in terms of a very homogeneous set of persons, who have not identical kinds of faces; being put into their world, they have identical set of ideas and identical set of notions, and then globalised capital can choose from among them. If we have all persons with their own kind of uses, in that case they are not commoditized in the sense that globalized capital would like to do. Therefore this homogenization becomes extremely important. This is not happening now; this has been happening for sometime. Sometime ago, I know from experience, the UGC was asked to set up a set of really 'good' Universities; the idea was to ask Oxford to set up a university here like the Oxford, Cambridge University to set up one here as well as Harvard to do so. In other words, these are universities which are supposed to be clones, carbon copies, as their original, without knowing that carbon copies will never be as good as the original, and hence could not exist at all. They would be having curriculum, syllabi and course content very much similar to that being taught outside. So this homogenization is a very important feature and this homogenization also occurs within the country where we have very different course structure like say, that of the MG University in Kerala. The idea increasingly is that even at the level of state universities, there should be a homogenization so that basically more or less all students are passing through the same will and they would be built up and evaluated by globalised capital and its offshoots. Some who are supposedly have a better fortune, would be paid by higher salaries; all of them can then be brought into a connection with the amount of money that they reserve in command.

But what does homogenization actually imply? Speaking about my own subject Economics, I believe an Indian student of Economics must know with the impact of British Colonial rule on India. If you want to know the impact of British Colonial rule on India then you must know about the drain of surplus from India about which people like Dadabhi Naoroji and Romesh Chandra Dutt wrote about. Therefore I believe that an Indian student of Economics must have familiarity with the writings of Naoroji, Dutt and others as part of the kind of training that an Indian student must have if that Indian student is going to serve the people of the country as an organic intellectual of the Indian nation. But on the other hand, nobody in Harvard or Cambridge has heard about Naoroji or Dutt; except those who have specialized on Indian economic history but otherwise so if you are going to take the Economics syllabus of Cambridge or Oxford or Harvard and applied in these universities, you are effectively shutting your students off from a knowledge of their home societies, from the history of their own societies and you are really producing second rate clones of the

kind of product that Harvard or Cambridge or Oxford people would be producing. So this homogenization is the next important implication of history.

If these students are produced as homogeneous commodities in that case ideally such commodity would be produced in private, commercial, money making establishments. As a matter of fact even the public universities become imitative; the argument I continuously come across in the JNU and elsewhere is that if our students earn so much then why doesn't the university also charge higher fees. So higher fees become justified; the University itself then internalizes the task of producing commodities; a student who gets one and a half crore must be really very proud of that. So commoditization affects not just profit making institutions; they of course make profit because their whole objective is to produce students who get one and a half crore to one crore; but even public universities, government says, why take money from the budget. Why don't you charge higher fees? So even public universities become imitative of this particular task; they abandon the idea of serving the people of the country through the education system but instead get drawn into the sole objective of producing for the globalised capital.

And, of course, one very important implication of this development, very important characteristic, is centralization. If public universities are going to produce such products, such commodities, private universities are introduced to produce such commodities, then naturally they say homogenization become very important. In this case the scope for state universities, like for example MG University or the autonomous Abul Kalam University of Delhi, which could try different kinds of things, that scope must be restricted. Therefore centralization as a question of the powers of the state, and therefore the powers of state universities, is part of this very process. Now this separation is of course had been going on for sometime; we know that there is a centralization of resources at the decision making which is going on for a very long time; the GST is in fact an addition to that because of the power of the state governments over direct taxes virtually disappear because everything is outside the hands of the state government now. So this centralization of power in decision making, and of resources, is in effect crippling the state universities and now that crippling effect is further reinforced by a lot of institutional changes that are taking place. After all, we know that as per the Indian Constitution, the capacity of the centre to raise resources is much greater than the responsibilities given to the center; the capacity of the states to make resources much less than the responsibilities given to the states. So periodically, every five years, we have a finance commission and the finance commission decides on the allocation of resources, the evolution of resources from

the centre to the state. Many people would say that, recently, the last finance commission recommended a substantial increase in the evolution of resources, which the central government has accepted; then how can you say that states have been starved of funds and this is an argument of people forwarded including by the union Finance Minister. But what is missed in this argument is that from the centre to the states the evolution of financial resources occurs through a number of channels; one channel is the finance commission, another channel is the plan grant which is used to be given, and a third one is various Ministries discretionally transferred.

If you look at the total grant from the centre to the state, even in the year in which the centre accepted the finance commission recommendations and therefore make a larger proportion of the divisible pool over the finance commission's jurisdiction applies, the total resources made available to the states are falling as a proportion of their population. In other words, the basic kind of discrepancy between the states' responsibilities and the states' finances is something which continues, that is actually getting aggravated notwithstanding what the centre has done over the finance commission recommendations. It follows therefore that the financial stranglehold that exist for a state university is a concern and, in addition, now there are various kinds of administrative efforts to homogenize it in a way where the federal structure of the Constitution is being undermined. Education, which was a part of the states list, was put into the concurrent list sometime ago; even within the concurrent list now the kind of areas over which the centre take decisions is increasing. For instance is the scrapping of the UGC; UGC is a body used to hand over resources to all kinds of universities including the state universities; now it is the case that the UGC is scrapped and the MHRD is given charge. MHRD is just a ministry of the centre. Now, it is put in charge of the evolution of funds to state universities and it itself is a very serious encroachment on the federal principle. These are some of the characteristics which are actually come through the commoditization, therefore commercialization, therefore hegemonization and therefore centralization of higher education that is taking place. But then a question can be legitimately asked, what is so wrong, what is so specifically disturbing, is that the new education system that has been introduced is something which has certain disturbing implications and let me turn to these implications next.

One implication which everybody has talked about at some length is the fact that it excludes people; that one of the things which has happened in the public universities is that there were reservations for people from socially deprived backgrounds. If you have private system, in the private system there is no need to have any reservations and no compulsion to implement them. As a result private institutions

would violate such reservations. As a matter of fact now even public institutions are violating these reservations from being implemented. And of course the fees structure, not quite apart from the reservations are not there, large number of the students get excluded. Well, when this argument is presented, there is the counter argument. When I was a member of the planning commission, I used to raise this issue. The Deputy Chairman of the commission consoled me that there is no scope for worries; even if the fees are high these students could run their education through student loans and can pay back their loans once they get jobs and in that case there is no exclusion on economic grounds. This argument might make some sense in a world in which there is complete, full employment and everybody is assured of a job at the end of their education so that through job you will have enough money and you can pay back the loans from the banks or wherever you have taken such loans. But obviously we live in a world of enormous amount of educated unemployment and as a result many people who take such loans cannot pay them back and as a result many of them would be driven to such a 'safe' position where a lot of peasants in the country commit mass suicides; and this fear of being pushed to the wall because of the inability to pay back loans would prevent many students from actually taking such loans anyway. One of the things we must not forget about the public education system, amidst all its failures, is that it has actually produced in public universities a large numbers of extra ordinarily articulate, intelligent and dynamic students from socially and economically deprived backgrounds. This is something which is really a remarkable feature of central universities where you can take variety of students like Rohit Vemula from HCU or Kanayya Kumar from JNU. Large number of students who have come up from socially and economically deprived backgrounds, through the system of public education, would be completely wiped out, obliterated, through privatization and they still exist because of the fact that until now universities like JNU still have not charged higher fees. Once that happens, then that entire set would no longer be able to enter universities. So exclusion is one very important part of the new system of education that we are introducing.

The second part of it is that when you are looking at a commodity, when you are actually producing a product, which is ideally suited to be in the market, which globalized capital will have a demand. The whole idea is that if you are somebody who is staring up this air, trying to question, trying to worry about things, trying to dig deep into an issue, such a person is not a very marketable commodity; in order to be marketable you must necessarily absolve a capsule called higher education and then produce that capsule whenever you are in an interview situation or whenever someone is asking you a question or so. That may be very good for 'still' development but that is not good for edu-

education because fundamentally education requires questioning. Unless you question you are not really getting an education, your purpose of education must be to make you questioning, and the purpose of education that turns out commodities is to prevent you from questioning, and if that happens the originality goes, as well as the whole kind of idea of thinking of your own, because the idea of producing people who are both excited by the world of grand ideas and who wants to be a part of it, and who wants to push front years of knowledge, who are sufficiently confused and therefore questioning in order to do so, that kind of production ceases. As a result, this kind of an education system really destroys creativity. At the same time, when you add to it the kind of Hindutva nationalism that has been imparted this Hindutva Nationalism additionally does reap with the concept of rationality in the sense that mythology and history, fact and fiction, science and prejudice are not distinguished between, and therefore what it does is a set of destructional reason which takes place in the University set up. Now a very important implication of this is of course that you cease to be the progenitors of new ideas, you get a capsule produced in Harvard, Columbia, or Princeton, and therefore you become intellectual parasites. And intellectual parasitism is something which basically implies that the real freedom consists above all, or begins above all, with freedom of thought. If you are intellectually parasites on the metropolis in that case ultimately that is something that undermines, subverts, your real freedom to the service of the metropolis. So the cultivation of intellectual parasitism, the cultivation of the destruction of creativity, all these are the central features of exactly the kind of education system we are moving into.

And this is obviously visible, that in universities where the students who are questioning, students who are agitated about the world around them, instead of celebrating that agitation, instead of being happy that we have a young generation of students that is questioning, by suppressing that agitation and suppressing that questioning, we are actually making them into disciplined foot soldiers who actually swallow these capsules and thereby train themselves to become ideal fodder for globalized capital and its various offshoots. In the context of the notion of Hindutva nationalism being imparted, many people would say this is the kind of nationalism Gandhiji was talking about, that he was propagating; but there is in fact a fundamental difference between the two very different concepts of nationalisms – the western concept of nationalism which began with the Westphalian peace treaties in the 17th century, was a concept of nation, nation-state, nationalism – all of which many people knew as a way to sustain the divine rights of the kings which existed earlier, which presented the king as the representative of god. People started questioning the divine right of kings and therefore, in some centres, the new concept of nationalism was a way

of sustaining kingship without the divine rights of kings because now the king was the repository of the nation and nationalism, the representative of the nation.

This kind of nationalism was characterized by three important features. One was that there was always an enemy within; the Jews everywhere in Europe, the Catholics in northern Europe, the Protestants in southern Europe; they were all enemy within. Secondly, nationalism was necessarily having an imperialist counterpart; it always was aggressive, expansionary; not within Europe where they had reached some kind of agreement on the treaties of Westphalia, but all over the third world. As a matter of fact, Cromwell's conquest of Ireland, which was the first conquest of imperialism of a colony, was made shortly a few months after the Westphalian peace treaties. The third feature, which I think is the most important, is the notion of nationalism – when the nation was seen to be above the people, the people were supposed to serve the nation, to work for the nation but the nation itself was above the people. Now, that basically meant that whether the nation was carrying out imperial projects, people will have to serve that, and if you did not then you are anti-national. As opposed to this, the nationalism was the anti-colonial struggle; the nationalism that Gandhiji stood for was a kind of nationalism that first was inclusive of every Indian irrespective of religion; the nation was constituted, constructed, as an inclusive entity; it was not imperialist because you had good relation with all the other neighbouring countries and so on otherwise you cannot fight the British – above all, the idea of the nation was that the nation was consisted of people. That serving the nation meant serving the people. Gandhiji's idea that the tears must be wiped out from the eyes of every Indian was really what the Nation was supposed to be; the whole purpose of the Indian nation was to achieve that the Nation was not separated from the people. What we have now is a revival of the kind of the post-Westphalian-European aggressive, aggrandizing nationalism in which the nation is supposed to be above the people and anybody who would fight for the people and therefore agitate against some economic project being undertaken or against the overall economic strategy being undertaken, or even against the education system that is being altered, would be considered anti-national. So the whole idea of calling people, calling fighters against injustices to the people anti-national follows such a notion of nationalism in which the nation is supposed to stand independent of the people and that what is at good of the nation is high GDP growth rate, substantial increases in wealth, but the point is that the GDP growth rate we achieve at the expense of the people, that is something which you are not supposed to worry about, because the nation is becoming better off while the people are becoming worst off. This idea of nationalism which the Hindutva ideologues have brought in now is really the diametrical op-

posite of Gandhiji's idea of nationalism. And, therefore, universities now, in addition to producing commodities, are supposed to produce commodities of minds filled with that notion of nationalism; there you actually have not the panacea for nation-building but a panacea for national destruction. In fact the third world is full of examples where the nation building project is something which has run the ground full of examples of 'failed nation states' and if our education system is not rectified, we would also be moving in the same direction of the failed nation states.

It is extremely important for us because the higher education commission which is being brought out now is really pushing this tendency further forward to oppose it. All the features of the new education system – centralization, commoditization, homogenization – all of them are now going to be further carried forward by the HECI. Why? Just consider commoditization. The Higher Education Commission was first mooted for instance by the Yashpal committee and why it was mooted, one of the ideas was that large number of private universities are coming up; they actually need some kind of an implementor, they need approval for these universities which necessitates a new commission, the UGC cannot manage it; the higher education commission is set up for getting quick approval for private universities. It is actually carrying forward the task of privatization; the whole range of private universities can then actually come and do on their own and the whole idea is that if you have financial autonomy in that case you can do whatever you like and you can engage in the task of producing commodities as your educational products. Centralization again basically is a kind of intervention which the HECI is going to do which is much greater than what the UGC ever did. The kind of micro intervention in the course structure of government funded universities that the HECI proposed to do is actually far more serious and intense than anything that the UGC had done. The composition of the HECI council is such that academics are really largely out, there will be two professors and all the rest of the 12 member committee are bureaucrats of various styles and regarding the Vice Chancellors, who may have been academics to start with, but now are fine bureaucratic or of official positions and consequently they will also be more or less going ahead with the views of the government. So this is basically a government controlled education system where academics are out and the little voice they had earlier they would no longer have. Also you have commoditization taking place, you have centralization taking place; you have a further body of academics from this whole process of higher education all of which carries on all work the agenda I was talking about; the agenda that underlines the paradigm shift in higher education sector taking place at the moment in our country. So it is very important for us to actually raise our voices against this and to fight for an alternative education

system. Fortunately not all the whole system is destroyed; substantial amount of it remains is most important. I had the chance to go to lots of universities and talk to the student community. Everywhere I find among the students a kind of anger, commitment and passion which I have not seen for decades. In fact, students are becoming deeply concerned about the direction the country is taking in a very big way and that's a very positive sign for the future.

References

- Agarwal, Pawan (Ed). 2012. A Half Century of Indian Higher Education: Essays by Philip G. Attbach. New Delhi: Sage Publishers.
- Barrett, Beverly, 2017. Globalization and Change in Higher Education: Political Economy of Policy Reforms in Europe. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bridges, David, et.al (Eds). 2012. Higher Education and National Development: Universities and Societies in Transition. London: Routledge.
- Ennew, Christie and David Greenaway (Eds). The Globalization of Higher Education. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Khan, Tamanna. 2016. Higher Education in Globalized Era: An Indian Experience. New Delhi: Shipra Publications.
- Maheswari, Amrutha. 2011. Globalization and Indian Higher Education. New Delhi: Gagandeep Publishers.
- Ortiz, Marta Peris and Jose M Merigo Lindahl (Eds). 2016. Sustainable Learning in Higher Education: Developing Competencies for the Global Marketplace. London: Springer.
- Panikkar, K.N and M. Bhaskaran Nair (Ed). 2011. Globalization and Higher Education in India. New Delhi: Pearson.