

On the Political Economy of Educational “Reforms”

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The educational “reforms” we are witnessing today in India are usually attributed to the changing requirements of the economic system. This is no doubt true, but in addition they are also meant to serve the needs of the new “Ideological State Apparatus”, to use Louis Althusser’s term, that must come into being to correspond to the change in the economic regime. The direction of the current education “reforms” is such that they serve both purposes, i.e. they are in conformity with a changed totality.

The nature of the “Ideological State Apparatus”, in whose formation the education system plays a major role, is determined by the nature of the State itself. The education “reforms” therefore are integrally linked to the transition in the nature of the Indian State, from being a *dirigiste*¹ to a neo-liberal State, a transition associated with the change that has taken place in the economic regime, and correspondingly in the nature of class relations in the Indian society.

I

The Indian State that had come into being after independence had been a product of the anti-colonial struggle, which had taken off in a big way in the 1930s when the peasantry, reeling under the impact of the Great Depression in the capitalist world, had thrown its weight behind it. This widening of the support base of the anti-colonial struggle had been made possible by the formulation of a vision of what post-independence India was to look like, for the first time at the Karachi Congress in 1931. The Karachi Resolution may be seen therefore as the first draft of the implicit social contract that underlay the formation of the post-independence Indian State, and that ultimately found expression in the Indian Constitution.

In accordance with this vision, the post-independence Indian State *inter alia* extended protection to the petty production economy, in particular to peasant agriculture, against the vicissitudes of world market price fluctuations, and against encroachments by big Indian capital; it also developed a public sector, as a bulwark against Multinational Corporations, and metropolitan capital generally, and for facilitating, through an expansion of the home market and through plugging gaps in the production structure, a relatively autonomous capitalist development.

The State that presided over the adoption of this path of capitalist development, in relative autonomy from metropolitan capital, taking the help of the then-existing socialist countries

1 *Social and economic matters controlled or directed by a central authority.*

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and pursuing a foreign policy of non-alignment, had a complex character: it was a bourgeois State in so far as it was ushering in capitalism, but it was not a State that exclusively promoted the interests of the bourgeoisie; rather it appeared to be, and not without justification, a State placed above classes, looking after the interests also of classes other than the bourgeoisie.

To be sure, inequalities in wealth and incomes not only were allowed to persist (the absence of radical land redistribution being an instance of this), but became accentuated as a consequence of the development that was taking place. They were however neither accepted nor justified ideologically; and the widening inequalities were not as glaring as in today’s India.

In short, the dirigiste regime, of State intervention, planning, and controls designed to realize plan priorities, gave rise to a State that appeared to stand above classes, that mediated between them and had a relative autonomy of its own both vis-a-vis domestic big business, and also, above all, vis-à-vis metropolitan capital. This is the State, the Nehruvian State if you like, that was referred to above as the dirigiste State.

The role of education in this context was seen in terms of “nation-building”. Since the dirigiste economic strategy meant above all a “national” economic strategy, albeit through the pursuit of a capitalist trajectory of development, but in relative autonomy from metropolitan capital, the education system too never sought to copy the curricula or course contents of metropolitan centres.

This had, to my mind, four basic consequences: first, by not merely reproducing what is taught in the West, the education system under dirigisme also eschewed the propagation of the patent ideological “untruths” (I am talking here primarily of the social sciences) that get ossified into syllabi in the heartland of capitalism. Its very heterodoxy allowed scope for a diversity of views and the taking up of critical positions. Secondly, there was an anti-imperialist content to what was taught which meant that students were exposed not only to the historical experience of their own country that had been subject to long colonial rule but also to the ideas of a range of independent thinkers, from Naoroji to Gandhi to the Left. Thirdly, there was a prominent place within the content of education, for the idea of egalitarianism and a progressive social order unmarked by caste and other forms of oppression. And finally it was taken for granted that education was meant to serve a social purpose. Even when the products of the education system, the students who passed out of it, having “embodied” the education that was provided, did nothing palpable for society, this fact was often admitted by them with a degree of sheepishness.

At any rate, the criterion of “success” of a product of the education system was not seen to lie in the exchange value commanded by him or her in the “market”, and certainly not in the “international market”. The products of the education system no doubt joined the work-force and sought to be absorbed in the labour market. But education was not exclusively meant to prepare one for the labour market. Education as a “thing” in other words had not become dissociated from education as a source of pleasure, “utility” or enlightenment.

One should not of course glorify this period, and exaggerate the positive role played by the education system in this period., in terms of both effecting a progressive social outlook and

inculcating a degree of personal non-conformism. But the fact remains that when I look back on my own student days in the Delhi University I cannot help being struck by the heterodoxy, the diversity, and the non-ossification that I was exposed to within my own discipline; and there were countless others like me.

II

The change in the economic regime in India from dirigisme to neo-liberalism has brought about a change in the nature of the State and is now ushering in a change in the education system that corresponds to the need for creating an alternative Ideological State Apparatus in conformity with the changed nature of the State.

The reasons for the change in the economic regime need not detain us here. The emergence of vast amounts of concentrated finance, nourished initially in the fifties and the sixties by persistent and growing US fiscal deficits, and subsequently in the seventies, in the wake of the oil-shocks, by the petro-dollars deposited in metropolitan banks by the OPEC countries; the successful pressure mounted by this concentrated finance capital to remove barriers to its global movement; the emergence on account of this removal of barriers of the phenomenon of "globalization", under which free movement of capital and commodities across countries was institutionalized; and the formation on this basis of an international finance capital of which the corporate-financial elites of the different countries constitute "aliquot parts"; these make up the totality of the process that brought about a radical change in the post-war global conjuncture.

This changed global conjuncture also underlay the shift away from third world dirigiste regimes. The collapse of the Soviet Union (itself not unrelated to the emergence of international finance capital); the abandonment by the third world bourgeoisie, including India's, of the project of building a relatively autonomous national capitalism; the pursuit of neo-liberal policies in the place of the earlier "planning"; the incorporation of big domestic capital into the ranks of globalized capital; the rupturing of the broad class alliance formed during the anti-colonial struggle and carried over subsequently into the phase of relatively autonomous capitalist development; and the corresponding creation of a hiatus within societies like ours between the big bourgeoisie (the corporate-financial elite) on the one hand and the vast masses of peasants, petty producers, and the working people on the other (with the professional upper middle class, beneficiaries of the new growth trajectory, siding with the big bourgeoisie as long as the benefits accruing to them last); these are all well-known features of this transition. What concerns us here however is its implication for the nature of the State.

A hallmark of this new conjuncture is that while the State remains a nation-State, capital is international; it can freely move around globally. Hence willy-nilly the nation-State must pursue such policies as cater to the whims and caprices of international finance capital, for otherwise capital would simply leave its shores and move elsewhere, precipitating acute economic difficulties. This necessarily entails a change in the nature of the State. From being an entity supposedly standing above classes, mediating between them, without appearing to be tied exclusively to the interests of any one particular class, it becomes exclusively engaged in promoting the interests of the big bourgeoisie, of the corporate-financial elite, whose

interests, in the absence of any "national" capitalist project, become indistinguishable from those of international finance capital in general.

An ideological justification is sought to be provided for this fact, of State policies being exclusively dictated by the interests of the corporate-financial elite, by the claim that what is good for finance is good for the country as a whole. This justification however is palpably negated by an obvious fall-out of the neo-liberal regime, namely the unleashing of a rampant process of what Marx had called "primitive accumulation of capital", that is, the imposition of distress, and eventually dispossession, upon vast masses of petty producers including the peasantry.

If property merely changes hands through purchase and sale at some price determined by the market then there is no primitive accumulation of capital involved. Primitive accumulation takes place when property is acquired by big capital from petty producers (or from the State) either gratis or, what comes to the same thing, at throwaway prices, i.e. at prices below what the market would determine. Primitive accumulation moreover must be seen not only in "stock" terms, i.e. in terms of a change of possession of assets, but also in "flow" terms, i.e. in terms of a levy on petty producers' incomes (or on the State's revenue) by big capitalists. When diesel prices are raised to increase the profits of the Ambanis, but the Kerala fisherman who uses diesel experiences a decline in his income as a consequence, we have an instance of primitive accumulation in "flow" terms (though such "flow" transfers may eventually lead to asset transfers as well, i.e. to primitive accumulation in "stock" terms).

Such primitive accumulation of capital becomes a pronounced feature under neo-liberalism. The fact of State policy being exclusively concerned with the promotion of the interests of the corporate-financial elite expresses itself in a withdrawal of support and protection by the State from the petty production sector, including especially from peasant agriculture. It now gets exposed to the world market fluctuations; subsidies (including subsidized institutional credit) are withdrawn from it; it is brought into direct contact with international agri-business; and it suffers an income deflation, culminating in eventual outright dispossession (and in many instances peasant suicides in anticipation of it). Such dispossession also occurs frequently, as we know, in the name of industrial or "infrastructure" projects.

The process of primitive accumulation of capital entails the takeover by the corporate-financial elite not only of petty property but also of State property, through the process of "disinvestment" and, privatization at throwaway prices, of public sector assets. Acquiescence of the political leadership to such primitive accumulation at the expense of the public sector is often obtained through "corruption", that is, by giving them a share of the proceeds of primitive accumulation. The corruption cases highlighted of late in the public discourse constitute instances of political (and public) personnel taking a "cut" from primitive accumulation; and yet ironically no fingers have ever been pointed in the discussions of corruption either at the main beneficiaries of primitive accumulation, the corporate-financial elite, or at the economic regime, of neo-liberalism, that promotes it.

Primitive accumulation at the expense of the petty producers, especially the peasantry, which manifests itself *inter alia* through the economic unviability of peasant agriculture, affects not only the peasantry, in particular the

small peasantry, but also agricultural labourers and other workers in the countryside. It leads to greater impoverishment in the countryside and swells the ranks of those seeking employment outside. Since “decent” employment outside hardly shows any increase, notwithstanding high GDP growth, the rural migrants end up as part-time workers, casual workers, or informal sector workers, earning a pittance. The incidence of absolute poverty increases as a result, both in the countryside and in urban areas, even in the midst of high GDP growth.

The neo-liberal State that presides over this entire process thus gets faced with a glaring contradiction: on the one hand it gets pre-occupied with promoting almost exclusively the interests of the corporate-financial elite, and of international finance capital generally, to the detriment of vast segments of the population; on the other hand it is founded upon a Constitution that enjoins universal adult franchise and hence gives these victims of the neo-liberal growth process the power to change governments.

This contradiction is managed normally by the fact that the insertion of a country into the vortex of globalized financial flows ensures that every political formation within it has willy-nilly got to bow before the dictates of finance capital in order not to precipitate capital flight and cause an acute economic crisis. As long as the country remains tied to a neo-liberal regime, no matter who gets elected makes little difference, since all have to pursue more or less the same policies, namely those approved by international finance capital, and hence, by implication serving the interests of the domestic corporate-financial elite.

Nonetheless a danger remains: someday some political formation may take it into its head to put before the people an agenda of de-linking from the vortex of global financial flows; or someday the people may elect some political formation opposed to the country’s being linked to such flows, which, though not significant to start with, may suddenly catch their imagination. This may happen especially during a period (such as now) when the economy gets caught in an acute crisis.

There are two ways in which this “danger” is sought to be tackled. One is through the direct capture of the State apparatus by the corporate-financial elite; and the other is by so constituting the Ideological State Apparatus, through education “reforms”, that no organic intellectuals are created who can be potentially associated with an alternative order. At present in India we are seeing both types of attempts being made.

The elaborate effort to project Narendra Modi as the next Prime Minister constitutes the first type of attempt. It is based on the supposition that if the State is to promote the exclusive interests of the corporate-financial elite, then the best way of ensuring this is by the corporate-financial elite directly controlling the State via their nominee.

The general tendency among observers has been to see Modi only as a rabid communal-fascist; but the current projection of Modi is not reflective of any sudden accretion of strength to the communal-fascist camp; it is an attempt by the corporate-financial elite to capture the State apparatus via Modi who is their nominee. This is not to suggest that the leaders of the present, U.P.A. government are not pliable instruments of the corporate-financial elite; but their “disadvantage” lies in the fact that, even though they themselves lack any political base to which they may be answerable or accountable, they function within a traditional political party that cannot afford

to be oblivious of the mood of the people. Modi, projected by the corporate-financial elite, has the “advantage” that he has even subverted his own Party, pushing it into tailing him, and through him the corporate-financial elite.

But further analysis of the political implications of this attempt is beyond our scope here. Our concern is with the second type of attempt, via education “reforms”. These “reforms” are meant, in exact opposition to what the dirigiste education system had visualized, to institutionalize the hegemony of the metropolitan curricula and syllabi in centres of learning in India; to obliterate the memory of colonialism and the anti-colonial struggle, by de-emphasizing economic history altogether; to incorporate into the Indian education system the patent ideological “untruths” that metropolitan capitalism propagates (which in my discipline include even a rejection of the proposition, put forward by John Maynard Keynes, that capitalism can experience involuntary unemployment); to beat down all diversity; to privilege “technocratic” disciplines over the humanities and social sciences which might still offer some scope for critical stances on social issues; to be obsessed about the “world ranking” of our educational institutions, which means ignoring the need for sui generis educational institutions in India and accepting instead the criteria prevalent in metropolitan capitalist countries (and hence the concept of homogeneity of criteria irrespective of the national context), and, by implication, accepting the hegemony of the ideology of metropolitan capital.

In a word, instead of being imbued with the task of “nation-building” the educational system now gets charged with the responsibility of producing commodities for the international “market”; instead of being cognized as having a social role, education is now seen as producing self-obsessed individuals, it’s worth assessed in terms of the exchange value commanded by these individuals in the market. This phenomenon is what I subsume under the term “commoditization of education”. “Commoditization” has the “advantage” that it meets the economic needs of international finance capital, while at the same time effecting an Ideological State Apparatus of a neo-liberal State that meets the needs of the corporate-financial elite. Let us look at this phenomenon of “commoditization” a little more closely.

III

We have lived for long under capitalism in this country, and during this period every educated person has always offered himself or herself on the job market. Since education has gone into the formation of the labour-power offered for sale by an educated person on the market, i.e. into the formation of the commodity that the educated person becomes, why should the fact of education, which constitutes the input for this commodity, becoming a commodity itself, make any difference? Why in other words should the commoditization of education be a cause for concern? If the input into a commodity itself becomes a commodity what difference does that make?

The answer lies in the fact that the notion of a “commodity” entails something more than the mere fact of being bought and sold in the market. The logic of “commodity production” does not apply to everything that is merely bought and sold in the market. After all, in India things have been bought and sold in the market for centuries; but this has not meant the enactment of the coercive logic of commodity production, with its tendency

towards differentiation among producers. Something more is therefore involved in commodity production.

While every commodity represents a combination of use value and exchange value, the hall mark of commodity production is that for the commodity seller it is pure exchange value. Commodity production comes into its own when the use-value aspect of the commodity holds no interest for the producer. Education gets truly commoditized therefore when both in the imparting of education and in the offering for sale of the product of education, the joy of learning, the excitement of thought, and the grandeur of ideas, play no role whatsoever. If they do, then neither education itself, nor the product of education, can be called fully-formed commodities.

The commoditization of education, and by implication the commoditization of the product of education, requires therefore that the thing called education should be completely detached from notions of joy of learning and excitement of ideas, and should be seen by its sellers, and in this instance by the buyers too, exclusively as exchange value (just as for the steel producer the pig iron used as input is not a source of joy but only a value-sum that is transferred to the value of steel). I am not suggesting that this has fully occurred in India; but this is the direction of our movement, and the current education “reforms” not only aim at it but constitute a big step towards it.

Commoditization of education and commoditization of the products of education proceed apace. The products of education become commodities in a way they never were before. Since commodities have no social sensitivity, the

education system gets exclusively oriented towards producing conformists concerned solely with the exchange value they command on the market. Since commodities are a packaged, complete, thing, the notion of education, once it becomes a commodity, precludes any questioning; the emphasis on the contrary is for the seller to sell and the buyer to buy a complete package called education. The more complete it is, the less open to doubt, the less surrounded by questions, the better. As a result, creativity, concern for the people around one, excitement with ideas, and the questioning of received wisdom, all these traits which are associated with true education, recede to the background. What we have instead is a destruction of thought.

What is happening in India today is not just specific to India. International finance capital is imposing similar changes in the education system elsewhere in the world as well. This effort however will not succeed, in the sense that, even if universities are destroyed in this manner as centres for promoting knowledge and nurturing ideas, the necessity for resistance, especially in the context of the current capitalist crisis, will give rise to other sources of education. Sources of education outside of universities will spring up, based on the experience of life itself, where ideas anathema to international finance capital will flourish. But instead of waiting for this to happen, which will necessarily be a long drawn-out process, it would be much better if the attempt to destroy universities is itself thwarted right now, which is why it becomes crucial to struggle against the current education “reforms”. ■

