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CITIZEN, CONSUMER, USER
COVID-19 AND THE HIGHER EDUCATION CHURN IN INDIA

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Abstract

As the infectious spread of the Covid-19 virus began to overwhelm people and governments across the world, higher education, unsurprisingly, has also been profoundly disrupted. While a slew of measures such as physical distancing, the wearing of masks, and increased participation in video conferencing offered tentative solutions for meeting teaching schedules, the challenge was not entirely limited to creating virus-free or safe environments. The global pandemic was, in fact, roiling through a university system that was already much beleaguered by the divide over whether higher learning was a market choice or a state responsibility. Though the dangers of Covid-19 initially played out as a quest for achieving personal safety in the class room, the implications of distance learning, I suggest in this essay, go far beyond addressing such logistical arrangements. The higher education story of recent years in India, in particular, can alert us to the emergence of a larger plot for university education. The university student will no longer be caught only within the existing tension between citizenship training and consumer choice but will be increasingly rejigged into a 'User' ─ simultaneously a virtual learner and raw material for the harvesting of metadata.

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By the time the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, medical advisories were already urging for limiting human contact and for enforcing physical distancing. Universities and schools the world over

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expectedly found themselves in the first wave of closures, followed by the dramatic lockdowns of cities and even entire countries.

While several of the harsh restrictions on movement and requirements for isolation have since been eased, in-person teaching in universities and schools, however, has proved to be far more intractable and complicated. Classrooms and corridors are difficult spaces to sanitise. And the many levels of intimacies that learning and teaching demand are often hard to turn into safe interactions. Small wonder then that much of the discussion in India and elsewhere has actually been redirected at addressing the challenge of 'online-teaching' (Kakkar, 2020; Pednekar, 2020).

The enthusiasm and the push for the online mode, especially for university teaching, however, predates the pandemic. In India, as early as February 2020, Nirmala Sitharaman, Finance Minister of the Government of India, in a budget speech had conveyed that the then working draft of the National Education Policy (NEP) would allow universities to offer 'fully online degrees' in higher education (McKenzie, 2020). In other words, online education did not emerge as an ad hoc or exceptional measure to temporarily side step the pandemic; rather, the idea of getting education to turn virtual had already acquired considerable traction, especially in the realm of policy-making for higher education.

The full implications of online education in India, however, as I will outline in this essay, need to be grasped keeping in mind the broader context of change and churn within the

universities steadily increased from 27 (1951–52) to 46 (1960–61). The number of intermediate colleges also witnessed a similar jump from 772 (1955–56) to 1,050 (1960–61) (Thorat, 2017: 17). While infrastructural expansion occupied the government in the early decades, there soon emerged a need to put higher education on a systematic policy pathway. Notably, by defining an overall direction for education with a set of general principles, which could then be periodically revisited and fine-tuned. The Education Commission of 1964–65 was subsequently tasked with the exercise and carried out elaborate consultations before finally issuing the first significant resolution in 1968, titled the National Policy on Education (NPE). While the NPE spelled out the urgency for developing a robust higher education capacity in India, it also underlined that education needed to be principally aimed at achieving a 'socialist pattern of society' through 'national integration':

> The educational system must produce men and women of character and ability committed to national service and development. Only then will education be able to play its vital role in promoting progress, creating a sense of common citizenship and culture and strengthening national integration (ibid.: 19).

In effect, at the heart of the higher education quest as outlined by the NPE was the broader goal for nation building, the making of a national culture, and t

universities, which they were required to be affiliated to (Varghese and Malik, 2017: 6). In short, despite being privately run for profit, these capitation fee colleges could not generate their own course content or curriculum design.

While efforts to reduce public funding for higher education were mostly tentative and timid efforts throughout the 1990s, by the opening decade of the 21st century for-profit education

kept away from educational institutions, and that 'any form' of political activity be comprehensively banned within university campuses (ibid.: 845). In sum, the idea of the political citizen for a national culture was to be entirely abandoned and instead replaced by a notion of the consumer-student seeking education as a commodity that was, in turn, shaped within a competitive market.

It is probable that the Ambani–Birla road map set the pace of context for subsequent decisions to transform/reform education in India. Between 2002 and 2011, around 178 private universities were established and the share of unaided (not public-funded) private higher education institutions in India grew from 42.6 per cent in 2001 to 63.9 per cent in 2012 (Gupta, 2017: 360). From 2009 onwards, in fact, several corporate houses and private investors in India began to fund and start universities even in the social sciences and the humanities. Notably, O.P. Jindal Global University, Azim Premji University, Shiv Nadar University and Ashoka University. There have also been instances where universities have been founded by modest, small town family business concerns such as Lovely Professional University, which was started by a successful sweet shop chain (Lovely Sweets) in Punjab (Dogra, 2010).

Nonetheless, this steady shift from public-funded to private higher education via privatisation in India, it must be emphasised, was not unique nor against the changing current in the higher education trajectory at the global level. A transformation, however, that must be understood for being far more profound and ideologically driven than simply heralding a logistical change in the pattern of funding or the loss of government control.

II. Humboldt makes way for the Consumer Oriented Corporation

According to Readings (1996), the 'animating principles' that established the 'modern university' was put forward sometime in the early decades of the 19th century in Europe and, in the main, by the intellectual efforts of the Prussian philosopher, linguist and diplomat Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). For Humboldt, the primary role of the modern university was to produce the national subject whose task was to nurture and elaborate upon a national culture for the nation state. Readings, moreover, saw in the intense debates within

could not be realised or paid back by the borrowers who took them primarily for educational purposes. In March 2013, _26,150 million worth of student loans was declared to fall under the NPA category, and jumped to _ 63, 360 million by December 2016. Indian banks, in other words, saw a near 142 per cent increase in student loan defaults during a period of just three years, which, in percentage terms, amounted to an increase from 5.40 per cent to 8.76 per cent.[4]

Despite the intense contradictions brought on by student debt, competitive pressures on faculty, the marginalisation of the liberal arts and the rise of audit cultures, the corporate university continues to gain ground over that of the Humboldtian university ideal. How has education as a commodity defeated the idea of the student as a political citizen? Was triumphant neoliberalism the real game changer?

III. Can Economics always Defeat Politics?

The 1970s, in the opinion of several astute commentators, marked the tentative beginnings of a qualitative shift in the nature of capitalism. This unsettling period of material and conceptual churn, Bell suggests, was spurred on particularly in the developed/industrialised world. A steady transformation that followed from a dramatic internal restructuring of their economies with the relative decline in manufacturing jobs (especially in the United States) alongside the expansion of service sector employment (1999: 121–64).

The dominance of white collar professions and the relative loss in blue collar jobs, or the move from goods to services, was in step with several transformations in technology and the functioning of the economy. Universities in such 'post-industrial' societies, moreover, in Bell's opinion, increasingly became 'primary institutions' for both meeting the heightened demand for education as much as for taking on the role of being the most significant conveyor belt for enabling social mobility (ibid.: 242–50). The sociologist and philosopher, Zygmunt Bauman, on the other hand, structured this change—beginning in the 1970s and consolidated by the 1990s—in terms of a shift from a 'society of producers' to that of a 'society of consumers', or as the transition from 'hard modernity' to liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2007a, 2007b). That is, the consumer and consumption became the critically defining force in society.

Marching even further but very much within stride to debate the 1970s as a watershed moment in global po

Keynesian economics and social planning—with an emphasis on the centrality of the competitive self-regulating market for organising economic and social worlds. Throughout the course of the 1980s, in fact, Rodger explains, 'free markets' and possessive individualism were increasingly naturalised and legitimised as constituting the most authentic realms for exercising freedom, choice and reason. The government, or 'big government', on the other hand, was written off as being essentially the source of coercion, and so mired in the politics of concession and compromise that its only effects were described as distorting the efficiencies of the market (2012: 41–76).

Through the course of the 1980s, arguments for establishing competitive markets, the dominance of t

other words, for the neoliberal imagination only the presumed 'laws of the market' are allowed to define freedoms and set the template for individual actions.[7] The content of power in a neoliberal society is thus expected to be largely a derivative of economic calculation and possessive individualism rather than political actions borne through ethical engagements, ideological commitments and deliberative democracy. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the neoliberal university, given its imperative to disenchant politics with economics, aims to replace the political citizen of the nation state with the commodified student who is to be essentially primed for competing in market conditions (Rider,

social media sites scoffing at JNU, abusing students for being parasites on tax payers' subsidies, wild claims abounded that the campus had become a terrorist training ground and, inevitably, even demands for the closure of the university. According to Singh and Dasgupta (2019), this ferocious assault on JNU was very much part of a deliberate and strategically directed 'spin'. In their estimate, a 'politics of emotions' was rabidly generated to 'de-contextualise' JNU from its otherwise known 'representational function' as a university to one now linked to a series of 'alarming associations' such as 'anti-national', 'India-breaking', '*tukde-tukde-* , and the 'urban-naxal'.

Instead of immediately instituting an impartial enquiry to sort out the many allegations and conflicting media claims, however, the government and the JNU administration watched as the situation was further aggravated: on 10 February the ABVP assembled a march of its members in Delhi and demanded the complete shutdown of JNU. The Home Minister Rajnath Singh soon followed with the astounding claim (later proved false) that Hafiz Saeed from the Lashkar-e-Taiba was behind the JNU events. The then Minister for Education Smriti Irani (earlier a small screen actress) exploded in tears before cameras over what she now held to be true without enquiry, that 'anti-India' slogans were chanted on campus. Meanwhile, waves of policemen raided JNU, carried out room to room searches of the dormitories, and began questioning students at will. And amidst this almost apoplectic mayhem of scare and alarm, slogan shouting mobs suddenly turned up outside the main gate of the university and laid siege to the campus for several days.

One evening, a large group of aggressive BJP and ABVP party workers assembled unchecked in JNU, overran the lawns of the faculty residential complex (Paschimabad apartment block), and through a blow-horn issued threats and warnings to teachers and their families. Throughout this unrelenting military style assault, the newly appointed JNU Vice-Chancellor maintained a curious silence (Swain, 2017; also Chakraborty, 2017).

On 12 February, the police once again swept into the campus and this time arrested Kanhaiya Kumar—the then president of Jawaharlal Nehru University Student's Union (JNUSU)—under the charge of sedition.[15] The notion of sedition, it must be noted, has its origins in the colonial period, when it provided the legal means for suppressing opposition against British

campus roads were suddenly switched off. And it is amidst this eerie and ominous darkness that the masked mob was given free rein to beat up and thrash students and teachers at will. During the mayhem, which lasted for several hours, worried local residents and friends alerted by phone calls and messages were not allowed into the campus, while the entire university administration, on the other hand, went conveniently missing (Tantray, 2020). At the time of writing this essay, not a single one of the masked assailants has been arrested nor any action taken on the complaints by JNU students and faculty (Krishnan, 2020). One can, therefore, only conclude on the basis of facts available that to have such levels of violence within the premises of a university that lies well within the heart of the nation's capital (only subsequently dwarfed by the Delhi riots of 2020, a month or so later) suggests that this planned and premeditated criminal assault coul only have been carried out through collusion and support at the highest levels.[21]

leading platform firms in the world today,[22] but when combined, their wealth, power and domination over our everyday living is most certainly unparalleled and unprecedented in recorded history (Galloway, 2017). Platforms, for Nick Srnicek (2017), simply put, refer to the digital infrastructure that serves to 'intermediate between different user groups'. A type of intermediation that, unlike traditional business models, is profoundly based upon the extraction and control of data. The platform, hence, essentially boils down to the 'ownership of software (the 2 billion lines of code for Google or the 20 million lines of code for Facebook) and hardware (severs, data centres, smartphones etc.).

In a more pointed elaboration by media studies scholars Dijck et al., the platform's architecture is described as being 'fuelled by data, automated and organized through *algorithms* and *interfaces*, formalized through *ownership* relations driven by business models and governed through *user agreements*' (2018: 9). Rigged and programmed thus, the platform then steers 'User interactions' towards generating 'data exhaust', which is the digital trail that Cukier and Schonberger refer to as being the 'by-product' that people leave in the wake of their online interactions (2013: 113). Data exhaust, hence, is the raw material that is extracted from the User by the platform.

For Zuboff, data exhaust is conceptualised as 'behavioural surplus', which is extracted through online interactions to feed the production of 'machine intelligence' or what is often referred to as 'Artificial intelligence' (AI) (2019: 8). Artificial intelligence, by being able to automate a huge number of correlations and patterns can then essentially be purposed to anticipate and predict User behaviour. Prediction, in effect, enables the modification and control of the User's behaviour through a vast range of techniques such as the 'nudge, coax, tune' and the herding towards outcomes. We, as the User, consequently are the 'objects from which raw materials are extracted' and therefore become, as Zuboff argues, the 'means to others' ends' (ibid.: 94). The platform, in other words, does not simply connect the service provider to the User, nor does it naively set about organising digital interactions. Rather, it is fundamentally wired up as 'machine intelligence' that is programmed through a suite of algorithms to extract, modify, steer, modulate and inevitably control human behaviour.

The persuasion that EdTech as a platform holds for its advocates, investors and enthusiasts, hence, goes much beyond trying to develop capacities for online teaching. The online teaching platform, more pointedly, intends to be a 'disruptive technology'. Its grand scope is no less than trying to 'Uberise' higher education by delivering a death blow to the remaining detritus of the Humboldtian ideal and by fatally downsizing a wobbling corporate university model.

VI. The Persuasions of EdTech

On the surface, in fact, EdTech offers both a convincing critique and a compelling set of solutions to the crisis that now engulfs higher education.[23] It correctly understands that student debt has not only become unsustainable but is also eroding the corporate university's initial claim that markets could help 'massify' higher education by broadening access.

There is a growing disconnect, moreover, between the degree that was paid for and the actual financial returns on the jobs that are available. In sum, degrees from the corporate university are not only pricing themselves out of the job market, but in the context of rapid technological change the very notion of competence and employability are undergoing significant shifts: the demand seems to be veering towards the need for a regular upgradation in skill sets rather than from an intense three- or four-year degree programme.

EdTech has the capacity to radically cheapen higher education. For starters, the online can entirely sidestep the huge costs involved in maintaining brick-and-mortar legacy infrastructures such as libraries, dormitories and lecture halls. Tens of thousands of students can be simultaneously connected to an online module, as opposed to a relatively minuscule number that can be packed into a single classroom. In a similar vein, virtual instruction can dramatically abandon the need to maintain an expensive student–teacher ratio by carrying out instructions via pre-recorded lectures, interactive Apps and with on-demand digital content.

In 2012, two Stanford computer science professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller assembled an online teaching and e-learning platform called Coursera, which they designed for offering massive open online courses (MOOC). The Coursera strategy involves partnering [like Uber] with existing universities, colleges, governments and corporates, and as of December 2019,

their total number of collaborations are listed as comprising roughly 200 across 29 countries.[24]

According to Dijck et al., the Coursera and the MOOC in general are aimed at entirely upending existing academic conventions and designs. Instead of the curriculum-based diploma or degree programmes, the platform offers the 'course—a single unit that can be "unbundled" and "rebundled" into an online "product"'. That is, instead of the current focus on completing a comprehensive two- or three-year programme that is made of several linked and connected courses, the User-student can now simply partake of a slice of the education experience by attempting a single course. Akin to what, as the author's tell us, Facebook and Google have done to the newspaper industry by un-packaging them in a manner that allowed the circulation of single articles, feature pieces and news feeds. These unbundled courses, furthermore, can be accredited by the award of certificates of completion and proctored exams—versions of micro-degrees or nano-degrees that can be earned for acquiring specific skills (2018 :117–36).

The EdTech platform as a decentralised, virtual and low-cost higher education model, however, already reveals inherent dangers. For one, the User-student's data (behavioural surplus), generated through digital interactions, can be repurposed by the platform for a range of unstated outcomes. An individual's learning curve, emotional states, psychological dispositions and learning abilities, for example, could be minutely mapped and tracked through the trail of data exhaust. Every digital indent, in the form of a like button, emoji use, a quiz, a survey or a simple click, could be graphed to size up as a behavioural analysis that, in turn, could then be conveyed as a score to a potential employer or authority.

Secondly, by dispensing with the '*aura*' of classroom solidarity, the online grinds away at attaining individualised and personalised outcomes. The gradient for learning is thus individual centric and steered by predictive analytics—algorithms that can replace the teacher's professional judgement with 'learnification'. The learnification paradigm is the 'idea that learning can be managed, monitored, controlled and ultimately modified in each student's personal mind'. In effect, the User-student will be encased within a filter bubble, a self-referential niche that will be digitally reinforced by corroding social solidarity, public

value and knowledge through collectives (ibid.: 124). In sum, the undermining of political citizenship and the devaluing of democracy.

VII. Towards a Conclusion

But how will the loss of the Humboldtian ideal and the corporate university actually play out? The impacts of EdTech might, in fact, be far more perverse with the platform university consolidating new types of social and economic hierarchies, built around different levels of

[20] BBC news report, 22 November 2020. 'JNU: Protesters bring top India university to its knees', https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50498890 (accessed 20 July 2020). Also see Sharma (2019).
[21] The JNU administration and the pro-government media were keen to claim that the violence of 5 January was essentially a 'clash' between left-leaning students and those on the right such as the ABVP. The detailed report by Chitranshu Tewari, however, claims that it was the ABVP that had carried out a one-sided and systematic assault (2020). Also see Tarique (2020).
[22] Somewhat comparable but nowhere near in terms of a global reach are the Chinese BAT firms: Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent. See Wade et al. (2017).
[23] Increasingly one notes how the failings of the corporate university are being written about. See, for example, Farrelly (2020).
[24] See the Wikipedia page on Coursera https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coursera.

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