

Understanding the Logic of Neo-liberalism in Education

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This article attempts a critique of the private institutions in higher education by examining how they realise three concepts of access, choice and equity to form a distinct discourse of education. Using techniques of substitution and false logic in their arguments, democratic language is appropriated by such institutions as a kind of co-option technique, high on rhetoric but perhaps leaving behind the very real issues that privatisation in general purports to overcome, and creating some new ones of their own. This, ironically, may also succeed in blurring the distinction between public and private institutions, and nullify the basis on which they have entered education.

Private institutions are on the rise in India in both the education and the healthcare sectors. While opening up the economy has enormously increased their numbers, they have been around in the education sector since colonial times (Pathak 2014: 72). In the case of higher education, the body of literature on such institutions is substantial, although a recent edited volume of research on higher education, published in *EPW* from the 1960s to date (Tilak 2013), indicates that studies and critiques of particularly the private sector in higher education using methods and perspectives from the humanities, though significant, are still relatively few.

In the healthcare sector too, this kind of research is negligible. An interesting exception which addresses these lacunae in the study of private institutions is a recent paper on a major private hospital chain in south India (Hodges 2013). The myths surrounding its birth and growth are analysed to see how these contributed to its legendary status. The author does a historical analysis based on interviews with doctors, and demolishes these myths by painstakingly reconstructing the reality. She asserts that the legendary status of the private hospital is based upon “accepting a set of assertions that are at best, debatable, and at worst mere myths” (ibid: 242). By conducting a range of interviews with healthcare personnel and reconstructing the actual history of the healthcare sector in and around Chennai, she shows how the claims made by this private hospital do not stand up to even basic historical scrutiny. Lastly, she exposes the lack of truth value in the assertions and points out that the real danger of such myths lies elsewhere: “they obscure a set of broader historical processes that both precede and go beyond any results

that can be attributed to one man or one hospital” (ibid: 242).

In what follows, arguments made by the private educational institutions to enter higher education are examined. These are part of the oral informal narratives of a section of the population, but they have also been reported in the media as well as repeatedly asserted in various educational consortia around the country. Thus, they are implicit in contemporary discourse on education as captured by “the ways of speaking which are commonly practiced and specifically situated in a social environment” (Rapport and Overing 2010: 117). Post-liberalisation, they also form part of the rationalisation that has surrounded the entry of particularly new private players into education. The arguments made by them are analysed in order to show the faulty reasoning and specious arguments made by using techniques of “substitution” and “subversion”. In philosophy, such faulty reasoning or poor arguments are called “fallacies”; the techniques used in these assertions appear to make some rational-sounding claims but the analysis shows how the logic underlying the arguments is false. This article uses the term “false logic” when in addition to the language substitution, there is a logical problem due to erroneous assumptions, premises, or conclusions. False logic thus refers to “errors in reasoning that invite us to accept a false premise or conclusion”.¹

Interestingly, some contemporary critiques of development have already shown analogous processes at work. For instance, in the analysis of rights issues, Patnaik (2010: 36) talks about how the “inversion of logic” has occurred: if “rights” are in fact constrained or “dependent on the capacity of the capitalist order in a bourgeois State” then, he asks, how can they still be referred to as rights? He points out that when the state reneges on its obligation to provide a “bundle of rights” because it cannot financially afford them, then it becomes evident that these cannot be deemed to be “rights”.

False logic works despite the logical fallacies occurring through the use of language substitution. They are deceptively

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convincing because they follow the form of logic and reasons, and also because they appropriate and insidiously alter democratic language to achieve this. Together they show the constitution of a neo-liberal discourse in education by private institutions which also succeed in subverting public education. But this is not the only implication as we shall show: The use of false logic succeeds in masking the similarities between private players and public universities than is currently suspected.

The analysis does not deride private players in education or insist on the superiority of one or other type of university; at the least, it shows that what is claimed by private institutions need not necessarily be true. It thus urges us to be more sceptical about such claims, examine their basis and understand what the implications are for the larger educational sector. In addition, it would make us advocate such changes as would enable private institutions to actually deliver upon their promise of increased access, equity and quality education.

A close look at the three key arguments is revealing as shown below:

1 False Logic of the Access Argument

The logic of the access argument takes the following form, by now a familiar refrain: there are too few universities for the numbers of young people who need or want to get into higher education and the government is unable to cater to this huge demand. Hence private players must be allowed in, either as solo players or in some kind of public-private partnership. Despite several critiques attempting to broaden the idea of “access”, to make it “social access”, it is still projected by government as well as private players in terms of building physical infrastructure and setting up more universities so as to enable more numbers of young people to get a university education. Yet private players tend to subsume or negate all these barriers by focusing on access in very ingenious ways as follows:

(a) Substitutes Merit-based ‘Non-discriminatory’ Admission for Equity-Based ‘Protective Discrimination’ in Admissions: Even though barriers to

access in terms of gender, caste, region, language and religion have been thoroughly discussed by educationists, the glaring under-representations of these groups in private educational institutions have been subsumed by the non-discrimination argument made by corporates which parallels the merit-based argument. This ignores problems of sectoral access and the protective discriminatory policies followed in public institutions by subsuming them under non-discrimination. Thus, it is common for such players to gloss over issues concerning reservation or quotas given to under-represented students by stating that they believe in “equal opportunity to all” (based, of course, on “merit”). The reality is that the private sector does tacitly give preferential treatment but it is based on one’s ability to pay – making the insurmountable barrier in this case, not gender, caste, religion and so, on but simply one’s inability to pay. Thus, the question still remains, who will educate the masses of people who cannot pay for private education?

(b) Disguises the Reality of Loans as ‘Filter’ by Excessive Focus on Loans as ‘Enabler’:

This argument goes that since there is a substantial cost of private education as compared to subsidised public education, the proposed solution is to make this expensive education easily “accessible” to everyone through student loans on easy terms. This supposedly creates a level playing field and education becomes equally accessible to all. In this context, student loans are being projected by particular sections of society as a great leveller, i.e., the major enabler for democratising education. But given that these loans currently carry a higher rate of interest than even car loans, the students that these private universities attract will be probably the middle- to upper-middle classes, leaving a large proportion of young people out of their gambit. Thus, rather than acting as an “enabler”, loans in fact act as a fine “filter” allowing only a certain kind of student into private campuses which essentially reveals the subversion of democratic goals.

(c) Subverts Constitutional Goals of Equity by Focusing on ‘Diversity’

Rather Than ‘Inclusion’: For many private universities particularly, the way to make campuses more heterogeneous and inclusive is not by opening it up substantively to people from different socio-economic groups but by substituting something called diversity which is brought in a big way into private university campuses via foreign students – the semester abroad programmes or exchange programmes with foreign counterparts. That this is significantly different from making a campus inclusive and thereby achieving constitutional goals of equity is a fact not commented upon. Ironically, equity through inclusive education remains with the public universities while private universities focus on “globalisation for diversity”. Diversity thus acts as a weak substitute for inclusion and subverts the larger constitutional goal of equity.

2 False Logic of Education as Improved Choice Argument

Not surprisingly, “improved choice” is an important part of the privatisation mantra, because there should be a variety of institutions and disciplines to choose from, even if only for the privileged few in the country who can pay the high fees of these institutions. The logic that private education will provide this improved choice to young people is couched in the language of democracy, i.e., of empowering students by giving them more choices of subjects, institutions, etc. Yet, when it is said that private players will improve the kinds of choices young people have, we need to see whether these are substantive choices or not, and what kind of choices have been enabled and what are their implications.

(a) No Real Choices in the Job Market:

First, fresh graduates are under tremendous pressure to get any kind of job (or indeed the highest paying one) to pay off their loans. Thus, effectively their educational loans add to the stress of merely getting a job as these jobs must come with a pay-package that will enable them to pay back their loans. This means that at the age when one gains valuable experience in the search for meaningful and challenging jobs, young people are constrained by the repayment of their

student loans. On the other hand, decent paying jobs (not the high paying ones) will have few or no takers. Thus, labour and job markets become skewed by this supposedly democratic and simple strategy of “empowering” students by increasing access to education through student loans. That students are, in fact, substantially disempowered in significant ways by the act of taking loans is a fact not commented upon.

(b) No Real Choices in Disciplines:

The problem of loans acting as a filter rather than an enabler has been discussed above. Yet, there is another problem regarding them: Loans also mediate the kinds of disciplines young people choose. The kind of courses and degrees young people would be willing to take loans for would unsurprisingly be the ones that will get them the jobs to repay their loans. Loan-driven education thus compromises on the substantive choices that young people may have, sacrificing educational and other goals to instrumental ones.

(c) Side Effect of the Above:

Courses and disciplines that do not have many “takers” due to the lack of one to one correspondence between their degrees and jobs (“non-professional” courses as they are benignly referred to) may end up the same way as the departments in public universities which have been shut down. Such departments may also be shut down because the eye on the bottom line of corporations will ensure it. This means that the pressure to repay loans combined with the competitive financial environments of private universities will force certain disciplines out of the sphere of education, and these disciplines will very likely die out. Ironically, if private universities are going to mimic the public universities which have virtually shut down many departments with few students, then the distinction between the public and private will prove to be false!

3 False Logic of the Failure of Public Education Argument

Both the above arguments are connected to the strongest argument that has been made, namely, about “the failure of the

public university system”, touting as evidence the fact that students are not “job/market-ready”. Three problems arise in the very formulation of this logic – i.e., the presumed linkage made between young people being ill-equipped for the job market and failure of public education. They are as follows:

(a) It Assumes That the Job Market Comprises Only Corporations:

First, the view that the public university system has failed to make students job/market-ready can be considered worthy of consideration only if we think of the corporate world as comprising the entire market. If we add the world of NGOs, activism, teaching, research, administrative services, the arts and several kinds of other careers for which our graduates are prepared by the public university system, then perhaps we would be able to allow that the very same public education system has, in fact, at least partially succeeded. In addition to this, our premier institutes of management and engineering (IIMs and IITs) are both within the public education system. These too have been somewhat more successful models of education within the public realm, although, admittedly, at a much higher fee cost in recent years.

(b) It assumes That Education Has Only Instrumentalist/Utilitarian Value:

Second, public education can be considered a failure if we understand education as being only about achieving instrumentalist ends in the form of equipping people for the job market, itself narrowly defined as pointed out above. However, there are numerous other things that young people learn by being on public campuses – the place of dissent and protest in society, the nature and place of democracy, the defence of the marginalised, the push for social justice, equality, etc. These deeper social goals, generally called “education for democracy”, may not feature anywhere in the current job market-ready mode of the private institutions.

(c) It Deduces That the Failure Is of the System Rather Than the Educators:

Lastly, when we talk about the failure of

the public education, we need to see whether the public university system and the premises it has been built upon have failed or whether public educators have failed in capturing the attention and imagination of young people. If the problem is the latter but the former is inferred, then corporatisation may not be the solution since both draw upon the same pool of human resources. We need to closely look at what else is it that private institutions are doing to enable quality educators, but that is not the purpose of this article.

In sum, the above shows how education on private campuses may subvert inclusion, equity and choice, revealing education as a private good to be what it is, despite the use of the language of democracy. Access and equity may be appropriated to form a distinct culture of private education while simultaneously subverting inclusion. Job and labour markets will get further skewed in favour of certain disciplines and kinds of graduates, deepening the divides in society. Education loans act as a red herring, directing students to choices which continue to be formal rather than substantive. Further, it means that private universities will therefore focus on a certain kind of student and increase the stress loads for them via the repayment of loans factor, and they also will focus on certain kinds of courses/disciplines leaving the public universities to take care of the rest, if at all.

So while the rationale of enhanced access, improved choice and the failure of public education that private institutions use to gain entry into the education sector prove to be logically false, its implications are not trivial as pointed in the beginning of this article. Rather than the ecosystem of university education becoming robust because of their entry, we could see further segregation, weaker universities with little accountability and perhaps the rise of more technical institutions, even within the newer private universities. This shift would be detrimental to university education as a whole, unless private universities go beyond the rhetoric to take specific initiatives which substantively enable improved access, equity and choice. Without this substantive

engagement, there is a very real chance that private universities may end up mimicking the culture of public universities which led to their “failure”, leaving us educationally as well as financially poorer.

NOTE

- ¹ See *Patterns of Deception*, a project of Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University

of Pennsylvania, <http://www.flackcheck.org/patterns-of-deception/false-logic/>, accessed on 30 October 2013 for use of false logic in especially analysing political rhetoric.

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