
**ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON
HIGHER EDUCATION
IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION**

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*Honourable Shri Arjun Singhji,
Vice-Chancellor Shri Ved Prakashji,
Members of the Faculty,
Staff and the Student Community,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

It is a matter of great privilege for me that I have been asked to deliver the First Foundation day lecture of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, an institution of great eminence with which I have had the good fortune to be associated in a number of different capacities, almost since its very inception. As the topic of my today's lecture suggests, I shall be concerned with the context of globalization. But before I come to globalization, let me first distinguish between two very different perspectives on higher education. These perspectives exist quite independently of globalization, but the context of globalization accentuates the divergence between the implications that follow from these perspectives, and hence underscores the need to distinguish between them.

The first perspective sees higher education as a transaction between teachers and students, which occurs at specific locations called colleges and universities, and in the course of which teachers impart and students receive a certain training, which enables them to improve their skills and get better placements in the job market. Two conclusions follow from this conception which is very widely held. First, the success of a university can be measured by the success of the trainees coming out of it in getting good placements in the job market. Second, since placements in the job market can be hierarchically ordered as being better or worse, an ordering that transcends national boundaries, the universities too can be hierarchically ordered across the world as being better or worse. Therefore, when people lament that so few Indian universities figure among the top 200 in the world, underlying this lament is this first conception of higher education, the conception that believes in the possibility of ordering universities as one orders natural numbers. When students demand and institutions open placement cells to facilitate campus recruitment, underlying it again is this first conception of higher education: the institution, by opening such cells, is establishing its *bona fides*.

As against this, there is an alternative conception of higher education. This sees higher education as an activity in which students and teachers are jointly

engaged *on behalf of the people of a society*. It is not a bilateral transaction between teachers and students; in fact it is not a transaction at all. Both teachers and students are jointly working on behalf of the people. The purpose of higher education according to this conception is, to borrow a term from Antonio Gramsci, to produce “organic intellectuals” of the people.

But what, it may be asked, has the activity of teachers and students got to do with the people? The answer lies in the fact that higher education is essential not just for the development of a country, but for the very survival of the freedom of its people. The realm of higher education is the cradle of ideas; the shrinking or extinction of this realm necessarily makes a society parasitic on others for its ideas, and *such a parasitic society cannot remain free*. In fact our freedom struggle began in earnest when we broke out of our parasitic status in the realm of modern ideas, through the writings of pioneering thinkers like Dadabhai Naoroji and Romesh Chandra Dutt who laid the intellectual groundwork for the political mobilization of the masses. They dared to think independently of the prevailing theoretical constructs of their time in the institutions of higher learning in the metropolitan countries and in their local off-shoots.

Indeed the prevailing theoretical constructs in educational institutions of their time were meant to show colonialism as a benefactor of the Indian people, and to produce intellectuals who would be willing to serve,

directly or indirectly, the interests of the colonial regime. Macaulay's policy in other words had been designed to produce "organic intellectuals" for the colonial regime. When Gandhiji gave a call to students to come out of educational institutions, a call that even Rabindranath Tagore was critical of, his object was precisely to break the "colonization of the mind" that institutions of higher learning of the time were designed to produce and did produce. Gandhiji followed up his call by starting some preliminary institutions where an alternative education could be provided, and independent non-parasitic thinking promoted. This tradition of independent thinking that was necessary for the launch of the freedom struggle, is also necessary for defending the gains of that struggle. And since we are now in a position to have our own institutions where the conditions for independent thinking can prevail as a matter of course, we must develop and nurture such institutions.

This second perspective on higher education may appear somewhat bemusing at first sight: are we not supposed to impart skills through higher education? Are we not supposed to make our higher education system cater to the changing needs of the time, as reflected above all through the demand and supply situation in the market? Since high-sounding words like the "freedom of the people" and "organic intellectuals" fall essentially within the domain of the social sciences and the humanities, are we supposed to give a primacy to *these*

disciplines over what is accorded to science, technology and management studies? And going beyond such “practical” questions, are there no scientific truths that lie at the core of any discipline, so that the “profession” that professes this discipline has an integrity transcending the nationality of its practitioners?

The second perspective is totally different from these suppositions about it. Indeed the Gramscian notion of “organic intellectuals” does not refer exclusively to literary or “highbrow” activities. It encompasses all: writers, technicians, academics, scientists, professionals, officials of the State, engineers and doctors. The distinction between the two perspectives outlined above lies not in the fact that one emphasizes one set of disciplines and the other emphasizes another; it lies in the fact that one looks upon the higher education system *exclusively* as a means of imparting skills, while the other sees all activities of skill-imparting as being informed by a concern for, and an awareness of, the social ambience within which the skill-imparting is taking place. This does not mean a lacing of skill-imparting with occasional homilies on society and the people; nor does it mean thrusting down the throats of the students some particular theoretical or ideological outlook on society. It means a break from exclusive pre-occupation with marketability; it means a rounded education going beyond the narrowness of technical disciplines; it means inculcating in students a sense of the society to which they belong; and it means focusing

within particular disciplines on research themes that have relevance for society instead of being merely copied from abroad.

This last point may be disputed in the case of the natural sciences in particular, whose truths, not being nation-specific or society-specific, have a universality that makes for a unified profession in the case of these disciplines. The same incidentally may be said of social sciences too whose truths are not simply nation- or society-specific. The point here refers however not to the truths but to the problems for research. While some problems, both in social and natural sciences, like why an apple falls to the ground or why an economy faces recessions, may be common to both the first and the third worlds, problems like how to combat a resurgent malaria concern third world societies more than they concern first world societies. These latter problems should find greater reflection in research in our country than in the advanced countries, from which it follows that science curricula too can not be identical across countries, a view strongly held by no less a person than J.D. Bernal.

II

Since this second conception, which underlies our birth as a modern nation, is not much discussed, let me spend a bit more time on it. Implicit in it is a whole series of rejections. First, there is a rejection of the view that different institutions of higher learning belonging to

different societies can be ordered as being “better” or “worse” along one particular axis. If these institutions are to be “organic” to their specific societies, then, since the interests of these societies are quite obviously not congruent, each set of institutions must be different from the others in order to fulfil its legitimate role. Comments, which one commonly hears, such as “Jadavpur University or Jawaharlal Nehru University should imitate Harvard”, “our institutions should enrich themselves by borrowing ideas and faculty from advanced country institutions”, “we have to judge ourselves by how well we are recognized by top institutions in the world”, have no place within this second perspective. Such comments are based on a perception of higher education as a homogeneous commodity of which some institutions are better producers than others, and not as a means of producing “organic intellectuals” for a particular society¹. I referred above to Dadabhai Naoroji and R C. Dutt whose contribution to the struggle for the freedom of our society was enormous. But scarcely any one in Harvard or Cambridge doing economics would have heard of them (though those doing “India Studies” might have). Modelling our institutions after Harvard or Cambridge,

¹ It is a tragic symptom of our times that the Prime Minister of the country, despite himself being an academic who should know better, has announced that henceforth our civil servants will get promotion only on the basis of satisfactorily completing a training programme at Harvard. This is a move reminiscent of the colonial times and completely at variance with the ethos of a free India.

which would entail copying their curricula and syllabi, would therefore necessarily mean sacrificing, to our great cost, the conceptual framework, the perspective and the insights of a thinker like Naoroji.

Secondly, this second perspective rejects the view that the professionalization of subjects like “economics”, and “political science” is a desirable process. The “profession” in these disciplines as well as in others, is dominated by the advanced countries; therefore recognition in the “profession” would necessarily mean sacrificing any independent thinking and parroting borrowed concepts. This would not matter if these borrowed concepts were genuinely “scientific” and not imbued with the ideological objective of defending the hegemony of the advanced countries. In the social sciences at least, such is not the case. Not that everyone engaged in social science research in the universities in the advanced countries is a conscious ideological defender of imperialist hegemony, but everyone is entrapped by the need to belong to and to be recognized by the “profession” and therefore undertakes research within strictly circumscribed limits which preclude any critical awareness of the role of the handed-down conceptual apparatus in the ideological defence of imperialist hegemony. Stepping out of these limits invites reactions of unease, astonishment, silence, derision and even hostility, resulting in a loss of

academic and financial status². Hence even the best-intentioned dare not step beyond the limits. In societies like ours where the domination of the Western theoretical orthodoxy in social sciences is far from complete, thanks precisely to our rather recent birth as a nation after a prolonged *anti-imperialist struggle*, any emphasis on “professionalization” would mean voluntarily surrendering ourselves to this domination, closing the space which has been made available to us for independent thought.

Thirdly, this conception entails a rejection of the attitude which places a special value on “recognition” in the advanced countries, and hence on awards and distinctions bestowed from there. In the social sciences at any rate, all such awards and distinctions are conditional on conformity, on keeping within the “limits” and abjuring the use of concepts that critique imperialist hegemony. Unfortunately this attitude of prioritizing “recognition” in the West is all too pervasive in our country. Almost all of us, when we sit on Selection Committees, prefer a candidate who has published in a western journal over one who has published within the country, even without looking

² The manner in which, in the discipline of economics, ideas emanating from within the metropolis itself, but different from or hostile to the dominant conservative orthodoxy of the metropolis, are suppressed by the “profession”, is discussed in a recent article under the title “Hip Heterodoxy” by Christopher Hayes in *The Nation*. The article can be accessed at <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070611/hayes>

closely at the quality of the two publications. By doing so however we contribute to a stultification of the tradition of independent thinking.

Fourthly, this perspective denies any role other than a purely secondary one, to private institutions in the sphere of education. Privatization of education turns it into a commodity where the buyer's preference must necessarily enter to determine the nature of the commodity produced. There is a basic difference between education that satisfies the preference of the buyer and education that is undertaken in the interests of the people. And if education is to be undertaken in the interests of the people, to defend their interests, *then it must be publicly financed*. If it ceases to be publicly financed, then the education that increasingly gets to be produced is one that is intrinsically incapable of serving the interests of the people. To say this is not to ask for a ban on private institutions of higher education, but to emphasize the need for a predominantly public educational system, into which the private institutions must fit, in clearly specified ways. In contrast to this perspective, the first perspective which sees education as a transaction between teachers and students to augment the latter's employment prospects has an inherent tendency towards privatization. If placement on the job market is the object of higher education, then a publicly-funded education system necessarily entails an indefensible private appropriation of public means, compared to which charging fees appears preferable; but

if significant fees are charged, even on the criterion of ability to pay, then it becomes difficult to insulate the course contents and curriculum from the demands of the fee-paying students. And in any case, with such an objective for higher education, there is no argument left against the privatization of higher education.

III

The fact that in India public funding was supposed to sustain the core of the higher education system after independence is clear evidence that it is the second and not the first perspective that underlay our higher education policy, though not always explicitly. The relative magnitude of public funding of higher education did arouse the criticism, even by many progressive and sensitive thinkers, that resources which should have been devoted to elementary and school education were being used instead to sustain higher education which was a “white elephant”, that instead of a pyramidal structure with a broad base of elementary education underlying a small apex of higher education, we had opted for a top-heavy structure.

This argument however is fundamentally flawed. There can of course be no two views on the urgent need for eradicating illiteracy and enlarging the spread of elementary education. In fact it is a national shame that even after six decades of Independence nearly one-third of the population in the country remains illiterate, and around two fifths of children of school-going age remain

outside the ambit of formal schooling at any given time. But the mistake consists in believing that an absolute curtailment (or even a curtailment relative to GDP) of expenditure on higher education is necessary for overcoming these failures. The overall shortage of resources that is usually cited in this context as a constraint is a mere alibi: at no stage during the entire post-Independence period has India spent an adequate amount on education, by any reasonable definition of the term “adequate”. *In fact the proportion of GDP that the white-supremacist South African State spent on the education of the black majority even during the apartheid period, notwithstanding the massive drain on its exchequer that the maintenance of the highly oppressive police, military, and intelligence apparatus entailed at the time, was higher than what the Indian State has ever done on education as a whole throughout its entire post-Independence history.* The matter in short is one of priorities. Any government that has the political will to eradicate illiteracy and provide universal primary education would always find the resources for doing so without curtailing higher education. And any government that complains of lack of resources and considers it necessary to starve higher education in order to provide for the spread of literacy and primary education, simply lacks *ipso facto* the political will for effecting universal literacy and primary education.

This argument about higher education being a “white elephant” may appear *passé*, now that there is an

appreciation of the importance of higher education in the new “knowledge economy”. Hasn’t the National Knowledge Commission itself suggested that there should be 1500 universities by 2015, and that we should set up 50 National Universities providing “education of the highest standard”, of which at least 10 should come up within 3 years? But any joy that the NKC’s emphasis on higher education may bring, disappears the moment one realizes that the NKC *sees higher education exclusively within the first perspective*. Its suggestion that the Vice-Chancellors of the Universities should function like Chief Executive Officers, its implicit distrust of campus politics, its proposal that University Courts should be dispensed with and that in lieu of Academic Council meetings we should have Standing Committees taking decisions, all in the name of expeditiousness of decision-making, would effectively convert Universities into highly authoritarian institutions, run rather like factories sans trade union rights. And these authoritarian institutions will not even necessarily be in the government sector. The bulk of them will be run by the private sector or as public-private partnerships, to expedite whose birth the UGC is to be dispensed with and a Regulatory Authority put in place. The NKC’s proposals in short clearly envisage a substantial privatization of higher education in the country.

There are three basic problems with this NKC vision. The first, as we have seen, is it negates the role of

higher education as defender of the freedom of the people, through the production of “organic intellectuals” of the people. The 1500 universities visualized by the NKC, not all of them new of course, will successfully turn out cheap skilled labour for employment by Indian and foreign corporate groups, but not much expertise for critically comprehending the way the global system functions and impinges on the people. It would in short produce “organic intellectuals” of globalized capital but not “organic intellectuals” of the people. Only someone who believes that the interests of globalized capital and those of the people are altogether identical can rejoice over this prospect.

The second problem with the NKC vision is that it would create sharp dualities within the education system. Consider its attitude to the whole issue of drawing fresh talent into the academic profession. There can be little doubt that a major reason for the academic profession being drained of fresh talent is the abysmal incomes of the academics compared to other professions, which in turn is an outcome of the fact that income relativities have become totally irrational under the neo-liberal regime.

India now has one of the most unequal salary structures in the world. The salaries of executives in the private sector are now so astronomical, and so utterly lacking in justification for being so astronomical, that hardly any person of talent feels drawn any more to the sphere of higher education, which pays a pittance in

comparison. The Prime Minister lamented the other day that the salaries of corporate executives in India had crossed all limits, but the fact that they have done so is a direct result of the neo-liberal reforms which have removed the ceiling on corporate salaries that had existed until then. Neo-liberal India has not only thrown incomes policy to the winds, but also judges individuals according to their relative incomes. This has now become the biggest problem before the higher education sector, which is threatened with atrophy through being starved of talent. Some totally dedicated and committed people may still come to the academic profession, but they constitute the exception rather than the rule.

The NKC does not address the issue of income relativities at all. Instead what it suggests is “incentives and rewards for performance” which basically means a differential salary structure within and across universities. This still would not draw fresh talent into the profession, since at the start of an academic career very few new entrants can show “performance” (unless the idea is to get fresh Ph.D.s from Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge at astronomical salaries, far exceeding those paid to home-grown Professors, on the grounds that Ph.D.s from those universities, unlike from our local ones, ipso facto constitute “performance”). On the other hand it would introduce a new “caste-system” on the campuses and destroy whatever democratic atmosphere remains within them. Since such a democratic atmosphere is a pre-requisite for free academic

exchange, any destruction of it will be counter-productive, and hence act as a further deterrent to the entry of fresh talent.

Thirdly, and most importantly, such “dualism” (if I may use it as a short-hand expression) will be singularly unsuccessful in achieving the “excellence” that the NKC wants. There will be a whole lot of universities, faculty members and students who will be considered second rate and lacking in “performance”. They will be low in morale, lacking in self-confidence, full of cynicism, and drained of whatever enthusiasm they originally had, and whatever creativity they were originally capable of. On the other hand there will be a limited number of universities, faculty members and students, supposedly the “excellent” ones, who, precisely because they would be considered “excellent” only as clones of Harvard or Oxford or Cambridge, would forever be hankering to get to those hallowed precincts of supreme “excellence”. They too would be frustrated and low in morale, but for an altogether different reason, namely their unfulfilled desire to move from the imitation to the original, i.e. from their current locations to the places whose clones they are supposed to be. This would be the surest recipe for the destruction of quality in our higher education system.

Quality does not come from aping others. Some of our finest institutions, which indeed have acquired global attention, have done so because of their systematic refusal to ape others, their systematic

academic “arrogance” vis-a-vis similar metropolitan institutions, and their strong connections with the Indian reality. This is as true of Professor Mahalanobis’ Indian Statistical Institute whose major, original, and pioneering work related to the study of the impact of the Bengal famine of 1943 on the people of that state, as of the more recently created Jawaharlal Nehru University which has kept its feet firmly on the Indian social reality. And yet aping is what all the current signals emanating from the government are pointing to.

I may of course be confronted with the counter-examples of IITs and IIMs, which, despite apparently having very little connection with the Indian reality, have nonetheless acquired “world class” status. While I do not wish to talk about them per se I certainly feel that an entire higher education system modeled on them will be undesirable, apart from the fact that any large-scale cloning of such institutions will yield sharply diminishing returns even in terms of their current criteria of “success”.

IV

I have so far discussed only one of the ways that the objective of producing “organic intellectuals” of the people can be undermined by the context of globalization, via the overwhelming need for, and the apparently tempting prospects of, producing what can almost exclusively be called the skilled foot soldiers for global capitalism. There is another perennial threat that

exists under globalization, and that is from the communal-fascist outfits, who thrive in the soil prepared by the unemployment and deprivation unleashed by globalization. The sway of communal and obscurantist forces over the sphere of education has been loosened for the time being, but there is little room for complacency here. I shall however be brief in discussing them.

These forces, at any rate segments of them, often claim to be fighting “Western” influence on our education system. Paradoxically, however, they end up strengthening the very "Western influence" which they claim to be fighting. Their attempt at the introduction of courses in State-funded universities to turn out Purohiths and astrologers, on the explicit argument that there is a market demand for them, is as much a “commoditization” of education as the demand for capitation fees and the substitution of basic disciplines by more “marketable” subjects. Likewise their attempt to change text books to make them conform to the prejudices of a handful of bigots on the grounds that nothing offensive to the “religious sentiments” of the “majority community” should be carried in such books is antithetical to the spirit of scientific inquiry without which there can be no “intellectuals”, let alone "organic intellectuals" of the people. The retreat to prejudice, the promotion of obscurantism, the substitution of extraneous criteria for scientific investigation in evaluating the worth of academic propositions: all of

these entail a devaluation of the content of higher education which actually disarms the country intellectually against the onslaught of imperialist ideology. If at a political level communalism and fundamentalism divide the people and contribute to a weakening of the nation vis-a-vis imperialism, then at an intellectual level too they make a parallel contribution by obliterating the intellectual capacity to see through its machinations. The opposition to the ideology of imperialism, one must remember, was provided by an inclusive Indian nationalism that was secular, democratic and self-confessed socialist. Communalism, whether of the Hindu or the Muslim variety, never had an anti-imperialist thrust. Should it come as any surprise then that the emergence of communal politics and ideology also paves the way for the re-assertion of the hegemony of imperialist ideology?

V

All that I have said so far should not be construed to mean that our higher education system is not in a crisis, that it is not lacking in quality, or that we should not strive for excellence. What I mean is that the notion of quality and the means of achieving it should be our own, that the concept of “excellence” should be defined by us, and that the means of overcoming the crisis of higher education must include increased not reduced involvement by the State, social regulation of the so-called “self-financing sector”, better emoluments and

conditions of work for teachers, accompanied by greater inducement for research, and other similar steps based on a painstaking analysis of the crisis. Simply implanting some “prestigious” institutions on a crisis-hit situation amounts to a quick-fix that does not address or overcome the crisis.

There is, however, a deeper issue here. One may disagree with the NKC recommendations but they are addressing a certain reality, namely the increase in demand by global capital for skilled personnel from countries like India. This opens up large opportunities for the Indian middle class youth and hence creates in them a constituency that advocates reforms in the higher education sector which would enable them to tap these opportunities. If these reforms are not consciously undertaken then the “pull of the market” will ensure that they will be surreptitiously affected, through private self-financing institutions. And what is more, is resisting the pull of the market even desirable? Such resistance after all will only restrict employment opportunities for Indian youth. In other words, is not the second perspective on higher education both impractical and undesirable, in the sense of being inimical to the employment prospects of many? It may have been the perspective underlying our freedom struggle, but that alone cannot justify our sticking to it.

This question can be answered at two different levels. As long as we are constituted as a nation, the task of nation-building, the task of being sensitive to the

interests of the people, the task of ameliorating their condition and protecting their freedom, retains paramount importance. The higher education system therefore must be looked at through the second perspective. To change it under pressure from the Indian and foreign corporates and the middle class constituency that stands to benefit from such change is to allow a small segment of the population to hijack the agenda for higher education. The nation can permit such hijacking only at its own peril.

But then are we talking about a conflict of interest in the realm of higher education between the middle class youth hoping to cash in on the increased global demand for cheap skilled labour, and the vast number of ordinary people whose freedom and protection (threatened especially in the era of globalization) should be the objective of higher education? The fact that there is such a conflict in reality cannot be denied. The stark contrast between the burgeoning salaries and visible prosperity of a section of the middle class youth on the one hand and the spate of farmers' suicides on the other, both a fall-out of globalization, testifies to this conflict of interest. And our two perspectives on higher education epitomize the difference in outlook between these two social segments. Even so, I do not believe that the middle class youth coming out of an education system which has as its objective the production of "organic intellectuals" of the people, will for that reason cease to be employable by

global capital. Global capital after all is keen to employ Indian skilled labour not out of charity but out of hard economic calculations. As long as these calculations justify such employment, it will persist even without our having to turn our entire higher education system topsy-turvy in a bid to impress global capital with our “excellence”.

In other words, there is no need for the tail to wag the dog. There is no need for us *specifically* to change our higher education system for producing skilled foot soldiers for global capital. There is no need for us to internalize the insecurity of our middle class youth and change the conception of our higher education system away from producing “organic intellectuals of the people” to producing “organic intellectuals of global capital”. There is no need for us to abandon the project of painstakingly putting the higher education system back on track by finding solutions to the myriad problems that go into the making of its crisis, in favour of instituting quick-fix reforms that will only exacerbate the dualism of the system. The second perspective on higher education which is the legacy of our freedom struggle not only remains as relevant today as ever before, indeed more relevant today than ever before; but it cannot even be construed by any means as jeopardizing the short-term interests of the middle class youth in the context of the job opportunities opening up under globalization.

Thank you for your attention.

Prabhat Patnaik