

PRIVATISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERROGATION

Bikram Keshari Mishra
Aditya Keshari Mishra

AS India's turn to open up its education sector, as per the WTO agreement, coming closer, the queries the haunt one's imagination increasingly become perplexing as well as profound. The reason as to why the entire country is debating over the issue of privatisation of higher education is quite obvious. The very phenomenon of privatisation of higher education appears as a mixed basket full of problems and possibilities. Sceptics and the supporters of privatisation carp at each other with regard to its effects on the masses.

As one raves about the arguments proponented by the sceptics, it appears as if privatisation is anti-student, anti-people, anti-education, detrimental to society and its goes against the principles of equity, social justice and harmonious growth. One also gets the impression that the existing system of higher-education is unproblematic and flawless.

How Unproblematic is our Prevalent System of Higher Education?

Before proceeding further, it is methodologically significant to respond to the following query: is our prevalent system of higher education efficient, flawless, market-oriented/utilitarian and unproblematic? It goes without saying, most of the courses being offered in universities are very weak in terms of their employability. This has contributed to the rising unemployment resulting in frustration among qualified ones. It is observed that higher the education at present by an individual, the greater is his alienation from the masses. Philip Altbach based on his observation concludes that corruptive practices are rampant in institutions of higher excellence. Admission to universities is for sale in some parts of the world. In some cases academic posts are sold. In some other cases academic posts are awarded on the basis of ethnic or religious backgrounds. Even the research publications, at times, are not authentic. Plagiarism has been quite widespread. Corruption has pervaded the matters relating to 'promotion'. Examination continues to be a common site of corruption. Invigilators are sometimes beaten/assaulted. Question papers are stolen. More than results of the examinations, what makes headlines in newspapers is the question paper leak (Altbach; 2004). Ragging continues to be an implicit hallmark of many educational institutions. The greater renowned is the institution, the more infamous it is for its intensity of ragging. Regrettable in particular, is the coward, meek, pseudo-humanitarian manner in which the authorities deal with the cases of ragging. It is said as well as observed that the quality of research varies from university to university, within the university from department to department, within the department from teacher to teacher, and under the same supervisor from student to student. One might evade by saying these are aberrations; but given the plethora of problems that ail the universities, one feels compelled to rethink whether universities in contemporary times are intrinsically devoted to any genuine academic mission.

Needless to mention, with the alarming rise in country's population with its corresponding effect on mushrooming of colleges and universities, it is increasingly being difficult for the government to support every institution adequately. As Agarwal and Sharma would put it, a number of position/posts in universities and colleges are not being filled up, libraries do not have enough funds to purchase new books. Many universities have cut down or stopped purchasing of standard journals, scraped their research programmes and withdrawn numerous student facilities. Teaching-learning environment in the universities is deteriorating fast. In their frantic

* Doctoral Fellow, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

** Doctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India.

attempt to look for funds and resources, some universities like Calcutta University went to the extent of selling its buildings and other properties and leasing them for funds to the business and commercial houses (Agarwal and Sharma: 2004).

Argument Against Privatisation

But as one delves deeper into the phenomenon of privatisation, the queries, debates, connotations that strike one's memory are divergent and manifold. Critics argue that it distorts and subverts the core mission of college/university, which is to seek, transmit and generate knowledge, undisturbed by commercial motive. It accentuates inequality and enhances the gulf between the elite and the poor masses. The emphasis is more on profit and it runs on the principles of market and commerce. It appears, sceptics have reasons to frown upon the seemingly magnificent project of privatisation. It is feared that universities will act like industry for grabbing profits. They will be at liberty to raise the course fees in any way they wish including tuition fees, capitation fees and donations. It is also argued that complete marketisation of higher education would go against the constitutional obligation of providing equal opportunities of education to all. Only the more advanced sections of population who have better information, better access to resources and more capital to bear risk, will be able to derive the benefits from educational opportunities generated by the market forces. In effect, higher education will turn out to be a luxury good and it will be a monopoly of the rich (Agarwal and Sharma; 2004). It is feared that private forces may misuse higher education to exploit the gullible and make it a purely commercial enterprise and indulge primarily in selling certificates of degrees and diplomas. Bharat R. Sant quotes two examples that illustrate what is happening in our country today. One, most of the private colleges in Madhya Pradesh run from small rooms or abandoned sheds of factories with facilities wanting or absent. Two brothers from Kerala run a College of Aeronautical Engineering with course approved by the Director-General of Civil Aviation. The college building is in a soyabean field near Bhopal and the 100-odd students have only two qualified teachers. Can other states in India be much too far from the above situation? Two, unbelievable it may sound, but of the roughly 100 private universities recently sanctioned by state governments across the country, 78 have come up in Chattisgarh alone all under a single State Act (2003). Some of the universities exist only on paper and some are reported to have many campus already in the adjoining states like Orissa and Andhra Pradesh (Sant; 2004). The new Govt. of Chhattisgarh decided to restrict the number by imposing mainly two condition to be fulfilled latest by June 30, 2004 pertaining to acquisition of minimum 25 acres/15 acres of land and Rs. 2 crores/Rs. 1 crores Endorsment Fund. Only 37 Universities could fulfill the stipulated condition by the said dore. In the process remaining 60 Universities were denotified.

It is also apprehended that foreign providers will offer primarily professional courses such as IT, management, accountancy and finance which will, in turn, result in gradual negligence, stagnation and disappearance of disciplines in social science and humanities. Ahmad and Siddique (2003) opine that the self-financing higher education institutions have become a place where money power replaced the merit of the students. This has violated the basic concept of equality as has been enshrined in the Indian Constitution in Article 14, 15 and 16. The sufferers are the meritorious and talented students particularly those who belong to the low socioeconomic background. In effect, creativity, originality, innovativeness and therein the promotion of culture will take a back seat.

Is Privatisation Devoid of Any Positive Contribution?

Despite the supposed ill-effects of privatisation as mentioned above, it is also said to have immense possibilities that would prove functional for the society. Chauhan propones that the system of subsidisation of higher education has created an overall atmosphere of indifference among its beneficiaries. The teachers do not teach; the students do not learn; and the parents are not concerned about education. The parents are not anxiously concerned because they do not have to pay much and the nominal amount of fee they pay is insignificant as compared to their earnings. Those who are benefited by the subsidy in higher education do not demand better quality because they are not paying for it. Instead, they shout when they is a cut in such subsidy. When a beneficiary of a service has to pay (as in the case of public schools), he expresses concern about its quality. It has been recently reported in the press that out of every Rs. 100 that JNU spends on a student, only 59 paise come from student's fees. A Delhi University undergraduate student pays an annual fee between Rs. 200-350 while government subsidy is about Rs. 2800-4200. While we rate ourselves as a poor country, the high-fee charging public schools are thriving faster than the government-run schools. When people can pay high fees to public schools why not to colleges and universities? The fact is that people do not mind paying high price if the quality

is good correspondingly (Chauhan; 2004). In a privatised system of higher education, students will feel enthused and motivated to attend classes regularly and demand quality education from the institutions in return of the amount of fees paid by them.

Privatisation will have a number of positive contributions. As regards the teaching community, the teachers will feel intrinsically compelled to perform their duty seriously as their salary will be paid out of the fees collected from the students. A teacher's continuity in the job, promotion, salary or his dismissal will solely be contingent upon his everyday performance. This would eliminate the presence of teacher politicians, casual, non-serious, salary-minded teaching employees from the campus.

Recently, the state of Delhi decided that some schools showing poor results in public examination might be handed over to private trusts with permission to raise fees and some grant by the state. About 50-100 schools were considered for the scheme. The idea was to improve their quality with increased funds and physical facilities created by the trusts. The reason behind such a move is evident. The government accepts that within the limits of its resources, it is not capable of providing quality education (Chauhan; 2004). No doubt, privatisation will be a blessing for good teachers. It will efface politics from institutions and teacher politicians will not only be out of political business but also be thrown out of the educational institution. This will restore the sound academic ambience of the campus. Thus, it is premature to argue that privatisation is bereft of any academic orientation.

Privatisation and commercialisation are the two sides of the same coin. No private individual or group will come forward to set up educational institution unless some economic interests are involved. So profit-making has to be a part of private educational initiatives. But the government has to see that commercialisation of education does not undermine our efforts to provide quality education and create excellence. Stringent rules have to be developed that would monitor as well as standardize the free structure.

Another noteworthy feature of the private players is that they are adept in mobilising resources. It is believed that once the General Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS) in education sector comes to full effect, many foreign players would come to tap the Indian market. It may be a boon as GATS will play the role of a catalyst to accelerate the influx of private providers of education in countries where domestic subsidy is inadequate, course options are limited, or quality and relevance of the programmes of study are questionable. The entry of foreign institutions into the domestic market will make transnational education more cost effective to students who would otherwise have gone abroad for studies. Large number of students will be able to benefit from foreign education when the same facility is made available locally. Along with the aforesaid benefits, privatisation will also lead to:

- improvement in the quality of higher education due to competition;
- use of IT and communication technology for spread/exchange of educational packages;
- greater access by students to a wide range of opportunities at home and abroad;
- increased access to education and reduction in knowledge gap in developing countries, and
- easier access to higher education in developing countries.

Public Versus Private: Bridging the Gap

Sceptics have found a serious problem with the policy of privatisation; but that does not mean we shall say a big no to privatisation. The reason is simple. At a time when the government has started withdrawing from public sectors, reducing its role and paving the way for increasing the role of private sectors, any attempt to derecognise the phenomenon of privatisation would remain an exercise in futility. In fact, privatisation has almost become omnipresent. Even it is not an exception verboten in the sphere of education. Moreover, very soon India is supposed to open up its higher education to private/foreign participation as a part of its commitment to the WTO.

On the other hand, supporters of privatisation find a great promise in the policy. They are exceedingly optimistic about the functional aspects of privatisation. But does it mean that we should go for complete privatisation?

Perhaps, there is a danger in wallowing in indiscriminate privatisation. It would, in the long run, imply a complete disappearance of social science, humanities, literature and philosophy; an aggressive upsurge of technical and vocational specialists, a complete negation of economically indigent categories from higher education and permanent segregation of higher education from the poor.

Implicit in our discourse is the proposition that saying a complete 'no' to the phenomenon of privatisation is an existential impossibility. The question here is not whether should we initiate private participation in educational institutions. But the greater question is, how privatisation as an initiative can be moulded that would be suitable to Indian societal context or that could be stretched to the vantage point of all Indians – the rich and the poor. Because, privatisation of school education has already started which is manifested in the form of existence of dual school practices in India: one is the high-fee charging elite schools and the other is run by the government. It is also seen in the domain of higher education like management, IT, biotechnology, medicine, business administration, science and technology and the like. Thus privatisation of higher education is gradually turning to be a reality rather than a mere conjecture.

Critics frown upon privatisation; that does not mean that we should be chary of reforms. Because, our prevalent system of education is beset with a number problems and inadequacies. Thus, an invitation to the introduction of reforms in educational system has been an existential necessity. Although there is certain strength in the arguments of both the sceptics as well as the supporters, yet it is impossible to take a unilateral side and reject the other. In a populous country like India, where the population is rising exceedingly fast, it is not possible for a government to bear the entire cost of educational set up at all level. Your demand for subsidy can effectively be considered if you have a population of a small size. The more you keep adding to your population size, the more cut will be there in the subsidy for education sector, as the government has many other similar constitutional obligations to perform. The government cannot be seen as a milking cow, which has an unending flow of milk or for that matter an artisan well. If tomorrow, you make your population two billions, the government may be constrained to reduce the subsidy to zero.

The point we are trying to make is that invitation to private players has been or gradually going to be an existential compulsion. It is not a question of their intrusion; rather it is a question of out invitation. And we feel constrained to extend such invitation of our inability, insufficiency and commitment. But at the same time we have to be very cautions in the application of the phenomenon of privatisation in educational sector.

Along with allowing private players in higher education, we have to strengthen our public supported institutions and take up the challenge of globalisation. We need to fortify as many state-run institution as possible which can face the competition posed by the private/foreign players. Let's develop a well-considered and integrated policy framework that would monitor the co-existence of public-private bodies in the sphere of higher education, and that would stand as a surveillance to check the functioning of private players.

The fee structure should be such that the cost of education should be recovered from those who can pay for it, i.e., the elites. Certain percentage of seats should be kept for open admission for meritorious students who are unable to pay the fees. Such seats should be allotted either without fees or with a nominal charge. Provision for financial incentives should also be considered for such economically poor meritorious students. The cost for all these social obligations can be derived from/adjusted with the fee structures collected from those coming from elite houses. This is not to propone that the private/foreign universities should introduce the policy of reservation on 'ascriptive' ground as is being practised by the Government of India. Rather, this is a suggestion that seeks to provide a space for meritorious students who are only economically handicapped to enter into the domain of private institutions. Private institutions can also raise funds from other outer sources to meet such social obligations. No doubt, profit orientation will remain as one of the features of provide players; but it should not be deterministic. Merit should be the only consideration for admission. It has to verified from time to time that such private institutions function in accordance with the national policy objectives and public interests. State authority needs to ensure that they do not function as mere factories to produce degrees and diplomas. Quality should be given the highest importance.

Most social science and humanities course are theoretical and handicap students to enter professional jobs. It is necessary to give them a market orientation which will enable students to enter employment. Curriculum, needs to be made relevant, need based and skill oriented. State-run institutions need to be calcified in order to

run competently along with the foreign institutions. This would result in an era where both private and public institutions grow in concinnity and move in condescence.

Epilogue

This is not chimerical to imagine a situation where government institutions can function efficiently as like foreign ones if they are allowed to operate under “level playing conditions”. It is true that neither public nor private sector alone can take care of our higher education system in India. What we, in our contemporary times, need is a harmonious co-existence of both. It is a part of our higher education reforms. It would not be a delusion to state that privatisation can harvest miracles and wow the people if it dovetails meritocracy with profit-making, economy with equity, equality with accountability, accessibility with utilitarianism. It all depends on our vision and the way we perceive and monitor things. Problems multiply once we begin to visualise privatisation as a replacement or as an alternative. Rather, we need to see privatisation as supplementary and complementary to the state-run public educational systems.

References

- Agarwal, V., Sharma, U.R. (2004) *Privatisation vs. Commercialisation of Higher Education: Some Facts, Concerns and Suggestion*. *University News*, 42(07), pp.25-28 and 34.
- Ahmad, N., Siddiqui, M.A. (2003) *Privatisation of Higher Education: An Appraisal*. *University News*, 41(07), February 17-23, pp.4-12.
- Altbach, Philip G., (2004) *The Question of Corruption in Academe*, *University News*, 42(11), pp.10-11.
- Azad, J.L., (2004), *Privatisation of Higher Education*, *University News*, 42(07), pp.19-24.
- Chauhan, C.P.S. (2004) *Privatisation of Higher Education: A Socio-Economic Perspectives*. *University News*, 42(07), pp.35-39.
- Dongaonkar, (2004) *Higher Education in India: The Varied Dimension*. *University News*, 42(21), pp.17-23.
- Karuppaiyil, Mohan (2004) *Privatisation and Access to Higher Education*, *University News*, 42(07), pp.62-64.
- Kurup, M.R. (2004) *Free Trade in Education: GATS Simplified for Discussion at Grassroots Level*, *University News*, 42(07), pp.4-7.
- Madhusudanan, K.N. Manjunath, B.R. (2003) *Internationalisation of Higher Education: Indian Scenario*, *University News*, 41(39), pp.1-6.
- Maske, Pradip (2004) *Globalisation and its Impact On Higher Education*. *University News*, 42(07), pp.1-3.
- Patankar, A.V. (2004) *To Market, To Market To Get A Degree*. *University News*, 42(07), pp.29-34.
- Ram Mohan, T.T., (2001). *Privatisation: Theory and Evidence*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 2001, pp.4865-71.
- Sahni, R., Sumita, K. (2004) *GATTS And Higher Education: Some Reflection*, *Economic and Political Weekly*. May 22, 2004, pp.2174-80.
- Sant Bharat R. (2004) *Private Participation in Indian Higher Education: Towards Excellence in Teaching and Learning*. *University News*, 42(07), pp.55-61.
- Sharma Kavita A. (2003) *Fifty Years of UGC*. *University Grants Commission, New Delhi*.
- Shastree, Nalini K. (2004) *Privating Higher Education: Global Challenges and National Responses*, *University News*, 42(07), pp.5-18.
- Singh, Amrik (2004) *Challenges in Higher Education*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 22, 2004, pp.2155-58.