ISSN: 2456-9550
JMC
November 2020

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Volume 4, 2020

THE JMC REVIEW

An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism, Practice and Theory

http://www.jmc.ac.in/the-jmc-review/content/

JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
NEW DELHI-110021

LOCKED DOWN, BUT LOGGED IN! 'CONNECTING' TO THE FUTURES OF INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

DEBADITYA BHATTACHARYA[*†]

Abstract

The effigy of the public university in India had already been erected for nation-wide public consternation and censure before a new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 came up and proposed a magical formula for ridding the system of its rot: a wholesale merger of physical institutional campuses to a quarter of its current size, while at the same time doubling student enrolments. Till the pandemic provided the fuel in which to douse the public university in its entirety, we hardly noticed that the 'magic' in the policy draft was simply the spark of an online sleight. A plan for a mass deportation of classroom populations on to digital platforms was afoot, and the global alarm around 'physical distancing' merely draped policy intention with the force of fatalism. To that extent, the pandemic has just been cleverly used to fore-shutter the gates of a sector that had long been scripted into such a destiny. The question that this essay will attempt to answer is: how will the higher education sector in India bear the brunt of this mass online transitioning, and what are the portents from a global context that might be relevant for us to remember now?

Keywords: online classes, MOOCs, National Education Policy 2020, social reproductive labour, multidisciplinary education.

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[†] Acknowledgement: A word of gratitude is owed to the anonymous reviewer, for the provocative comments and suggestions that followed on an earlier version of the essay.

> To work today is to be asked, more and more, to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to desire without purpose, to connect without interruption…. Of course this fantasy of what Marx called the automatic subject, this fantasy that capital could exist without labor, is nothing new but is continually explored at the nexus of finance capital, logistics and the terror of state-sponsored personhood which is instantiated in various pageants of conferral and withholding. It is marked today by the term human capital.
>
> (Harney and Moten, 2013: 87, 90)

The scourge of the pandemic in India has proved that the 'pageants of conferral and withholding'—that is, the substance of state welfarism and regulation—are foisted on what Harney and Moten call 'state-sponsored' fictions of 'personhood'. There are two ways of looking at this: one logistical and the other juridical. In either case, it becomes apparent that 'conferral' and 'withholding'—the two dominant state functions of guaranteeing rights and controlling excesses—are not linked by the logic of contiguity, but practically seem to coincide with each other.

I. Of Sacrificial Men and Rightless Citizens

Within a neoliberal harnessing of human capital as the fuel for national 'growth', to confer is to potentially withhold and vice versa. In classic labour market jargon, what has long been peddled as an 'entrepreneurial' ethic[1] now evolved into a new euphemistic shibboleth: 'self-reliance'.[2] The Finance Minister's laboured announcements for a relief package to tide over the current economic crisis were calculated to this end, in so far as they opened up major sectors of government activity for private investment.[3] Such emergency-conjuring of a 'self-reliant India' (Aatma Nirbhar Bharat) thus follows on a time-worn moral fable of individual enterprise and sacrificial labour, while only lengthening the receding shadow of the state and eugenically consigning populations to their differing degrees of survivability.

When relief is viewed as reliance on the state—and a call to redistributive welfare—the 'nation' is nominally materialised in its 'publics'. This runs counter to the ideological manifesto of human resource accounting, where every trace of life is, in the final instance, an extractive source of capital accumulation. The moment at which such life is ejected from systems of production is also the moment when it must be left to fend for itself, or to reinsert itself into alternative circuits of circulation.[4] The nation, within this order of economic

rationalisation of wealth as always-already potential in life, must parasitically live off its publics, rather than provide for the latter's claim to livelihood *as such*.

It was this truth that one saw played out in these past few months—where 'to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to desire without purpose, to connect without interruption' was the injunction passed down to the world's largest democratic hoax. The middle classes were asked to clang plates and light candles,[5] the public press ordered to act as conduits for government data (refer Singh, 2020; Panneerselvan, 2020), the informalised migrant workforce threatened with punitive action even while they were belched out by factories and cityscapes,[6] and educational institutions were overnight reinvented as smart phone data (see Bhattacharya, 2020; Kundu, 2020).

This was a wholesale transition into the originary dream of modernity—the non-mathematical calculus that equates labour with logistics. Historically, the spectre of the nation-state had emerged out of this translatability. To turn people into logistics is to evacuate their subjectivity, and thus render the variability of labour-power into the *form* of the commodity. It is how labour is made invisible; unsuspecting of its own disappearance into capital. The corollary of this is the resulting perception of capital becoming self-generative. This is the first sense in which an interpellation into 'self-reliance' works.

The second dimension, as I noted above, is juridical. It implodes the state's 'gift' of citizenship as no longer productive of guaranteed rights, and consequently subjects an order of infinite circulation (of labour-power) to the random sovereignty of numbers. This is the rule of body-count, fancifully hailed as 'demographic dividend'—aggregated not in the legal members of a national community but as exchangeable entities in the marketplace. Majoritarianism emanates from infirmities in the market, and not from some underlying clash of civilisations.

Every living body in such a polity—whether culturally marked as normative or deviant—is predestined as disposable and yet potentially capable of a surplus. It must survive on its own and through a wage-hunt, but not be preserved. Across annals of history, the securitisation of a nation-state has been coincident with the global auctioning of its labour-power. And, just as

the raking up of citizenship claims (in the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 and a promised National Register of Citizens) occurred in the context of a flailing economy (see Das, 2018; Chatterjee and Sengupta, 2019; Unnikrishnan, 2019), so will the neoliberal route of a post-pandemic recovery spend itself in cultural angst and aggression. To make citizenship redundant for economic survival, while at the same time dematerialising labour as logistical transport, will only make the shipment of bodies inseparable from a territorialism of borders. Every act of moving, underwritten into the globality of capital and evicted from the materiality of being, is automatised as the terror of the unknown.

II. Shipping and Skilling Labour

Having set out a staggeringly large terrain, the question that this essay will attempt to answer is: how will the higher education sector in India bear the brunt of a nationalistic narcissism disguised as 'self-reliance'? Using terms from the foregoing discussion, how will this 'human capital'—disowned by the state and marked as permanent surplusage—be reintegrated into annual reports of national growth?

On the face of it, human capital—viewed as self-reliant and self-generative—must be successively upgraded for it to retain 'value' despite depreciation or falling demand. In other words, there must be an exponential increase in the scramble for higher-order cognitive skills at significantly lower costs.

The entire workforce that, in its logistical transformation, is alienated from its labour-power and hollowed of its subjective character will seek to substitute/supplement its erstwhile skills with new ones. In most cases, unmoored from the protections of the state and left at the mercy of ruthless competition in a free market, existing/erstwhile wage labour in the private sector will try to boost its productivity through part-time stints at acquiring new skills. Understandably, these will be skills that promise alternative professions of dignity, or serve as additional benchmarks for the quality of renewed labour-power to be pawned in the market. Since most of these new entrants into college education—aspiring to achieve the status of knowledge workers from mere skilled wage labour—will be required to balance work commitments outside of their academic careers, there will result a massive demand for online courses from reputed universities at minimal costs.[7]

The process is already underway.[8] The final tranche of relief announcements, while in the throes of the pandemic, launched a scheme under which the 'top 100 universities' in the country were empowered to offer online degrees without any regulatory approval or legislative control (Mohanty, 2020). Since none of this necessitates investment in physical infrastructures or the costs of their upkeep, the revenue requirements of such courses are expected to be low and predictably shared by a far wider enrolment base than the traditional classroom initiates. On what is popularly termed as a cost-sharing basis among end clients, the nation's online transitioning of higher education is touted as imminently cheaper and yet a greenfield investment opening for private ed-tech capital.

But, why is this to be rolled out as a sop for the 'top 100' alone? The answer to this is two-pronged. While university branding is calculated to attract both private investors (in the hope for greater enrolments) and enrolments (in the hope for better services or knowledge outcomes), the deliberate policy linkage of ranking with 'autonomy' is to function as an incentive for other non-'performing' institutions to follow suit. More and more institutions will competitively digitise knowledge content without much need for coercive scaremongering, in seeking the nod of accreditational agencies and their push for graded deregulation.

III. Is Access Infrastructural?

By all appearances, we are headed for the cherished dream of a mass democratisation of higher education. The university sector is finally to be opened to people of all ages and places and professions, the hierarchies of value between on-campus courses and open distance learning are to be dismantled, and the structural exclusions perpetrated by centuries of intellectual apartheid are to be remedied. The trilemma that governed the misfortunes of Indian higher education—identified by Devesh Kapur and Pratap Bhanu Mehta as the non-contiguous welding of 'quality-access-financing'[9]—is to be ironed out by the online university, in as far as it promises the best possible education to the largest possible audience at the lowest possible cost. If online teaching is to achieve the maximum amplitude of 'publicness' within structures of higher education, isn't it a just replacement of the public university?

I would emphatically argue that, quite to the contrary, the virtualisation of pedagogy performs an accurate inversion of the *raison d'etre* of public education. And, the plain arithmetic of access—as encoded in the statistical fetish for enrolment ratios—is grossly ill-equipped to grapple with this scandal.

Access is neither a measure of social opportunity nor of a humanist resilience against odds; it is, in the final instance, a question of the responsiveness of infrastructures to histories of disprivilege and dispossession. A public education system begins from the premise that the state must assume this burden of historical guilt and therefore make the inaugural move towards redressal. Formal access to infrastructural provisioning must therefore be the commitment of the state, and not the onus of the private individual. While the brick-and-mortar public university exists in order to correct inequities of access to infrastructures of knowledge production and reception, the spectre of online education consists in privatising these access costs entirely. Not only is private entitlement to technological gadgets/devices/resources the key to one's ease of access to education, the quality and substantive content of such education is also made incumbent on the quantum of technological capital that may be afforded (nature of device, size of mobile screen, configuration of software, speed and bandwidth of internet connection, memory space on device, etc.). Despite the avowed 'low cost' of 'good' online education, it eventually turns out that the quality, access and financing of such offerings devolve differentially on the individual's capacity for buying them. And, it is here that the state finds a most opportune exit route from its constitutional responsibility towards the education sector.

Having said this, it needs to be maintained that a political resistance to the ploy for privatising higher education (through online means) cannot be articulated in terms of the reality of its unequal access. Though the overwhelming majority of public critiques has resorted to highlighting data around the 'digital divide'—and how it plays out along lines of caste, class, gender, community, religion and region[10]—this would not prove a sufficient counter-argument on specific grounds.

First, the question of individual access understands the state's withdrawal from social sector provisioning as dependent on context, and not as a larger structural adjustment. Consequently, it argues for alternative arrangements to even out disparities across contexts—

for example, the state provisioning of internet services or the nationalisation of broadband data. Given the amount of resources that the state is likely to save by pulling out of the physical infrastructures of education (and its recurring costs of reproduction), it is not impossible for doles of monthly data to be made freely available as incentive to students who opt for substitutive online means. Against the backdrop of the Indian state's intimate partnerships with the telecom sector, such a reform model for revamping higher education—and, in the process, instituting mechanisms of cyber-surveillance[11]—is in fact entirely believable.

Second, there is no denying that a large-scale transitioning of higher education to digital platforms—through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and the like—will initially enlarge enrolments to an unprecedented extent. This is because a large section of adult working male populations will log into the fabled adventure of university education without having to physically attend the university, till the myth of its promised enlightenment wears off in unanticipated ways. It is true that many of the new entrants into tertiary education will also represent communities that have been millennially deprived of the right to higher intellectual pursuit, and forced into situations of semi-manual or mechanical labour. Access is precisely the arithmetic that the government too will be trumpeting in its attempts at advertising the relative merits of a digital university (McKenzie, 2020). Couching reform in terms of its possible critique is something that the state bureaucracy has learnt exceedingly well. This was best demonstrated by the rhetorical self-projections of the *Draft National Education Policy 2019*—that made liberal education seem the sole ideological instrument of a fascist regime,[12] which had faced the stiffest resistance from university communities for suppression of liberal voices.[13]

The third and final reason why access parameters might not be the best defence is the fact that what we are defending has not been innocent either. Ranged against an online onslaught is the hubris contained within the history of the traditional university itself—and its prolonged complicity with forms of systemic discrimination, suspicion of first-generation learners, disavowal of contingent knowledge practices and non-secular life-worlds. Despite having generated myths about its penchant for intellectual emancipation as well as a means for social-economic mobility, the public university has veritably failed its public vocation for decades now (Bhattacharya, 2019a). It has neither been as substantively transformative nor as

democratically self-oriented as its hallowed vision documents claimed. Over time, the government has carefully sculpted an image of the colossal betrayal of democracy and social justice within traditional higher educational institutions—and therefore mooted the need for a thorough overhaul through reorientation of policy. Part of this imagination of the 'failed project' of Indian higher education was manufactured by successive drafts and the final Cabinet-approved version of the new *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*.

IV. The University as a Sick Asset

To en-frame an alternative in policy terms is not merely about positing imaginary benefits; it demands a prior debunking of existing systems and an aggravation of the apparent chasms between what they professed as opposed to what was achieved. To have successfully done the latter is to already strengthen an alternative as imperative.

Spanning nearly four years of stock-taking and two separate committees,[14] the draft of the new education policy begins by ruing the minimal penetration of higher education among the bulk of India's population of college-going age. With a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of only 26.3 pitched against a massively unwieldy spread of nearly 52,000 institutions (GoI, 2019: I–II), the university sector is flagged off at the very outset as limping under its own weight. The bloated obesity of the institutional architecture is lamented as the cause of a regulatory malfunction.

Add to this an apparent failure of social justice policies in effectively redistributing public resources and enhancing formal inclusion of 'under-represented groups' (URGs), later re-acronymised as 'socio-economically disadvantaged groups' (SEDGs), such that there is need for a clear bifurcation of educational goals. While 'employability' is still cited as the limit of intellectual labour for the socially marginalised,[15] liberal education becomes the opiate of the mainstream. The vocational and the liberal are self-separated by pedagogical difference, but welded together in the cause of an ill-fitted commitment to equality. In the process, social mobility and democratic citizenship are mapped out as mutually exclusive pursuits within the liberal university—the bulk of populations coming out of which is destined to near-indefinite un(der)employment.

This damning policy portrait of the public university is then given the aura of a providential truth by years of spectacular prophesying that went before. The absurd fee hikes and tuition increases across government-funded institutions had already made the sector appear like an unsustainable investment.[16] The significantly lower returns—portended by accurately stage-managed theatres of 'anti-national' sloganeering by slothful scavengers of university students, living off public resources unto eternity—had further discounted higher education as an immoral economy of consumption and debauchery.[17] References to an overpaid, underworked and ill-prepared teaching force—marching out into the streets on the slightest caution of reform—confirmed the wasteful expenditure on higher education, in so far as these 'urban naxals'[18] were made to represent a 'Harvard' of lethargic privilege against the 'hard work' of active nation-building (Verma, 2017). Their old-fashioned teaching methods, it had been repeated *ad nauseam*, were at the heart of every debacle that the nation fathomed itself going through—from employment crisis to breakdown of the family, from a bohemian punk-rebellion to internal security threats.

V. Digitality as Reform Antidote

The effigy of the public university had already been erected for nation-wide public consternation and censure before a new National Education Policy draft came up and proposed a magical formula for ridding the system of its rot: a wholesale merger of physical institutional campuses to a quarter of its current size, while at the same time doubling student enrolments.[19] Till the pandemic provided the fuel in which to douse the public university in its entirety, we hardly noticed that the 'magic' in the policy draft was simply the spark of an online sleight. A plan for a mass deportation of classroom populations on to digital platforms was afoot, and the global alarm around 'physical distancing' merely draped policy intention with the force of fatalism. To that extent, the pandemic has just been cleverly used to fore-shutter the gates of a sector that had long been scripted into such a destiny. An analogy with how online education swelled within American and European college contexts in the backdrop of austerity cuts, mandated by the 2008 recession in international finance, is instructive here (Newfield, 2016a). A spectre of an immediate crisis external to the sector must always be called upon to necessitate 'reform' as the only condition of possibility of survival.

It has been severally remarked that a long-term solution to the threat of similar disruptions and future pandemics will have to be devised, and a compulsory streaming of college courses on digital platforms might be the only way out. While an existing set of regulations—published by the University Grants Commission in 2016—allowed a maximum of 20 per cent of an institution's academic offerings to be made available online,[20] a committee appointed to debate the future of digital higher education in the context of the pandemic is reported to have doubled the limit as a basic minimum for the running of courses.[21] A separate committee revising academic calendars owing to lockdown closures issued a fiat for one-fourth of every department's teaching to be made virtually transmissible.[22] Coupled with the NEP's proposal for merging institutions and drastically curtailing their numbers, the digital evangelism within higher education is assumed to be a one-step reform antidote to all the lineaments of crisis surrounding the public university. From boosting enrolments to effectively deregulating the market for educational services, widening the drive for social mobility through an absolute diversification of consumer bases, lowering the financial liability of states as well as beneficiaries, curbing the menace of the lazy 'anti-national' greying eloquently on university campuses, revamping teaching methodology beyond its lecture-theatre tedium—an online adaptation was all it needed for the university system to start paying off and paying back its debts to both the state and global finance capital.

The most recent survey data on higher education trends holds that nearly 74 out of every 100 potential enrolments in the college-going age bracket have no access to a college degree.[23] For the year 2018–19, this would amount to a 105 million-strong youth left out of the nation's university cartographies. If this proportion of the 'demographic dividend' could be tapped into, alongside the expansion of demand within working populations, private vendors offering online knowledge solutions are expected to flock wholesale into educational shareholding. It is with such promise of returns that the government illegally rolled out a public–private partnership scheme in the National Educational Alliance for Technology (NEAT)—a body first named in the draft NEP[24] and made operational much before the final policy was unveiled. Through tie-ups with private tech-providers, free to charge for courses and services at market rates, this platform is designed to enable a leveraging of public universities for competitive bids.

Ushering in a private equity model within higher education—or what Christopher Newfield describes as a 'leveraged buy-out' of the university system (2016a: 177)—technological start-ups could effectively make use of public resources and institutional reputation to sell their products to prospective buyers of online education. In the course of such venture-capitalist invasion into the sector, the public university is successively disintegrated into smaller service-assets and pawned off to multiple shareholders. According to Newfield, the MOOC years in the United States (2011 to 2016) were witness to identical developments that—in his prescient discerning of a cautionary tale—make for a fairly advanced 'Stage 6' of the 'unmaking of public universities' (ibid.).

VI. Who are the Surplus Peoples?

The caution in the tale extends farther, inasmuch as the bubble of enhanced enrolments in online courses is fated to a dramatic implosion. While American universities, riding on the post-recessionary MOOC wave, have had an average of 60 per cent of their initial course subscriptions drop out by the third year, fully online academic programmes have registered the highest-ever attrition rates in the history of global higher education. The latter variety saw its graduation rates in the US dip to an abysmal one-eighth of regular public university classroom courses, and almost a quarter of community college completion statistics (Newfield, 2016a:191–92). Significantly enough, the social profile of drop-outs from online programmes accurately coincides with those who were supposed to benefit from it—to be more precise, first-generation college-goers and working adults who neither have the academic motivation nor the necessary social capital to survive demands of intellectual rigour.[25]

When transposed into an Indian context, the 'social justice' claims enunciated by a digital reinvention of the public university will only end up in a consummate perversion—by making collaterals out of minority, Dalit–adivasi and women enrolments. The policy prescription for such a scenario is to inordinately dilute content and relax testing mechanisms, which would only go on to compromise the credibility of such courses for potential employers and provide no 'value-addition' to the skill sets that an incumbent already comes with. Structures of discrimination are thus to be incrementally reified through a social

credentialing of unfit/undeserved labour-power, and bad debts doubled by a plan that professes to democratise higher education.

On the other hand, what a digital proselytism within the university sector achieves in the long term is a complete dispensability and precariatisation of multiple forms of academic and non-academic labour that keep the brick-and-mortar university running. Learning from the American example, even a partial onlining of university curriculum leads to a major outsourcing of teaching-labour—not only to underpaid adjuncts or non-tenured contingent faculty, but also to teachers who are contractually engaged by tech-companies.[26] Faculty positions cease to be the exclusive preserve of educational institutions, and knowledge consulting within a corporate service sector emerges as the largest (but also the most tenuous) recruiter of intellectual capital. Teachers are hired on variable course contracts and wages clocked against specific hours of online content creation, thus forcing a near-total disappearance of the idea of tenured or permanent employment.[27]

This wholesale casualisation of teaching work plays into the branding strategies for online coursework, in so far as specific programmes are run in the names of celebrity professors, while the hard labour of content designing is passed on to underpaid teaching assistants or relatively younger temporary recruits. The 2016 UGC Regulations, in hailing the MOOC turn in Indian higher education, urges a replacement of faculty vacancies within institutions through online course imports.[28] In this lies an implicit policy nod for cutting down teaching positions within departments where digital resources are available. In the same vein, the Regulations empower colleges to offer elective papers in the remote online mode, even if they lack the immediate infrastructural requirements and faculty strength to run them.[29] Needless to say, the UGC's ploy for enabling digital cross-streaming of courses across institutions not only made economic sense—in that a course could now be physically run at one college but offered at many others at no extra cost to the state!—but it also entrenched the concept of 'credit transfer', in the garb of which a 'one-size-fits-all' common national syllabus was imposed on the nation's colleges the year before (see Sharma, 2015; Newsclick, 2015; Tewary, 2015; Kumar, 2015).

This new curriculum—rammed in through classic executive unilateralism—was advertised as retaining a greater amplitude of student 'choice' and therefore more attuned to personalised

'learning outcomes', while assuming that student populations who enter the country's higher education sector are but mirror reflections of homogeneity. It occasions no wonder that a uniform syllabus preceded the move towards online learning, since it only makes an effective cost-cutting mechanism seem so much more like a push for standardisation of knowledge output (or, in governance terms, 'streamlining'). In truth, the Choice Based Credit System—by virtue of its insistence on mass mechanical reproduction of syllabi across contexts—makes it infinitely more possible to convert courses with inter-departmental and cross-university student enrolments into online teaching modules.

The digital transitioning could, for example, begin with papers that call for larger classroom sizes, better material infrastructures, greater teaching workload, more maintenance staff salaries, that is, the Ability Enhancement Compulsory Courses (AECC) and Skill Enhancement Courses (SEC). As an illustration, it might be worth pointing out that if a single AECC paper is wholly digitised, every undergraduate college with a relatively conservative annual intake of 1,000 students will lose an average of two sanctioned teaching posts in the relevant discipline. Multiply this by the number of public-funded undergraduate colleges in the country (which, in 2018–19, was in the range of 8,500),[30] and that is the size of the labour abscess dug up in one discipline alone. I am leaving private unaided institutions out of the equation, though the faculty attached to such spaces are likely to bear as much of the brunt of this resource shedding, if not more.

VII. The Teaching Industry and *varna*-labour

From the discussion thus far, it is evident that any critique of the forced online transformation in higher education needs to urgently move beyond access data and ethnographic field-notes on the 'digital divide'. The magnitude of this structural reconfiguration of the university may, in my understanding, assume full proportions when viewed in the context of policy and historical precedent—though the latter might be borrowed as lessons from a context not too far from our own policy infatuations.

Although I have already touched on the impact of a digitally outsourced college education on faculty numbers and recruitment patterns, what is it about online teaching that devalues teaching-labour at the same time as it promises to massify or globalise its reach? How are the moral economies of merit (and caste-based rights of professional access) reified into

unbreachable hierarchies via forms of 'digital idealism'[31] now in evidence? The former had historically conjured the figure of the 'teacher' as a subject of prophetic intervention—most often, through a careful epistemological separation between what Gopal Guru calls the 'theoretical Brahmins' and 'empirical Shudras'.[32] In what ways will the 'teaching industry' be recalibrated in the model of a factory-ethic of eliminationism,[33] where more and more people can enter a life of undignified drudgery while fewer attain heights of unimpeachable authority? In effect, the university system will continue to enable vertical mobility for an even more restricted coterie of the caste elite, while at the same time widening horizontal access to the toiling multitudes of a casualised bottom-end *cognitariat*[34]— a perfect example of re-packaging what Ambedkar called the principle of 'graded inequality' within the *varnashrama* ideal.

I have already gestured at this division of interests within the intellectual community, festered by separating a privileged minority of tenured professors (who also double up as the managerial class within university governance) from a large floating population of 'ad hoc' and part-time/guest lecturers who are usually tasked with keeping the departments running. The marketing of online courses not only exploits but also feeds into this feudalism of productive relations through strategic investments in celebrity capital.

While the Supreme Court of India contended that teachers are not 'workmen' but part of a 'noble vocation'—and therefore exempted from the mundane pettiness of 'industrial disputes'[35]—how would state bureaucracies under the shadow of the NEP 2020 use this hallowed feudality of the teacher's professional rank and position to re-institute socially differentiated sectors of intellectual labour? In other words, how would the current moment in history widen the deep institutional chasms between the enlightened moral guardianship of the upper-caste professoriate and the 'life of the Dalit mind'? (Guru, 2013: 39). Considered in similar terms, how might the Gramscian imagination of 'traditional intellectuals'—who 'experience through an "esprit de corps" their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification' (Gramsci, 1971: 7)—reinstate its power and privilege against the 'moving moral menace' (Guru, 2013: 41) of the Dalit-bahujan organic intellectuals entering the digital university as low-skilled informal teacher-workers?

The studied (and sinister) silence of the NEP 2020 on state-mandated policies of caste-based reservation, while at the same time bundling all forms of historical disprivilege under the vacuous rhetorical elasticity of an acronym like 'SEDG',[36] goes hand-in-hand with its meritocratic lament about failing 'quality' standards of a rapidly expanding higher education sector. This casteist bias within the policy is accentuated through repeated references to 'merit-appointments and career progression', concerns about 'quality and engagement of faculty', stocking of statutory bodies with 'persons having high expertise…and a demonstrated track record of public service' or 'eminent public-spirited experts' or 'highly qualified, competent and dedicated individuals'.[37] This hankering for a moral credentialing of 'eminence', however infamous by precedent,[38] runs parallel to a conscious inattentiveness to any kind of structural representation of caste or religious minorities on policy-making platforms as envisioned by the framework. The NEP advocates the cause of making 'tenure-track' faculty appointments in the same section where it ironically champions the furtherance of faculty autonomy and academic freedom.[39] Damningly, such tenure-track entrants into the teaching profession will have to depend on 'peer reviews' for their annual appraisals and renewal of contracts. It does not beg explanation that this culture of 'peer review' as a precondition for the career progression of casualised teaching-labour will only reproduce the university as a site of feudal kinship relations, based on existing caste distinctions. The 'theoretical Brahmins' will command (and own) the slave labour of the workmen–teachers, who must necessarily do the former's bidding at online content creation as teaching assistants/apprentices. A system of moral character certification—another variant of the patronage economy of 'recommendations' on the basis of merit assumptions—will now be built into the map of professional success within academia. However, the nature of labour demanded from such claimants to certification will largely be informal carework, in as far as the latter must provide consulting and mentoring support to student consumers of knowledge data.

The summary scrapping of the M.Phil. programme by the new policy[40] also contributes to the emboldening of the caste-Hindu stronghold in terms of research access and routines of advanced intellectual training. It is a rarely debated and historically corroborated fact that the sheer duration of a Ph.D. course—a minimum of four to six years—discourages women scholars and those from marginalised communities from committing to it for lack of financial

resources, social capital and chances of cultural survivability. In such a scenario, most of them seek a rite of passage into the research sector through the M.Phil. degree, secure jobs and then look for doctoral opportunities while in service. With the *AISHE Report* pegging the rate of research enrolments at 'less than 0.5 percent' of the total GER in higher education,[41] the exact institutional census would resemble something like this: if out of a sample of 1,000 adults only 263 can minimally access higher education, it is only one in these 263 college-educated youth that dares to enter the portals of research. The identity permutations that facilitate such research 'ambitions' are not difficult to guess, and it is still less difficult to fathom how universities systemically exclude the 'empirical Shudras' in order to become fit spaces for a 'noble vocation'.

Of course, none of this is a new development, since the neoliberal turn in educational policy-making consisted precisely in a remodelling of the non-profit public good of knowledge along principles of the market. For nearly three decades now, economic prospects of 'revenue generation' have structured administrative behaviours as well as the approach of the funding state towards the university intellectual. Forms of punitive performance audit, charges of irrelevant research, repressive codes of professional conduct, threats to fundamental academic freedoms have gone hand-in-hand with an unchecked contractualisation of teaching jobs, as the surest means of keeping a class of potentially 'enlightened' citizens perpetually at risk and therefore in control.

VIII. The Classroom is a Missed Call!

Apart from the crippling changes in the conditions of work and pay, how does the ceremony of a digital shift alter the *idea* of the university?

In referring back to Harney and Moten and returning to a strand of argument I began with, it begs being reiterated that methods of digital delivery reduce academic labour to a set of logistical arrangements. Stretched along a fortuitous coincidence of time and place—and their distensions over speed and connectivity—the practice of 'online learning' is voided of the subject and her situatedness. The alchemy of contact, and the possible violence of collisions, between the necessarily disconnected life-worlds of those occupying a classroom is where academic practice becomes an act of labour. It is the labour of trying and failing to connect with *an other* without miraculous aid, technological assistance or digital conversion. And, it

is in such failure that labour is recognised *as such*. To succeed is to connect without an investment of the body, an effort of the imagination, a plunge into the materiality of time and space.

The classroom is where one struggles not to reconcile, but to surrender to the in(de)finite disjunction of subject-positions—the unrelenting difference that distracts sense from senselessness, the sensate from the sensible. It is the space where an ethics of labour is both postulated and elaborated, in the naïve conviction that *our* world too may be the habitat of many others.

Counterposed against such naivete is the labour of a rejection (by the student–subject), the refusal to inhabit or to acknowledge the *charity* of hospitality. Such refusal is a resolute investment in the history of one's *own* situation—or, perhaps a difficult escape from a history one had not chosen into a space of hostile desire. In terms borrowed from Harney and Moten's powerful manifesto, the classroom is also the site of fugitivity (2013: 23–43), the space of the undercommons. It allows one to steal what should have been one's own, to dream in spite of the historical weight of injustice, to defy despite the order to obey.

There is no instant connect, no mute button, no volume control here, and yet there is all of that in the permanent possibility of slipping out of one world while staying in another. The classroom is a zone of chronic connectivity failure; and in as far as it thrusts the radicality of otherness in our faces (in someone's choosing to look out of the window, giggle away, doze off or whisper in muted syllables), it replicates the default injustice of production. It is the site of working at a world, once at a time, in wonder and frustration, feeling and guessing. In its rootedness within the incompletion of world-making, academic labour is not global and it can neither be transmitted as data nor coded as an algorithm. Online classrooms do not build commons—because, as the Edu-factory Collective poignantly maintains, the commons is not universal.[42] To build it is to stake a claim on it; in the digital classroom, capital predates (on) the labour of building a commons.

IX. Mortgaged Labour, Hidden Debts and Credit Points

Time is *lived* in the translation of embodied labour into abstract labour-power, imagined as 'socially necessary' when contributing to systems of production. But, there is always a time

outside of this cycle of crude economic approximation, which is either productive-yet-unwaged, or immaterial and determinedly unproductive. The latter order, classically speaking, is informal immediate labour not tied to the expropriative interests of capital. In this, it is the most subjective and heterogeneous component of time—one that claims a recuperation from productive work or reproductive housework. Such socially unnecessary appropriation of time by living labour, always-already outside the surveillance of capital, is spent in activities like planning disobedience, imagining insurrection, wishing away law or perhaps forgetting the trauma of abjectness. Absolutely indispensable to a radically transformative politics, this order of immaterial temporality is constantly at the risk of being preyed on and abstracted by capital, and then subsequently criminalised in the cause of governance.

The physical classroom provides a collaborative site for multiplying these informalities of living, while the online class achieves just the opposite. The latter assumes a commonality between all these disjunctive times, and forces immaterial labour into the synchrony of a choreographed appearance on-screen, on-device, on-your-mark. Till all are ready and cued in.

An online charade of knowledge-networking first blurs the distinction between productive and social reproductive labour, and then slouches towards eliminating the irreducibility of unproductive unwageable labour. In so far as the student must log in at the same time as look after an ailing parent, keep an eye on the kitchen stove, calm a restless toddler, shut out a boisterous neighbour, run an errand, answer a command, swallow a father's jibe or ignore the noise of the radio in the other room—all the while listening to a teacher's narcissistic baritone—the business of online education is both about doing 'business-as-usual' and making business out of the unusual. It allows no consciousness of the difference between earning course credits and doing unpaid carework at home. All labour is commodified irrespective of wage value, and consequently 'credited' by the university as capital to be invested in future and reaped profits of. Seen differently, all forms of labour are rendered into debt, attracting credit, only to compound the debt for reinvestment at higher rates of future productivity. In terms borrowed from a 'knowledge management' discourse, the online student–learner must learn to 'multi-task' because that's the only key to maximising labour productivity and wage credit.

X. The Everyday Reproduction of the University

Just as the digital university makes social reproductive labour at home indistinguishable from and co-eval with routines of cognitive production, it also issues a death warrant against all sectors of lower order (read: blue-collar) non-academic work that reproduces the institution on a daily basis (Caffentzis and Federici, 2009). With the increasing delegitimisation of the brick-and-mortar infrastructures of a university campus, the kinds of labour that create a conducive setting for the 'disinterested' surplus of teaching and research are now dispensed with. The cleaner, the mess worker, the canteen waiter, the groundkeeper, the janitor, the caretaker, the gardener, the newspaper vendor, the campus grocer, the photocopy machine-operator, the barber—and several such forms of daily wage labour—are, in one fell stroke, declared excessive to the *systems* university.

It was this life-world that allowed the university to confront a history of its own injustices and exclusions; it was here that the university realised its potential for a self-critique as the inaugural condition for social justice. The class-caste-gender and civic solidarities that soiled the insides of higher education—and its meritocratic rites of access as the sole formal right of entry—were only to be questioned in the everyday encounters with an ever-swelling precariat propping up the haloed quest for emancipation. The liberal university's 'original sin' was at the same time its only claim to a redemptive self-interrogation—but often, outside the centres for postcolonial studies, social exclusion or gender studies. In the online transitioning of cognitive capital, the physical institution blows up its salvatory prospects by becoming a 'systems-management' unit. What swells at the cost of this mass-precariatisation is the administrative–technical bureaucracy, the class of data-miners and knowledge consultants. For example, 'Annexure IV (Human Resource and Infrastructural Requirements)' of the recently published UGC (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations 2020 does not mandate any 'physical infrastructure' for the opening of a Centre for Online Education, thus eliminating the need for secondary amenities and consequent staffing requirements altogether. Even while academic personnel are to be roped in from existing 'Departments or Schools of Studies', technical recruitments are differentiated across eight new grades.[43]

Intersectionality is the name of an alliance building, a claim to sharing a commons. It is an imaginative exercise, and begins with a forsaking of the economy of intellectual rights. Imagination is preconditionally equal, the intellect is historically its obverse. For the university to become the site of a knowledge-commons, its non-intellectual communities are a potential window to the outsides of theoretical reason—the realm of know-how and tactical contingency. It is here that the imagination meets development practice, distinct from state-sponsored sample-sized wellness therapy manoeuvring as governance theory.

The hurried move towards online education—in the name of compensating for 'academic loss' caused by the pandemic—decisively pronounces the sovereignty of the intellect as the only province of higher education. It champions the unimpeachable right to cognitive labour over the costs borne by social reproductive labour within the university. The nagging regrets monotoned by university administrations (and the online–academic ilk)—about 'depletion of teaching time', 'impossibility of laboratory-based practicals', 'unviability of field-work'—seem to me, to echo a Brahminical nostalgia for an unquestioned continuum of intellectual privilege. In its fetishisation of that same privilege, it argues for a globalisation of knowledge as data, whereas what is foreclosed in the process are the forced encounters with difference.

XI. The Digital University and the Organic Intellectual

The adventure of equality through 'little acts' of the imagination could only be provoked by the encounters I detailed above.

In fact, many of these 'little acts' were already in sight during the recent lockdown. The doors to chemical labs in colleges were indeed bolted open by students coming together to make gallons of sanitisers and package them, or to stitch together face masks for free distribution to the poor[44] while the government was trading in export profits on protective equipment (Gunasekar and Sanyal, 2020). How are these not practicals enough? Why can't the field of the university ethnographer be shifted to relief camps in cyclone-affected south Bengal or colonies of migrant labour? How is running a community kitchen for the stranded poor not worthy of term-paper credit? Is sheltering a Muslim family displaced by a state-

backed pogrom in northeast Delhi not adequate learning for a lost semester? Is opening a community radio station to relay our collective (but divergent) experiences of the pandemic—or simply writing a song to mourn the death of a neighbour whose ambulance arrived a little too late—too little for an examination's worth of teaching? If so, the public university had become a relic even before we shoved and shelved it online.

For months before the outbreak of the pandemic, students of Indian universities moulted into the primary apprentices of a political revolution—a 'democracy from below' (Beg, 2020; Ara, 2020a). They streamed into the streets, occupied alleys, sat in on highways, marched towards parliament, thronged the gates of ministers' residences and blocked police headquarters against a 'chronology' of citizenship legislations that sought to disenfranchise, detain and deport the Muslim poor as 'illegal migrants'.[45] The spring in their slogans thundered against the darkness of state terror, till the 'imaginative work' made possible by a public university demanded a republic of commons. There was intimacy and laughter, dread and defiance in this festival of political vagrancy; the physical space of the university was beginning to transform itself by exceeding its body and its borders. It was as if the country became a university of outsiders and immigrants, learning to love and live with every other.

The pandemic's online swoop on these teeming multitudes has helped policy architects of public education imagine a not-too-far-away future, where universities may be swept clean of student bodies altogether. Not a stray loiterer, not a voice out of choir, not a poster out of place, not a protestor out on the prowl—a 'Swachh Bharat' dream come true! Such is a university logisticised; a prison-house of self-quarantined dissent and data-pack(aged) labour.

Sitting in Mussolini's prison, Gramsci wrote about the need for a new class of 'organic intellectuals' whose 'mode of being…can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator' (1971: 10). Inasmuch as the digital university is about 'connecting' away from 'practical life', it can only log in to the national(ist) organisation of a future *sans* organic intellectuals.

XII. Postscript: A Pan(aca)demic Excursus

George K. Varghese recounted his field experiences from colleges in Karnataka and Kerala to point at a deep sense of 'alienation', structurally reproduced by humanistic pedagogy and curricula across institutions (2011: 91–98). He went on to chart a history of the disciplinarisation of social and human sciences in the West, finally contending that the power of the digital invasion into 'matters' of academic inquiry has only led to an era of baffling 'super-specialisation'. In a Deleuzean sense, he regards these 'territorialisations, deterritorialisations and rhizomic interconnections between far-end disciplines' (ibid.: 98) as postulating a new and necessary order of default 'multidisciplinarity'—something that he accuses the post-independence Indian encounter with humanities and social science teaching as incapable of meeting the challenge of. On that note, he complains: '[w]ith a few outdated governmental institutions given the mandate for the overall nurture of knowledge what we have witnessed [in India] is tenacious immobility, distortion and degeneration of these non-science disciplines' (ibid.). This is a familiar lament couched in terms of a moral inadequacy and normative idealism, even if one were to un-hear Varghese's stealthy suggestion for de-regulating social science teaching (from being the 'mandate' of 'outdated governmental institutions') towards a new crop of elite private liberal arts universities of the kind that he himself taught in. This was 2011, and the age of Shiv Nadars and Ashokas and Jindal Globals had already begun,[46] often with the tacit and not-so-tacit enlisting of innovation enthusiasts from the ilk of social scientists and humanists. Turning Varghese's lament into a prophecy, the new National Education Policy 2020 champions a wholesale move towards broad-based 'multidisciplinary' liberal education, and argues for a phasing out of single-stream institutions or their mergers into 'multidisciplinary education and research universities' (MERUs).[47]

So, are we finally 'delivered' into global relevance, as Varghese would have imagined close to a decade ago? The answer however stands at an immeasurable distance from the desired ideal, in so far as the NEP's imaginative glossary for 'multidisciplinarity' only consists in a structural mechanics of optional course offerings; for example, a student of physics taking a semester's course in Sanskrit or a student of sociology dabbling in a paper's worth of accountancy. Alongside this order of cognitive skill-training in multidisciplinarity, what does not find a single mention in the government's new policy manifesto are the *actual* instances

of interdisciplinary social science practice that emerged from those same 'outdated governmental institutions' that Varghese talks so disparagingly of—namely, women's studies, studies in social exclusion or social and economic planning, human rights studies, minority studies. Quite the contrary, such Centres have been at the receiving end of the government's threats for closure and defunding since 2013 (Bhattacharya, 2019b: 194-96); the latest of such targets being Jamia Millia Islamia's Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies (SNCWS) (Ara, 2020b). What Varghese misses in his elaborate 'global tour' of the institutional lives of the social sciences is precisely this epistemological dichotomy: between the substance of the 'interdisciplinary' and the shadow of the 'multidisciplinary'. The latter is aimed at reproducing the conditions of survival of a recessionary economy—that is, an order of multi-tasking labour that thrives on cheap, semi-skilled, informal job contracts. For it, a cursory flirtation with accountancy and sociology is quite enough, as well as effective in forestalling any penchant for critical inquiry. The interdisciplinary social sciences on the other hand begin by questioning the limits of disciplinary methods and conventions, and are therefore potentially committed to teasing the imaginative contours of democracy.

The chronicle of the post-pandemic Indian university, as foretold by NEP 2020, is unsurprisingly both hydra-headed in its multidisciplinary proliferations as well as minimalistic in its reliance on 'faceless' interactions.[48] It recalls the triumphalism of a virtual multiplicity. The economics and arithmetic of this 'multiplicity' bears out the truth in the paradox. It resounds through policy diktats and regulatory circulars:[49] minimisation of physical teaching routines and yet an increase in the number of workdays and working hours, fewer face-to-face classes and yet longer daily shifts, blended teaching methods and yet biometric attendance scans, work-from-home schedules that consist in turning your home into the scientist's laboratory or the ethnographer's field at will. Time will walk us into classrooms that resemble airport lounges; each of us sitting at feet-measures of 'social distance' but permanently logged into our devices, never meeting till a message pops up on our screens.

This is no dystopian science fiction. It is the little workshop of a 'brave new world', where there is little work worth its name and little play that does not worsen the rules of the game.

Notes

[1] Jan Breman, in his deep ethnographic account of the informalisation of labour in southern Gujarat and the large-scale migration of a rural proletariat into the non-agricultural urban economy, presciently notes how governments and state-appointed committees have repeatedly given in to a 'dominant tendency to see the informal sector as a reservoir of self-employed'. Conducting his fieldwork through the period that saw the Indian economy transition from 'national capitalism' to a free market regime, he points at a poignant irony within state-led policy planning: 'According to this stereotype, the heterogeneous mass of energetic and inventive mini-entrepreneurs inhabiting the lower echelons of the economy are quite able to look after themselves and are in fact better off without state intervention' (Breman, 1996: 197).

[2] In the midst of a COVID-induced national lockdown—which saw thousands of migrant labourers and daily wage workers stuck without work or food away from home for months—the Prime Minister announced the unveiling of a 'stimulus' package as the route to economic recovery. The package, called Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan ('Self-Reliant India Mission') promised a total of ₹ 20 lakh crore of relief, which was to devolve into a series of sector-wise 'structural reforms' to be subsequently elaborated by the Finance Minister. For details of the PM's televised speech, see Misra (2020).

[3] As part of the ₹ 20-trillion 'fiscal stimulus', the key public sectors marked out for 'structural reforms'—in the form of enhanced foreign direct investment (FDI) and entry of private capital—include defence, coal, minerals, civil aviation, power distribution, social infrastructure and space–atomic energy. For a summary of the package, see Government of India (2020). For a break up of package details, see Institute of Policy Research Studies (2020). For an analysis of announcements, see Roychoudhury (2020); Abrol and Franco (2020); 'Centre's economic package: Centre raises FDI in defence to 74%, allows commercial coal mining', *Scroll.in,* 16 May 2020, available at https://scroll.in/latest/962130/centres-economic-package-centre-raises-fdi-in-defence-to-74-allows-commercial-coal-mining; 'Modi's Rs 20 Lakh Crore Package Will Likely Have Fiscal Cost of Less Than Rs 2.5 Lakh Crore', *The Wire,* 17 May 2020, available at https://thewire.in/economy/modi-rs-20-lakh-crore-package-actual-spend.

[4] Jan Breman prefers to call such forms of 'labour nomadism' as 'circulation instead of migration' (2013: 6).

[5] While infection rates in the country were steadily on the rise and the government's lack of preparedness with public health infrastructures became apparent, the Prime Minister made periodic appearances on national television to urge citizens to perform symbolic charades in their 'fight' against the virus. On 19 March 2020, days before the world's longest-ever lockdown was to be announced at four-hours' notice, the PM urged people to thank 'Corona warriors'—essential service workers—by clapping from their balconies or banging steel plates or blowing conch shells (see Panwar, 2020). With the situation getting grimmer by the day and with masses of migrant working populations forced to walk back home with no recourse to public transport, the Prime Minister made another televised appeal on 3 April for people to fight the 'darkness' of a pandemic by switching off lights and flashing candles or mobile torches (Narendra Modi, 'Let us switch off lights at home & light a lamp for 9 minutes at 9 PM on 5th April', 3 April 2020, available at https://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-prime-minister-narendra-modi-s-address-to-the-nation--549108). Millions of people across the country mimed the Prime Minister's call for theatrical symbolism with unquestioned devotion, sometimes by dancing to drumbeats with plates in their hands or by bursting firecrackers in festive revelry—a testimony to how fascist commandeering works by holding people's minds hostage. For more, see 'Social Distancing Forgotten, Country Raises a Racket at 5 pm', *The Wire,* 22 March 2020, available at https://thewire.in/society/coronavirus-janata-curfew-racket; 'Modi Harnesses "Power of Light", Questions Remain on Strategy to Combat COVID-19', *The Wire,* 5 April 2020, available at https://thewire.in/politics/narendra-modi-coronavirus-diwali.

[6] An order issued by the Government of Haryana (ADGP/Law and Order) Ref. No. 5264-5304/L&O-3 dated 29 March 2020—captioned 'COVID-19 Instructions Regarding Flow of Migrant Labour Across Haryana'—cited the Union Home Ministry's 'alarm and unhappiness at the large-scale movement of migrant labour on roads by foot' and issued 'clear directions from the Central Government' to ensure that 'there is no movement of people

on roads'. Section 4 of the order empowers the 'State Home Department to declare big indoor stadiums or other similar facilities as Temporary Jails, so that people who refuse to obey the lawful directions of district administration can be arrested and placed in custody for the offence committed by them under Disaster Management Act'. See also Yadav (2020); Suffian (2020).

[7] Sections 20.5.3 and 20.5.4 of the *Draft National Education Policy 2019* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2019) observe that the 'projected requirement for upskilling and reskilling youth is several times larger than that of training fresh candidates. HEIs can consider ways to address this requirement, through evening courses, online courses, and so on that can bring in additional revenue for them…. This task will also require projections of the need for such skilling in various sectors (e.g. skills gap analysis)….A large percentage of India's workforce is in the unorganised sector and in small businesses. They must have the option of moving from being hired as unskilled or semi-skilled labour to becoming skilled labour instead and being paid correspondingly higher wages. Many of them would also benefit greatly from receiving training in areas like entrepreneurship, financial and digital literacy. HEIs must be incentivised to look for models to address this need. The infrastructure for adult education as well as online education must also be used to provide opportunities for them to get trained during off work hours' (pp. 370–71).

[8] As a demonstrative example of recent developments towards this goal, see 'University Grants Commission (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations 2020', *The Gazette of India: Extraordinary*: New Delhi: UGC, 4 September 2020.

[9] D. Kapur and Mehta (2017). In the 'Introduction' to the volume, the editors identify the 'trilemma' of Indian higher education policy as consisting in the cross-cutting challenges of access, quality and financing.

[10] See Nagarajan (2020); Goradia (2020); Bhaskaran (2020); and 'Digital divide may turn shift to online classes operational nightmare, warn experts', *The Week*, 8 June 2020, available at https://www.theweek.in/news/sci-tech/2020/06/08/Digital-divide-may-turn-shift-to-online-classes-operational-nightmare-warn-experts.html

[11] For an understanding of how, in the context of the pandemic, concerns about privacy and data protection have re-surfaced, see M. Kapur (2020). The Internet Freedom Foundation, vide its letter Ref. No. IFF/2020/131 dated May 02, 2020 addressed to the Prime Minister, flagged these concerns (available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RR3tBnJCSkQvSDp0uVcMQr6C2RILgqg4/view). A comprehensive report on the question of data privacy and India's tryst with forms of cybersurveillance has been published by the Centre for Internet and Society, titled *The State of Privacy in India*, available at https://privacyinternational.org/state-privacy/1002/state-privacy-india#policiessectoral)

[12] Part II, Chapter 11 ('Towards a More Liberal Education') of the original *Draft National Education Policy 2019* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development) notes: 'A comprehensive liberal arts education develops all capacities of human beings—intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional and moral—in an integrated manner. Such education, which develops the fundamental capacities of individuals on all aspects of being human, is by its very nature liberal education, and is aimed at developing good and complete human beings' (p. 224).

[13] 'Editorial: University as Battleground', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(8), 25 February 2017, available at https://www.epw.in/journal/2017/8/editorials/university-battleground.html; see also Thapar (2016); Kumar (2016).

[14] Refer to '9-member panel to prepare final draft of National Education Policy', *Business Standard*, 26 June 2017, available at https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/9-member-panel-to-prepare-final-draft-of-national-education-policy-117062600537_1.html. See also K. Sharma (2018).

[15] Refer to Section 14.4 (p. 33) of the final *National Education Policy 2019*—revised from the Kasturirangan Committee report by the MHRD, and leaked to press. Titled 'Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education', this Section aims at 'increasing economic and employability potential of higher education programmes' in order to set 'targets for higher GER for URGs'. However, Section 11.7 of the same document names 'employability' as only a 'by-product' for the overwhelming majority of students enlisted for a 'liberal education' curriculum across all 'types' of institutions (p. 29).

[16] See 'Education for all? Universities across India fight fee hikes', *India Today,* 19 December 2019, available at https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/education-for-all-universities-across-india-fight-fee-hikes-1629501-2019-12-19; see also Shankar et al. (2019); Kaushal (2019); N. Sharma (2019).

[17] For references to how public universities across the country have been systematically branded by the Hindu Right in power as a cauldron of sedition and 'anti-national' sentiment, see Yamunan (2015); 'Rohith Vemula didn't get fellowship for past 7 months, says letter', *The Economic Times,* 19 January 2016, available at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/rohit-vemula-didnt-get-fellowship-for-past-7-months-says-letter/articleshow/50638216.cms?from=mdr; 'My Birth is My Fatal Accident: Rohith Vemula's Searing Letter is an Indictment of Social Prejudices', *The Wire,* 17 January 2019, available at https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices; 'Police crack down at JNU, arrest student leader for sedition', *The Hindu Business Line,* 12 February 2016, available at https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/education/police-crack-down-at-jnu-arrest-student-leader-for-sedition/article8229344.ece; Pandey (2018); Sethi (2016); Hebbar (2016); 'After national flag, Smriti Irani ropes in Army to teach nationalism on campus', *India Today,* 15 March 2016, available at https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/after-national-flag-smriti-irani-ropes-in-army-to-teach-nationalism-on-campus-313367-2016-03-15.

[18] 'Who is an urban naxal, asks Romila Thapar', *The Hindu,* 30 September 2018, available at https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/who-is-an-urban-naxal-asks-romila-thapar/article25088465.ece.

[19] Addendum 1, Section 4.7 of *Draft National Education Policy (DNEP) 2019* indicates a reduction of the total number of higher educational institutions across all 'Types' to a maximum of 12,300—from its current size of 51,649, as recorded in the *All India Survey on Higher Education Report (AISHE) 2018–19*. (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2019). Section 2.3 of the *AISHE Report 2018–19* needs to be read in consonance with Chapter 9 of *DNEP 2019*, in order to understand the doubling of enrolments proposed by the latter.

[20] Clause 4.3 of University Grants Commission, 'UGC (Credit Framework for Online Learning Courses through SWAYAM) Regulation 2016', *The Gazette of India Extraordinary* Part III—Section 4 (20 July 2016). New Delhi: Government of India.

[21] See 'Online teaching limit in university courses needs to be doubled: UGC panel', *ABP Education,* 27 April 2020, available at https://www.abpeducation.com/news/online-teaching-limit-in-university-courses-needs-to-be-doubled-ugc-panel-1.1142437

[22] See University Grants Commission, 'UGC Guidelines on Examinations and Academic Calendar for the Universities in View of COVID-19 Pandemic and Subsequent Lockdown' (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development), appended to Letter D.O. No. F.1-1/2020 (Secy), dated 29 April 2020, p. 7.

[23] As per Section 2.3 of *All India Survey on Higher Education Report (AISHE) Report 2018–19* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, p. 18), the GER for higher education—in the age bracket 18 to 23 years—is estimated at 26.3 per cent. This figure implies that 73.7 per cent of the relevant age cohort does not even enrol for a college or university degree.

[24] See Section 23.3 of the final *National Education Policy 2019* by the MHRD (revised from the Kasturirangan Committee report and leaked to press). It says: 'An autonomous body, the National Educational Alliance for Technology (NEAT), ***will be*** created to provide a platform for the free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enhance learning, assessment, planning, administration, and so on (p. 49, emphasis mine). Much before the policy was approved by the Cabinet, the said body was announced as functional by a press release from the Ministry of Human Resource Development in September 2019. The original Press Information Bureau (PIB) release has recently been removed from the official website, but a copy of the announcement is archived and available at https://www.phdcci.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Ministry-of-Human-Resource-Development-announces-National-Educational-Alliance-for-Technology-NEAT-Scheme.pdf. See also 'Government portal to offer education technologies using artificial intelligence for personalised learning', *The*

Hindu, 19 September 2019, available at https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/government-portal-to-offer-education-technologies-using-artificial-intelligence-for-personalised-learning/article29460680.ece

[25] Newfield's essay (2016b) cites from a 2013 study titled *Adaptability to Online Learning: Differences across Types of Students and Academic Subject Areas*, conducted by researchers at Columbia University, D. Xu and S.S. Jaggars: 'Overall, the online format had a significantly negative relationship with both course persistence and course grade, indicating that the typical student had difficulty adapting to online courses. While this negative sign remained consistent across all subgroups, the size of the negative coefficient varied significantly across subgroups. Specifically, we found that males, Black students, and students with lower levels of academic preparation experienced significantly stronger negative coefficients for online learning compared with their counterparts, in terms of both course persistence and course grade. These results provide support for the notion that students are not homogeneous in their adaptability to the online delivery format and may therefore have substantially different outcomes for online learning…. These patterns also suggest that performance gaps between key demographic groups already observed in face-to-face classrooms (e.g., gaps between male and female students, and gaps between White and ethnic minority students) are exacerbated in online courses. This is troubling from an equity perspective.'

[26] Ibid.: 26, where the author registers findings from an early 2013 survey on the relationship between MOOCs and educational resource allocation in the US: 'Our first question was, how do online programme personnel compare to those of face-to-face programmes? Our hypothesis was that they would have reduced teaching staff compared to traditional colleges and universities. We first noted that virtually all of the higher education companies that used online as their primary teaching mode were for-profit companies. Even including the not-for-profit firms, distance-only [online degree] institutions have one third as many full-time faculty as community colleges, and about one eighth as many as public research universities. Student–faculty ratios were the highest (worst) in the business—worse even than community colleges, and three times higher than the gold standard of liberal arts college.'

[27] See Schell (2009: 114–18). The author notes: 'The US has been a major incubator of for-profit universities. Perhaps best known of them all, the University of Phoenix models what these universities are all about—profit. Students meet in empty office buildings or rented spaces at night to attend classes or log-on to virtual campuses. Approximately 95% of all teachers at the University of Phoenix are contingent faculty working off the tenure-track…. For-profit educational institutions are profitable because they do not carry real estate and labor costs in the same way that traditional universities do. They make money because they don't keep up expensive grounds and expensive libraries and student centers—all things associated with traditional universities. They also do not make commitments to expensive, tenure-line faculty. They quite literally and quite nakedly make their money off of contingent faculty's backs. They "outsource" their entire faculty operation to contingent faculty or they employ a few big name professors to design online courses (course ware) that are then facilitated by online contingent faculty…. Contingency is to be accepted, capitalized upon, and celebrated. This entrepreneurial rhetoric of the happy adjunct plays right into the entrepreneurial rhetoric of outsourcing and online education.'

[28] Clause 4.4(a) of University Grants Commission, 'UGC (Credit Framework for Online Learning Courses through SWAYAM) Regulation 2016', The Gazette of India Extraordinary Part III—Section 4, 20 July 2016 (New Delhi: Government of India), explicitly empowers the Academic Council of a university to 'allow' online courses if 'there is non-availability of suitable teaching staff for running a course in the Institution'.

[29] Clause 4.4(b) (ibid.) extends provisions for online enrolments if 'the facilities for offering the elective papers (courses), sought for by the students are not on offer in the Institution, but are available on the SWAYAM platform'.

[30] Table 5, *All India Survey on Higher Education Report 2018–19 (AISHE Report 2018–19)*, p. 18 (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development).

[31] I borrow this term from the severally scattered allusions by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her accounts of an 'epistemological performance' with the children of subalterns in rural Bengal, to the moral entrepreneurialism of corporate-funded NGOs armed with digital doles of skill-relief packages. This model of knowledge

management, Spivak repeatedly maintains in her lectures, is only aimed at reproducing feudal behaviours in the subaltern—the 'social responsibility' logic of globalised finance capital.

[32] Guru and Sarukkai (2012: 10). Structured as an internal debate between the two authors, this book is fundamentally hinged on Guru's diagnosis of the epistemic hierarchies that condition the rite of passage into social science practice in India. Guru observes how, in advanced social scientific research, the right to abstract theoretical thinking has continued to be the historical preserve of the caste elite while raw 'lived experience' remains the only repository of Dalits and bahujans.

[33] Bourdieu and Passeron (1979: 27) explain this principle of 'eliminationism' based on cultural capital thus: '…the potency of the social factors of inequality is such that even if the equalization of economic resources could be achieved, the university system would not cease to consecrate inequalities by transforming social privilege into individual gifts or merits. Rather, if formal equality of opportunity were achieved, the school system would be able to employ all the appearances of legitimacy in its work of legitimating privileges.'

[34] Christopher Newfield (2010) incisively invokes the scourge of 'knowledge management' within what is understood as the American knowledge economy. Though specifically rooted in the US higher education context, the discussion is of prescient use in contemporary settings across the world. In the piece, Newfield refers to the triadic tiering of university education—where the lowest order is 'focused on regional needs and vocational training' and confers 'mass degrees that offer their possessor no special advantage in the job market'. He continues: 'Though their graduates have acquired meaningful cognitive skills and some focused credentials, they have obtained no social advantage. These institutions are about basic employability, but not about social mobility. They are increasingly seen as the only destination for knowledge training that the society's leaders are willing to pay for. They are the training grounds of the true "cognitariat", knowledge workers and rarely knowledge managers, and in fact heavily managed starting with curricula oriented towards immediate job skills from their first year in college.' They, in Newfield's analogy from pre-revolutionary France, eject their beneficiaries into a 'Third Estate' which includes 'the vast majority of brainworkers whose jobs require college degrees, additional specialised knowledge, and complicated experiential "know-how"—nurses, social workers, accountants, urban planners, architects, and college professors with doctorates in anthropology or the history of art'.

[35] Supreme Court of India, *Miss A. Sundarambal vs Government of Goa, Daman and Diu*, 5 September 1983. The bench, comprising Justices G. Couto and R. Jahagirdar, debated about 'whether a teacher is a workman as defined in Section 2(s) of the Industrial Disputes Act' (para 16). It finally came to the conclusion that teaching work, by virtue of involving higher-order intellectual skills, does not fall within the scope of the said Act and cannot claim relief to disputes under its provisions.

[36] Section 6.2 (appearing under the section title 'Equitable and Inclusive Education: Learning for All') of the Cabinet-approved *National Education Policy 2020* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, published on the MHRD website on 30 July 2020, p. 24) announces: 'Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) can be broadly categorized based on gender identities (particularly female and transgender individuals), socio-cultural identities (such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and minorities), geographical identities (such as students from villages, small towns and aspirational districts), disabilities (including learning disabilities), and socio-economic conditions (such as migrant communities, low income households, children in vulnerable situations, victims of or children of victims of trafficking, orphans including child beggars in urban areas, and the urban poor).' The 'breadth' of the 'categorization' is so expansive that it effectively reduces 'disadvantage' to ahistorical generality.

[37] Ibid., Sections 9.3(e), 13.1, 18.10, 19.2.

[38] Refer to the government's anointing of a yet-unestablished Jio University—a private university-project piloted by the Reliance Foundation—as an 'Institute of Eminence' (IoE) in 2018, while its academic operations were reported to begin in 2021. See 'Jio Institute, still on paper, gets 'eminence' tag, sparks row', *Hindustan Times*, 10 July 2018, available at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/still-on-paper-jio-institute-gets-institution-of-eminence-tag-draws-criticism/story-w45LROLHvX95uUB4eKdfXO.html.

[39] Section 13.6 of *National Education Policy 2020* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development), p. 40.

[40] Ibid., Section 11.10, p. 38.

[41] See 'Key Results', *All India Survey on Higher Education Report (AISHE) 2018–19* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2019). p. II.

[42] Edu-factory Collective, 'Introduction: All Power to Self-Education!', in *Toward a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, The Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory*, New York: Autonomedia, 2009, p. 5.

[43] 'University Grants Commission (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations 2020', *The Gazette of India: Extraordinary* (New Delhi: UGC), 4 September 2020, p. 91.

[44] For example, see 'Coronavirus: Jadavpur University, Kolkata college make low-cost hand sanitisers', *The New Indian Express*, 21 March 2020, available at https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/mar/21/coronavirus-jadavpur-university-kolkata-college-make-low-cost-hand-sanitisers-2119471.html; Rumi (2020 Mullick (2020).

[45] See ''Aap chronology samajh lijiye": Amit Shah's phrase on NRC-CAA is the internet's favourite meme', *The Free Press Journal*, 30 December 2019, available at https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/aap-chronology-samajh-lijiye-amit-shahs-phrase-on-nrc-caa-is-the-internets-favourite-meme; Ramakrishnan (2020); Johri (2020); 'Resistance, revolution and resolve: How Indian students led the anti-CAA protests', *Sabrang*, 23 December 2019, available at https://sabrangindia.in/article/resistance-revolution-and-resolve-how-indian-students-led-anti-caa-protest

[46] For a discerning account of the political developments and legislative plans that enabled the sprouting of a private 'hub of higher education' (in Haryana) through the first decade of this century, see Roy Chowdhury (2018).

[47] See Sections 10.11 and 11.11 of *National Education Policy 2020* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development), pp. 35, 38.

[48] Section 18.10 of *National Education Policy 2020* insists on 'a faceless and transparent regulatory intervention' and unflinchingly advocates the 'use [of] technology extensively to reduce human interface to ensure efficiency and transparency' (p. 48).

[49] For example, refer to 'UGC Guidelines on Academic Calendar for the First Year of Under-Graduate and Post-Graduate Students of the Universities for the Session 2020–21 in View of COVID-19 Pandemic'. (New Delhi: University Grants Commission), September 2020, available at https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdfnews/1019576_Guideline.pdf.

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