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CHURN IN INDIA**

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

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### Abstract

As the infectious spread of the Covid-19 virus began to overwhelm people and governments across the world, higher education, unsurprisingly, has also been profoundly disrupted. While a slew of measures such as physical distancing, the wearing of masks, and increased participation in video conferencing offered tentative solutions for meeting teaching schedules, the challenge was not entirely limited to creating virus-free or safe environments. The global pandemic was, in fact, roiling through a university system that was already much beleaguered by the divide over whether higher learning was a market choice or a state responsibility.

Though the dangers of Covid-19 initially played out as a quest for achieving personal safety in the class room, the implications of distance learning, I suggest in this essay, go far beyond addressing such logistical arrangements. The higher education story of recent years in India, in particular, can alert us to the emergence of a larger plot for university education. The university student will no longer be caught only within the existing tension between citizenship training and consumer choice but will be increasingly rejigged into a 'User' — simultaneously a virtual learner and raw material for the harvesting of metadata.

**Keywords:** Humboldtian ideal, corporate university, user-student, EdTech, neoliberalism.

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By the time the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, medical advisories were already urging for limiting human contact and for enforcing physical distancing. Universities and schools the world over expectedly found themselves in the first wave of closures, followed by the dramatic lockdowns of cities and even entire countries.

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

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

The full implications of online education in India, however, as I will outline in this essay, need to be grasped keeping in mind the broader context of change and churn within the higher education sector. In particular, I point out how higher education had begun metamorphosing from the initial quest from the late 1940s onwards to prepare students for political citizenship to a radical re-envisioning by the 1990s, which increasingly visualised and treated them as a type of ‘customer-consumer’. In the post COVID-19 phase, however, these customer-consumer students are, I argue, being further rejigged into ‘Users’—students who are simultaneously virtual learners and sources for the harvesting of metadata.

## **I. Higher Education in Independent India**

Following India's independence in 1947, infrastructure and ensuring standards for higher education were first initiated as public-funded government endeavours. The number of universities steadily increased from 27 (1951–52) to 46 (1960–61). The number of intermediate colleges also witnessed a similar jump from 772 (1955–56) to 1,050 (1960–61) (Thorat, 2017: 17). While infrastructural expansion occupied the government in the early decades, there soon emerged a need to put higher education on a systematic policy pathway. Notably, by defining an overall direction for education with a set of general principles, which could then be periodically revisited and fine-tuned. The Education Commission of 1964–65 was subsequently tasked with the exercise and carried out elaborate consultations before finally issuing the first significant resolution in 1968, titled the National Policy on Education (NPE). While the NPE spelled out the urgency for developing a robust higher education capacity in India, it also underlined that education needed to be principally aimed at achieving a 'socialist pattern of society' through 'national integration':

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

In effect, at the heart of the higher education quest as outlined by the NPE was the broader goal for nation building, the making of a national culture, and the need to produce responsible citizenship.

From the 1990s, however, there began a distinct mood shift.<sup>1</sup> For starters, the Dr. Swaminathan Panel (1992) and the Punnayya Committee (1992–93), in rapid succession, recommended that higher education institutions had to take steps to increase their cost recoveries (higher fees) from students, and the government too was urged to begin the process of tapering off its subsidies in the education sector. The implication, in essence, was a call to dilute public funding and enable the 'privatisation' of higher education. Interestingly enough, in the 1980s itself, self-financing (or profit driven) colleges were already allowed in engineering, management and medicine. Under the generic moniker of 'capitation fee colleges', these self-financing colleges were rapidly set up in Andhra Pradesh

(now Telangana and Andhra), Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra. These private colleges, however, were still not given the authority to design or offer their own courses, and their curriculum therefore remained firmly governed by the rules enunciated by the public universities, which they were required to be affiliated to (Varghese and Malik, 2017: 6). In short, despite being privately run for profit, these capitation fee colleges could not generate their own course content or curriculum design.

While efforts to reduce public funding for higher education were mostly tentative and timid efforts throughout the 1990s, by the opening decade of the 21st century for-profit education took on an altogether fresh confidence. In 2000, the then Prime Minister's Council on Trade and Industry (PMCTI) set up a special subject group to deliberate on possibilities for 'private investment in education, health and rural development' (Sharma, 2001). The committee, interestingly enough, was headed and stewarded by two of India's then wealthiest industrialists: Mukesh Ambani (Convenor) and Kumarmangalam Birla (Member). In the Ambani-Birla submission, titled 'Report on a Policy Frame Work for Reforms in Education' (2000), or what came to be more widely and popularly referred to as the Ambani-Birla Report (ABR) the overall purpose and direction for higher education in India was profoundly re-envisioned. Unlike the earlier NPE of 1968 which put citizen training and nation building at the heart of the urgency for education, the ABR framed the main challenge of education as being chiefly in terms of realising an economic outcome:

Education is universally recognised as an important *investment in building human capital*. Human capital affects growth in two ways. First, human capital levels act as a driver of technological innovation. Second, human capital stocks determine the speed of technology. It is now widely accepted that human capital, and not physical capital, holds the key to persistent high growth in per capita income. ...Knowledge has become the new asset....About two thirds of the future growth of world GDP is expected to come from *knowledge led business* [italics mine] (Ambani and Kumarmangalam, 2003).

For the ABR, then, education needed to principally become part of an economic narrative defined by a cycle of investment, human capital and business. Only through such a profound shift, it was felt, could India be decisively reoriented towards becoming a 'competitive knowledge economy' in which education would be integrated with information and communication technologies (ICTs), and private universities be

established through a ‘Private University Bill’. Despite the overwhelmingly economic tone, the ABR rounded off its recommendations by demanding that all political parties be kept away from educational institutions, and that ‘any form’ of political activity be comprehensively banned within university campuses (ibid.: 845). In sum, the idea of the political citizen for a national culture was to be entirely abandoned and instead replaced by a notion of the consumer-student seeking education as a commodity that was, in turn, shaped within a competitive market.

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

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

## **II. Humboldt makes way for the Consumer Oriented Corporation**

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

a national culture for the nation state. Readings, moreover, saw in the intense debates within the German Idealist tradition (the writings, for example, of Schiller [1759–1805], Fichte [1762–1814] and Kant [1724–1804] and others) the ambitions to also consolidate the modern university around pursuits such as reason, research, teaching, and the cultivation of thought and action (1996: 54–70). Put differently, the modern university arose in the 19th century essentially as a political project that was aimed at sustaining citizenship for a Republic— education, in essence, that was meant to expand upon constitutional rights, duties and obligations for a citizen, rather than for buttressing the authority and power of an Emperor or King.<sup>2</sup>

From the latter half of the 1980s, however, Readings noted that the Humboldtian University ideal was busily being transformed ‘from an ideological arm of the state into a bureaucratically organised and relatively autonomous consumer oriented corporation’ (1996: 11). This drastic shift was chiefly brought about by ‘economic globalisation’, which, furthermore, for Readings, was actively engaged in now metamorphosing the student into a consumer. The impacts of the corporate university on higher education, in fact, have been substantially critiqued in a slew of carefully researched monographs, but limitations of space in this essay will prevent us from rehearsing them (Collini, 2012; Ginsberg, 2011; Giroux, 2007; Cote and Buller, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010). We will, however, touch on a few aspects.

The most striking consequence that can be directly linked to the corporate university is the alarming rise in student debt (Chamie, 2017). In the United States, student debts climbed to more than \$1.48 trillion in 2018, with the average debt per person for the class of 2017 being estimated at \$40,000. It is also estimated that close to 44.2 million Americans have student loans as part of their financial burdens and, in all likelihood, they will take years if not decades to pay off both the principal amount and the interests on the principal loan (Reinicke, 2018). In India, in particular, there has been a noticeable spike in education loans for both institutions and students. In the opening year of 2000, loans amounting to roughly ₹3,000 million (INR) were disbursed for higher education; by 2016, higher education loans had turned into the runaway sum of ₹720,000 million. Much of this huge demand for loans was, in fact, intended to fund private colleges.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, paralleling the stunning growth in loans for higher education has been the equally stunning rise in what

has begun to be declared as non-performing assets (NPAs) within the education sector in India; referring to loans that could not be realised or paid back by the borrowers who took them primarily for educational purposes. In March 2013, ₹26,150 million worth of student loans was declared to fall under the NPA category, and jumped to ₹ 63,360 million by December 2016. Indian banks, in other words, saw a near 142 per cent increase in student loan defaults during a period of just three years, which, in percentage terms, amounted to an increase from 5.40 per cent to 8.76 per cent.<sup>4</sup> This indebtedness to the corporate university, or what Nandini Chandra describes as the ‘GATS-ification of higher education’, occurs and intensifies when students are compelled to ‘confront the university as an academic market’ that runs on a ‘micro-finance model’—a ‘combination of self-financing and high interest rates’ (2019: 66–67).<sup>5</sup>

Besides disciplining the student through loans, debt and fee hikes, and attempting to transform him/her into a customer of an education service, the second significant corporate inspired shift has been to rewire the internal design of the university. At the University of California in the US, for example, despite a sharp spike in student fees, faculty employment actually fell by 2.3 per cent between 2009 and 2011, even as student enrolment increased by 3.6 per cent. Several studies also show that in both the UK and US, actual instructional costs are being steadily hammered downwards by universities, which prefer to rely more heavily on ad hoc, part-time and adjunct faculty. That is, teaching is expected to be carried out by the precariat, and the temporary rather than tenured faculty.

The revenue bump from increased student fees, on the other hand, tended to be directed mostly at enhancing administration costs and student facilities, as clearly described by the experience at the University of Essex:

...at the University of Essex academic staff numbers increased 27 percent between 2005 and 2015 while administrative staff numbers increased by 81 percent. In the US during the same two year period in which faculty employment fell by over 2 percent at the University of California, jobs for managers increased by 4.2 percent. The other major money pit has been the extraordinarily zealous investment in luxurious student housing, recreation and sports facilities. For example one luxury dorm at the University of North

Florida cost \$ 86 million to build and includes a Lazy River—essentially a theme park water ride where students float on rafts (Martin, 2015: 145–46).

A third, equally telling, fallout has been the systematic marginalisation of the traditional humanities and the liberal arts. In part, the claim here is that universities today are compelled to emphasise technical, instrumental and vocational courses (STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) because of the immediacy of employability, given how precariously placed most students tend to be with high fees and loan repayment schedules. The contemplative and reflexive mood for higher education, consequently, has begun to lose traction. However, in recent years several efforts have begun to develop a version of ‘corporate humanities’ that, ironically enough, instead of questioning the status quo is intended to orient the liberal arts towards sharpening the neoliberal profit maximising individual (Di Leo, 2013; also D’Souza, 2020).

Another recent concern within academia relates to the detrimental effects of corporate style competition on teaching and research. The cultures of ‘publish or perish’, ‘winner takes all’, and the seemingly endless validation and credential-isation (or branding) exercises that academics find themselves in have been meticulously detailed by Berg and Seeber (2016). They describe, in particular, how a vast number of academics in western universities chronically suffer from low self-esteem and the constant undermining of their emotional well-being. These debilitating and sometimes fatal stress levels, besides diluting the quality of their research and teaching abilities, were in no small measure traceable to the ‘time poverty’ strategies that were systematically generated by the foisting of corporate inspired competitive strategies within the university.

The creation of time poverty—whereby the academic always runs short of creative time to reflect and write—can be linked to the ruthless regime for the measurement, assessment, and control of academic performance through audit cultures,<sup>6</sup> or what Muller (2018) refers to as the ‘tyranny of metrics’. Notably, through a heightened velocity in ranking, benchmarking, ratings and standard setting exercises, research and teaching capacities in universities have begun to be increasingly made commensurable for evaluation at the global level through a range of ‘accountability metrics’ and ‘performance indicators’. For Muller, more pointedly,

these auditing exercises inevitably reshape universities precisely into the very metrics they adopt. The distinctive histories and missions of different universities are thus erased, and through the ‘ranking arms race’ become instead homogenous commodities that are set up for unrelenting competition over ‘academic output’ (ibid.: 67–88).

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

### **III. Can Economics always Defeat Politics?**

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

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

Marching even further but very much within stride to debate the 1970s as a watershed moment in global political economy is Rodgers’ critically acknowledged work which

compellingly draws out how the Reagan (1981–89) and Thatcher (1979–90) years oversaw the systematic jettisoning of the post-Second World War ‘vocabularies of social thought’—Keynesian economics and social planning—with an emphasis on the centrality of the competitive self-regulating market for organising economic and social worlds. Throughout the course of the 1980s, in fact, Rodger explains, ‘free markets’ and possessive individualism were increasingly naturalised and legitimised as constituting the most authentic realms for exercising freedom, choice and reason. The government, or ‘big government’, on the other hand, was written off as being essentially the source of coercion, and so mired in the politics of concession and compromise that its only effects were described as distorting the efficiencies of the market (2012: 41–76).

Through the course of the 1980s, arguments for establishing competitive markets, the dominance of the consumer and the celebration of possessive individualism, became, for the Marxist scholar and geographer David Harvey, vital ingredients for defining and elaborating the notion of neoliberalism, which, as an ideological, governance and public policy project for him, broadly refers to:

...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (2007: 2).

Harvey, nonetheless, is also keen to underline that neoliberalism should not be treated as merely providing a conceptual tool kit with which to explain the shift away from Keynesian inspired socialist planning, or of state controlled and directed economic activities. Rather, as an ‘ism’ for free market enthusiasts, neoliberalism affords a muscular policy strategy and manifesto of sorts for shaping interventions such as (a) deregulation (of the economy); (b) liberalisation (trade and industry); and (c) privatisation (state owned enterprises) (see Steger et al., 2010: 11–14).

While the notion of neoliberalism is often defined as a ‘winner takes all’ competitive ethos, for Davies it refers to ‘the disenchantment of politics by economics’ (2017: xiv). That is, at the heart of the neoliberal turn is the effort to undermine deliberative democracy with the rule of the expert and by professional elites, who will be entirely free of political pressures.

In other words, for the neoliberal imagination only the presumed ‘laws of the market’ are allowed to define freedoms and set the template for individual actions.<sup>7</sup> The content of power in a neoliberal society is thus expected to be largely a derivative of economic calculation and possessive individualism rather than political actions borne through ethical engagements, ideological commitments and deliberative democracy. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the neoliberal university, given its imperative to disenchant politics with economics, aims to replace the political citizen of the nation state with the commodified student who is to be essentially primed for competing in market conditions (Rider, 2009). The ideals of political democracy, social justice and meaningful collective living, thus, finds no traction in the neoliberal or corporate university.<sup>8</sup>

In India, the shift from the political citizen of the public university to the indebted consumer-student of the private university began to get palpable from the late 1990s, especially in the wake of the dramatic opening up of the Indian economy to the forces of globalisation and market competition, or what is widely referred to as ‘economic liberalisation’.<sup>9</sup> Despite an uneven wave of initiatives in India, beginning from the 1990s, that drew in private and corporate funding for higher education, the public university system in India still retained a commanding presence even as, academically speaking, the strains from poor funding and management were showing. In a recent paper, Kapur and Perry convincingly argue that the crises overwhelming government run higher education is traceable to being the ‘collateral damage of Indian politics’:

The vast majority of government colleges in small towns offer dismal educational outcomes. For politicians, the benefits of the license-control raj extend beyond old-fashioned rent seeking by manipulating contracts, appointments, admissions and grades in government run colleges and universities, to the use of higher education admissions for vote-banks and partisan politics and a source of new entrepreneurial activities (in private higher education) (2015: 16–17).

By flagging the corrosive role of politics, Kapur and Perry are more than forceful in their analysis and tone. Their critique, in fact, carries more irony by implicitly questioning the belief that political citizenship should be the end goal of education. On a different level, Chandra evokes the notion of ‘institutional decay’. For Chandra, a range of factors— involving poor governance, uninspired teaching, lack of funds, infrastructural collapse and

even a loss of moral direction—have fatally come together to crash the entire Indian public education system (2018: 221–56). While tracing signs of the impending collapse of higher education as far back as the 1970s, the much celebrated historian of science, Deepak Kumar, argues that much of the crisis in education actually mirrors the deeper malaise within India’s troubled, unequal and unjust social worlds (2016: 124–47). For him, consequently, the state and the private sector can provide, at best, ‘artificial respiration’ to the education challenge (ibid.: 134).

Put differently, if the public university has indeed failed, can the neoliberal university with its in-built proclivities for financial exclusion be tasked to clean up higher education from its toxic immersion in politics and institutional decay? In particular, can these private universities meaningfully address, for example, caste based discrimination and work towards enabling the social mobility of disempowered groups? Thus far, however, private universities in India have aggressively pursued strategies that have helped exempt themselves from taking up meaningful social justice responsibilities.

None of the new privately funded educational institutions, for instance, are required to enforce caste based reservations, nor are they legally mandated to carry out any affirmative policies either in the recruitment of students or in the hiring of faculty. In a recent essay, Chandra points out how the world over such neoliberal universities—primarily as expressions of invested capital in the search for profits—have sought to ‘objectively’ de-link themselves from efforts to pursue social mobility as a ‘goal’(2019: 63–91). The pay-as-you-go neoliberal higher education format, in other words, has essentially ended up reinforcing privilege and buttressing wealth in society, rather than turning the idea of education into the empowering means to upset the status quo.<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the aspirational demands for higher education amongst marginalised social groups, there continues to be enthusiasm for the public university in India. Rawat and Satyanarayana, for example, are emphatic in hailing the role of the public university system in providing accessible education to Dalits (socially discriminated untouchable castes); who were thus enabled to break into the ranks of the urban middle class, oppose social discrimination and better their lives (2016). It is precisely the capacity of the public university to impact the quality of democracy that also puts it directly in the line of

fire during moments of political upheaval and sharp ideological shifts within a country's political leadership.

In the Indian general election of 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-dominated National Democratic Alliance swept to power with a clear majority. The BJP occupies the extreme right of the Indian political spectrum with deep ideological roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—an organisation committed to propagating Hindutva, which advocates an exclusivist interpretation of Hinduism.<sup>11</sup> Not unexpectedly, the radical ideological convulsion of 2014 has profoundly and forcefully impacted the Indian public university system. Not merely in the manner in which the new government has retained the broad momentum for privatising higher education, but, significantly enough, by perceptibly re-framing the public university as a terrain of threat and a site for ideological confrontation.

#### **IV. Finding 'Anti-Nationals' in Public Universities**

On 9 February 2016, a protest meeting against capital punishment was organised at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Given JNU's rich legacy of left wing inspired student politics,<sup>12</sup> such post-dinner meetings were a regular feature of the campus' cultural life involving debate, discussion and the exchange of opposing views. The meeting of 9 February, organised by the Democratic Students Organization, was intended to debate the hangings of Afzal Guru (found guilty of masterminding an attack on the Indian parliament) and the Kashmiri 'separatist' Maqbool Butt. In ordinary times what would have simply passed off as a loud and engaged discussion at best, ended up sparking a nationwide anxiety about so called seditious beliefs on Indian campuses.<sup>13</sup>

By the morning of 10 February, Zee News, a pro-BJP Hindi channel, was agog with claims that an event in celebration of Afzal Guru had been held within JNU campus and that 'anti-India' slogans were uninhibitedly being chanted by radical left wing groups.<sup>14</sup> By the evening, not only had several other channels picked up the allegations and turned them into incontrovertible facts, but, soon enough, several video clips (later proved to be doctored) of masked men and students chanting so called 'anti-India' slogans began to be widely circulated.

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

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

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

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

against British rule. In independent India, as well, sedition continues to be used to harass opponents of the government and, as Atul Dev is keen to remind us, ‘a person charged with sedition must live without their passport, barred from government jobs, and must produce themselves in the court on a loop. All this, while bearing the legal fee’ (2016; also see Gabriel and Vijayan, 2016). On the other hand, the alleged ‘organisers’ of the seditious JNU event, Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, were charged under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) Section 120B, which deals with criminal conspiracy against the state, and 124A, which arguably also responds to the charge of sedition.

The subsequent outcry by democratic groups and especially a stubborn campaign by students across India, however, did much to challenge the BJP’s narrative on the ‘JNU sedition row’ (as it came to be popularly referred to).<sup>16</sup> Questions and debates focused on the rights for dissent, the legitimacy of student politics and, importantly as well, what constituted ‘anti-nationalism’ in the first place.<sup>17</sup>

The JNU incident of 9 February in fact followed hot on the heels of the tragic suicide of Rohith Vemula—a bright promising research scholar, a Dalit and an activist of the Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) at the University of Hyderabad (Shanta, 2018; also see Minhaz, 2017). According to a fact finding investigation carried out by faculty members from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Vemula had run afoul of the local unit of the ABVP, essentially over political and ideological differences. The ABVP, as it turns out, then chose to leverage central government ministers (Union Minister of Labour Bandaru Dattatreya and also the controversial education minister Smriti Irani) to force a series of disciplinary actions on ASA members. In a telling letter that was sent out by the local members of the BJP unit to the Union Minister there are, in fact, several ominous elements of the script that subsequently played out in JNU:

Why is it made to perceive on campus that it is shameful to be a Hindu and Indian in Indian Universities... [The Minister Dattatreya is requested to] direct University of Hyderabad to enquire into all activities of ASA and other radical groups on campus...set up committees to monitor activities of radical and anti-national students and faculties at the University of Hyderabad (Raju et al., 2017: 13).

The very same fact finding team was also keen to underline that Vemula's tragic loss could not be reduced only to the political machinations of the ABVP and the central government. Caste discrimination and psychological violence against historically discriminated communities is, in fact, quite rife in most Indian universities. Despite the hostile learning environment, however, in the opinion of the academic and civil rights activist Anand Teltumbde (currently in jail), public universities still provide relatively greater intellectual and political possibilities for challenging the ferocity of caste violence within Indian society.<sup>18</sup>

Public institutions unlike private universities, Teltumbde notes in particular, are constitutionally required to meaningfully address the challenges of caste based discrimination and other forms of social injustices. Unsurprisingly, therefore, radical Dalit ideologies and groupings that have aimed to confront social discrimination in India have, more often than not, been able to proliferate mostly in public university spaces: notably, the Ambedkar–Periyar Study Circle (APSC) at the Indian Institute of Technology (Madras); the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association (BAPSA) at Jawaharlal Nehru University; and the Ambedkar Student Association (ASA) at Hyderabad Central University (Teltumbde, 2019; MT. Hany Babu, 2019).

While radical social visions had been skirmishing for several decades against upper caste domination in higher education institutions in India, in the post-2014 regime shift a discernible crackdown against campus based social justice organisations has become visible. In early 2015, on the basis of an 'anonymous' complaint made to the Union Human Resources Ministry, the APSC was promptly derecognised by the university authorities (Sruthisagar, 2015). In the anonymous complaint, the APSC was accused of instigating students against the central government by 'creating hatred ... in the name of caste and against the Prime Minister (Modi) and Hindus' (Sudhir, 2017; see also Yechury, 2015). Though the notification against the APSC was subsequently withdrawn after strong protests, the IIT (M) campus was soon turned into a battle ground of sorts over questions such as beef festivals and Brahminism (Thangavelu, 2017).

Since 2015, with almost chilling regularity, cycle of hysterical accusations followed by violence against so called 'anti-nationals' have been made to play out at Jadavpur University

(Bengal), Ramjas College (Delhi University), Film and Television Institute of India (Pune), Aligarh Muslim University (Aligarh) and the Benares Hindu University (Varanasi). Sundar describes these attacks as being made up of the ‘multiple batteries of privatisation, Hindutva and bureaucratic indifference’ (2018: 48–56).<sup>19</sup>

In a subsequent study based on the parameters that were spelled out in the Academic Freedom Index (AFI)—developed by the V-Dem Institute of the University of Gothenburg (Sweden)—Sundar goes on to provide us with an even more detailed list of how a range of what should have been ordinary, taken-for-granted freedoms within Indian campuses such as expression, institutional autonomy, right to dissent, faculty hiring and even course design had been put under different levels of threat with the ever present potential for violence (2020).

With campuses thus placed under a choke-hold of sorts, the NDA, by November of 2019 after handsomely winning a second term in office, felt emboldened enough to initiate a second round of harsh actions. This time, however, the government focused on the subject of student’s fees and began by implementing a steep hike in JNU (Pandey, 2020). A decision that was, however, almost immediately challenged by the students of JNU. The protests that erupted saw students in large numbers taking to the streets and, on occasion, during the course of their agitations almost paralysing life in various parts of the capital city.<sup>20</sup>

The resistance proved so stunningly robust that the government’s own narrative about the need for higher fees to rein in students fattening on tax subsidies soon lost favour on the ground, as it increasingly became clear that a large proportion of students in the public university system were not only deserving and talented, but did indeed come from economically underprivileged and socially marginal communities (Shankar et al., 2019). An accessible and affordable higher education was, in fact, the best way for many to improve their lives and raise the economic standards of their families.

While the tenaciousness of the agitating students enabled them to win several concessions and some temporary reprieves, on 5 January 2020 a hitherto unprecedented round of violence was unleashed within JNU campus. Beginning from 6.30 p.m. that day, masked club-wielding mobs began streaming into the campus. They not only remained entirely

unchecked by campus security, but strangely enough the local Delhi police, in seeming coordination, proceeded to simultaneously block the entry and exit points to the university. Mysteriously as well, street lighting along roads adjoining the university and street lamps on the main arterial campus roads were suddenly switched off. And it is amidst this eerie and ominous darkness that the masked mob was given free rein to beat up and thrash students and teachers at will.

During the mayhem, which lasted for several hours, worried local residents and friends alerted by phone calls and messages were not allowed into the campus, while the entire university administration, on the other hand, went conveniently missing (Tantray, 2020). At the time of writing this essay, not a single one of the masked assailants has been arrested nor any action taken on the complaints by JNU students and faculty (Krishnan, 2020). One can, therefore, only conclude on the basis of facts available that to have such levels of violence within the premises of a university that lies well within the heart of the nation's capital (only subsequently dwarfed by the Delhi riots of 2020, a month or so later) suggests that this planned and premeditated criminal assault could only have been carried out through collusion and support at the highest levels.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the public university system in India is being dismantled not only through regulations that favour the corporate university model, but more drastically with political violence. In other words, by eroding the public university's capacity to produce political citizenship, the Indian government (especially from 2014 onwards) appears to be aiming to radically reorient the mission of higher education.

While the triumphant run of the corporate university model has hit a pause as Covid-19 rages across, online education enthusiasts who previously sat at the margins suddenly found centre stage. Though virtual teaching is predominantly debated as a logistical response to counter the virus, the vision for online education is actually a much grander and comprehensive project. Notably in the fact that the Educational Technology (Ed. Tech) industry, by envisioning the unity of computer hardware, software and education theory, announces a paradigm shift which calls for delivering higher education through the platform university — an education product generated by platform capitalism.

## V. Platform Capitalism

The platform heralds a significant strategic shift in contemporary capitalism. The big four of Amazon, Google (Alphabet), Facebook and Apple, for example, not only make up the leading platform firms in the world today,<sup>22</sup> but when combined, their wealth, power and domination over our everyday living is most certainly unparalleled and unprecedented in recorded history (Galloway, 2017). Platforms, for Nick Srnicek (2017), simply put, refer to the digital infrastructure that serves to ‘intermediate between different user groups’. A type of intermediation that, unlike traditional business models, is profoundly based upon the extraction and control of data. The platform, hence, essentially boils down to the ‘ownership of software (the 2 billion lines of code for Google or the 20 million lines of code for Facebook) and hardware (servers, data centres, smartphones etc.).

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

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

fundamentally wired up as ‘machine intelligence’ that is programmed through a suite of algorithms to extract, modify, steer, modulate and inevitably control human behaviour.

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

## **VI. The Persuasions of EdTech**

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

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

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

In 2012, two Stanford computer science professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller assembled an online teaching and e-learning platform called Coursera, which they designed for offering massive open online courses (MOOC). The Coursera strategy involves partnering [like Uber] with existing universities, colleges, governments and corporates, and as of December 2019, their total number of collaborations are listed as comprising roughly 200 across 29 countries.<sup>24</sup>

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

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

Secondly, by dispensing with the ‘aura’ of classroom solidarity, the online grinds away at attaining individualised and personalised outcomes. The gradient for learning is thus individual centric and steered by predictive analytics—algorithms that can replace the teacher’s professional judgement with ‘learnification’. The learnification paradigm is the

‘idea that learning can be managed, monitored, controlled and ultimately modified in each student’s personal mind’. In effect, the User-student will be encased within a filter bubble, a self-referential niche that will be digitally reinforced by corroding social solidarity, public value and knowledge through collectives (ibid.: 124). In sum, the undermining of political citizenship and the devaluing of democracy.

## **VII. Towards a Conclusion**

But how will the loss of the Humboldtian ideal and the corporate university actually play out? The impacts of EdTech might, in fact, be far more perverse with the platform university consolidating new types of social and economic hierarchies, built around different levels of educational inequalities. The always perceptive and future looking Scott Galloway, Professor of Marketing at the prestigious NYU Stern School of Business, in a stock taking interview on the future of higher education in a post Covid-19 world offers us an unnerving assessment. For Galloway, the shift to the platform university will first begin manifesting as:

a dip, the mother of all V’s, among the top-50 universities, where the revenues are hit in the short run and then technology will expand their enrolments and they will come back stronger. In ten years, it’s feasible to think that MIT doesn’t welcome 1,000 freshmen to campus; it welcomes 10,000. What that means is the top-20 universities globally are going to become even stronger. What it also means is that universities Nos. 20 to 50 are fine. But Nos. 50 to 1,000 go out of business or become a shadow of themselves. Ultimately, universities are going to partner with companies to help them expand. I think that partnership will look something like MIT and Google partnering. Microsoft and Berkeley. Big-tech companies are about to enter education and health care in a big way, not because they want to but because they have to.... The strongest brands are MIT, Oxford, and Stanford. Academics and administrators at the top universities have decided over the last 30 years that we’re no longer public servants; we’re luxury goods.

Clearly, the Galloway prophecy is that higher education of the pre-Covid-19 world will become virtually unrecognisable in the not too distant future. The big brand universities are going to gobble up the small guys, online education will massify access and, finally, expect a defining role for Tech giants such as Google and Microsoft in shaping the platform university. Despite this dramatic churn, however, Galloway still believes that the four-year liberal arts campus experience might survive, but only because it will be populated by the

really rich. Brick-and-mortar higher education, hence, will spur a caste system, the triumph of aristocratic entitlement over malodorous merit.

In all likelihood the coming years will see the continued frictions, tensions and abrading wars between the Humboldtian ideal, the corporate university and the EdTech driven platform. Three souls will haunt and agitate campuses: that of the student-citizen, the customer-consumer and the User-student. The winner, for sure, will not take all.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The year 1991 is often marked as the time when initiatives for ‘economic liberalisation’ were inaugurated in India. The previous Nehruvian paradigm for pursuing a self-reliant and relatively closed economy was steadily dismantled through a set of economic reforms that sought to institute market-led economic growth. For an excellent discussion on how the economic and political ‘caesura’ of 1991 was ideologically legitimated, see Bajpai (2018). Also see Balakrishnan (2010) and Kohli, (2009).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on Humboldt and his ideas on education see Sorkin (1983). Also, for a succinct summary on how Humboldt’s call for intimacy between the nation state and the modern university was debated see Bhattacharya (2019: 2–12).

<sup>3</sup> Pushkar, 31 July 2017, ‘It Makes Little Sense to Blame Students for India’s Growing Loan Default Problem’, *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/education/serious-indias-student-loan-default-problem> (accessed 8 July 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> GATS refers to the 1995 General Agreement on Trade in Services.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the university rankings (with different metrics and criteria) are carried out by the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *Shanghai Jiao Tong*; *US News and World Report* and the *Princeton Review*.

<sup>7</sup> See excellent discussions on neoliberalism and the state in Harvey (2007: 64–86) and Davies 2017: 111–50).

<sup>8</sup> On what the neoliberal turn has meant for the liberal arts, see Brown (2011).

<sup>9</sup> For insightful and accessible discussions on the processes and politics that drove liberalisation in India see Balakrishnan (2010, 2011); Kohli (2009); Mukherji (2014). For a celebratory account see Jairam (2015).

<sup>10</sup> The ‘college admission scandal’ that dramatically broke out in March 2019 in the United States has once again brought home the harsh contrast between an education that reinforces privilege and status from that which challenges the status-quo. See Wadman (2019).

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to the politics of the BJP see the excellent essays in the edited collection by Hansen and Jaffrelot (2001 [1998]). Also see Sharma (2015 [2003]) and Ananthamurthy (2016). On the RSS see Basu et al. (1993).

<sup>12</sup> On JNU’s rich legacy of student politics and ideological diversity see the document brought out by Jawaharlal Nehru University Student’s Union (JNUSU, 2004). Also see Martelli and Parkar (2018).

<sup>13</sup> HT correspondent, 16 February 2016. ‘What really happened on the night of Feb 9: A JNU student recounts’, *Hindustan Times*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/what-really-happened-on-the-night-of-feb-9-a-jnu-student-recounts/story-Hz3USZC3NwntZFWKpF2g1M.html> (accessed 29 September 2020).

<sup>14</sup> See the resignation of Vishwa Deepak on the biased reporting of the Zee News channel. See Hafeez (2016).

<sup>15</sup> For the arrest in his own words and the events leading up to it, see Kumar (2016: 123–78).

<sup>16</sup> A fairly detailed record of the agitations and arguments on the ‘JNU Sedition row’ are available on online sites such as Kafila <https://kafila.online/> and The Wire <https://thewire.in/>

<sup>17</sup> The JNU teaching community initiated a public lecture series on nationalism which was uploaded on YouTube. Subsequently, several lectures were turned into an edited collection without an author and published on 4 January 2017 titled *What the Nation Really Needs to Know: The JNU Nationalism Lectures*. India: HarperCollins.

<sup>18</sup> Teltumbde (2019). Professor Anand Teltumbde was arrested in February 2019 by the Mumbai police on various charges, including for supposedly plotting to kill the Prime Minister of India. Along with several other human rights activists, he is currently in prison as an undertrial. See Sampath (2019). ‘

<sup>19</sup> Sundar, Nandini. 16 June 2018. ‘Academic Freedom and Indian Universities’, LIII (24), *Economic & Political Weekly*, pp.48-56.

<sup>20</sup> BBC news report, 22 November 2020. ‘JNU: Protesters bring top India university to its knees’, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50498890> (accessed 20 July 2020). Also see Sharma (2019).

<sup>21</sup> The JNU administration and the pro-government media were keen to claim that the violence of 5 January was essentially a ‘clash’ between left-leaning students and those on the right such as the ABVP. The detailed report by Chitranshu Tewari, however, claims that it was the ABVP that had carried out a one-sided and systematic assault (2020). Also see Tarique (2020).

<sup>22</sup> Somewhat comparable but nowhere near in terms of a global reach are the Chinese BAT firms: Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent. See Wade et al. (2017).

<sup>23</sup> Increasingly one notes how the failings of the corporate university are being written about. See, for example, Farrelly (2020).

<sup>24</sup> See the Wikipedia page on Coursera <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coursera>.

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