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HOMOGENEITY, INEQUALITY AND ALIENATION IN EDUCATION BEFORE AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC: SOME SOCIO-HISTORICAL AND PEDAGOGIC CONCERNS

VIKAS GUPTA*

Abstract

The present essay underscores some of the processes through which formal education has been distanced from the child's milieu and his/her concerns; the creative agency of teachers, students and parents weakened; the pedagogy of silence strengthened; social inequality reinvigorated; and these trends are likely to be augmented further. The paper focusses on the history of modern education and the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to illustrate some of these processes.

For instance, if faced with a situation of pandemic or epidemic, educational institutions in the pre-modern or even early-modern periods would have cancelled examinations or could have made local level adjustments: those institutions were organised on a decentralised or diffused pattern. All crucial decisions—duration of study hours, commencement and termination of studies, texts to be used, the practical knowledge to be imparted, the method and schedule of assessment—were determined largely by the teacher: Of course, certain broad framework was available by convention and scriptural texts (Acharya 1978,1996; Dharampal 1983; Di Bona 1983). Still, as a following section of this paper listing some alternative modern practices will clarify, I am not suggesting for a return to these pre-modern forms of educational arrangements which generally preferred to maintain status quo in the society and thereby discriminated against specific groups. At the same time, I believe that the policies of modern states have been also generally status quoist. This is the general trend; it is particularly evident in the present paper in my example of the anxiety with the weaknesses of the National Education Policy 2020 as approved by the Central Cabinet with regards to the social justice provisions and in terms of its compromise with fundamental right to equality in

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making differential/substandard educational arrangements for the majority of our population which is categorised here as socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs). My core objective in this paper is to point at certain kind of alienation of education from the concerns of human beings who are otherwise its targets and recipients.

Keywords: Pedagogy, homogeneity, NEP 2020, formal education, home-based education.

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I. The Homogenizing Process from Colonial to Current Times

With the increasing involvement of the modern colonial state in the sphere of education from the nineteenth century onwards—whether through direct ownership, management and funding or under the grants-in-aid schemes—the diffused pre-modern arrangements of education were replaced by a new order or system of education. It meant shifting of managerial, curricular, evaluation and certification related aspects from the hands of teachers and educational institutions into the jurisdiction of the provincial departments of public instruction. Various landmark measures of the colonial state played significant role in creating such a system. This included the creation of provincial departments of public instruction—the official term used for public education in this period—through the Educational Despatches of Charles Wood (1854) and Lord Stanley (1859): these were sent by the Secretary of State for India sitting in London. These despatches also helped the evolution of the provincial mechanisms of textbook committees for the preparation, selection, production and dissemination of textbooks and other reading material, and the course of studies in the higher classes of schools was also influenced by the requirements of the universities (Goyal and Sharma 1987; Gupta 2007, 2012; Seth 2008; Sengupta 2011). Their procedure was further streamlined by the central government during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[1] Lord Northbrook constituted an investigation in the nature of textbooks in India and the system of its selection and prescription and set up a committee which submitted its report in 1877 (GoI 1877). An Education Commission was constituted by Lord Ripon, the Governor General of India (Hunter 1883). In light of the recommendations of the Hunter Commission, various notifications of the government tried to address once again different issues that had emerged following the educational despatches of 1854 and 1859.[2]

Various initiatives of Lord Curzon tried to tighten the system and further increased control of government on educational matters (Basu 1974; Ghosh 1988).[3]

When education became a subject of provincial governments under diarchy and Indians acquired some representation in the state governments from 1919 onwards—this was the time when compulsory free primary education movement had gained some salience owing to the efforts of some nationalist leaders and the hitherto excluded groups including in some 'princely states'—the departmental mechanisms of education were further expanded (Naik 1958; Naik and Nurullah 1974; Gupta 2018).

However, these were not the developments that happened in India alone and that were merely produced by the colonial state. Western countries also experienced similar structural transitions in the modern period more or less from the same time onwards. It can be said notwithstanding some specific differences, such as varying degrees of their emphasis on equitable quality of education to be provided within public system and different manners in which they tried to work out a resolution of religious question within a broadly secular education scheme (Green 1991; Lawton and Gordon 2002; Melton 1988; Schleunes 1979; Soysal and Strang 1989; Weber 1976).

The rise of nationalism as a global phenomenon—including in countries like India which were formerly colonies—and their subsequent emergence as nation-states further proliferated and hastened this process of homogenisation in the name of decolonisation and national integration. Nation-states further homogenised the system of education through 'officialised knowledge', 'nationalised textbooks', national curricular frameworks and national systems of admission through single entrance and the outsourcing of evaluation ore assessment (Gupta 2014; Kumar 2001; Qaiser 2011).

Of course, the processes of homogenisation, centralisation and the resultant disjunction and alienation had already commenced (Gupta 2012, 2016), the National Education Policy as approved by the Central Cabinet in its meeting on 24 July 2020 (GoI 2020, hereafter NEP 2020)[4] puts a lot of emphasis on these national institutions: Parakh for coordinating examination at school level, National Testing Agency for conducting entrance tests in Higher Education, National Research Foundation for monitoring and funding research, National Commission for Higher Education as a single window for addressing all issues through its

four verticals, National Curricular Frameworks from Pre-Primary to Higher Education, national pattern of stages of school education, single model of interdisciplinary institutions of Higher Education, single window for all scholarships at national level, national television and radio channels specially dedicated for different subjects under E-Vidya Programme, national online portals for e-learning or digital material, National Institute for Translation and Interpretation, and National Academies for different languages. The educational institutions are being globally linked with each other through the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) and an increasingly uniform calendar of semesters.

Such centralised control over education and knowledge even by the national agencies is an important mechanism for ideological indoctrination of its citizens. If it can be used for the promotion of constitutional values—with whatever limited intention—by the political parties who pronounce their adherence to secularism, it can be also utilised far more effectively by those regimes who want to even delete this word from the Constitution and National Education Policy. These are neo-conservative forces.

II. Covid-19 Pandemic and Education

The disjunction between formal education and the child's milieu and his/her concerns is becoming far more visible—in fact being augmented further—under the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, this disjunction is not the same for each class and community.[5] It is likely to increase the already existing inequality in the society. Perhaps it may not be an exaggeration to say that lockdown experience represented for a large section of society a kind of 'existentialist' crisis. Households in India—rather in the world—are currently face-to-face with a colossal crisis of survival in terms of physical dislocation, financial hardships, emotional trauma, and the risks to life and health. Yet, they have to be worried about continuation of educational activity of their children and youth. Students, parents, teachers, management of educational institutions and local communities and administration are hardly left with any decision-making powers for resolving their tension, predicament and quandary even though autonomy and choice have become the buzzwords in the contemporary discourse. The earliest completion of examinations has become so important that these are to be organised and taken irrespective of the degree to which different areas, families and students are affected by the crisis. Newer technological solutions which penetrate the home

are being worked out and imposed. This educational situation is surely a significant landmark in the homogenizing drive.

The Maharashtra unit of the Public Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) has released a series of reports systematically examining the impact of various restrictions imposed in context of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of these reports deals explicitly on an examination of the ways this impacted upon education. Its title is quite indicative: 'Broken Slates and Blank Screens: Education Under Lockdown' (PUCL 2020). It examines the implications of the restrictions imposed in context of the pandemic for the rights of children and youth. While it highlights the main issues that emerged due to the measures like lockdown, it also raises fundamental questions about framing policies that violate the fundamental principles of federalism and constitutional rights and promise of 'Education for all' and 'common school system' (ibid.).

The PUCL report also shows that 'the lockdown has heightened existing injustices - malnutrition of children in the ICDS anganwadis and government schools, push-out of large number of children due to inward migration, exposing and deepening of the "digital-divide", profiteering by private managements, child-labour and child-marriage, suicides, apathy of the legal system. Along with the children the teachers are also bearing the brunt; being made to serve on COVID duties at check-points, pressurised to adopt to new technologies in absence of sufficient support, working without remuneration and facing job-loss. Over and above this, the onslaught of ICT technology-based market forces feed on the vulnerabilities of people, ultimately tightening their noose on individual freedoms' (ibid.: 1–2).

The 'Neo-conservative' and neoliberal attitude of the state—epithetical to the decision making abilities of the learners—is also reflected in specific deletions from the CBSE syllabus for different classes as carried out on instructions from the MHRD recently on the pretext of making adjustment with lost time due to Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, besides those political topics that ran counter to the BJP-RSS vision in the political science textbooks even the chapters giving a scientific idea of evolution have been removed from science textbooks clearly exposing their adherence to a mythological explanation of life and civilisation. Otherwise, instead of deleting these or any other topics, choice of questions in

the final examinations should have been increased leaving it on students and teachers to decide what do they leave or study, and where they give more or less time and focus.

The specific political choices made in the realm of public pedagogy reflect the official attitude towards the pedagogy of formal education as well. The new public pedagogy in which the political class is reaching out to the citizenry of the nation can be seen in the manner in which intellectual spaces of critical dissent are being tightly controlled and disagreement is turned into an anti-national propaganda (AIFRTE 2020a). Available mechanisms of legislative consultations were not utilised, not even press conferences were organised by public representatives. There was very little cognizance of the federal character of Indian polity. The important announcements relating to the management of Covid-19 pandemic were a kind of one-way instruction, a monologue, wherein one leader gives command to the entire nation to be followed by 130 crore listeners. This direct but one-way communication—which witnessed manifold increase during the early management of Covid-19 Pandemic—is the next stage from the tendency to indoctrinate people straight from the center on a more regular basis through television, radio, Youtube, Facebook, Instagram and mobile apps etc. and through 'mann ki bat'. Now the NEP 2020 explicitly seeks to utilise these technologies for educating the young on a regular basis.

Since there is a more visible tilt towards an ultra-unitarian regime, it has important implications for the kind of pedagogy being pushed in the sphere of formal education as well. It can be seen in the renewed and far more powerful emphasis on dedicated tv and radio channels under recent announcements of E-vidya programme with the slogan 'one nation, one channel, one subject (or textbook)' (AIFRTE 2020a). This is also going to be an area of focused attention under the NEP as approved by the Central Cabinet (Times of India, 2020). It has fundamentally an oppositional relationship with the diversity of Indian nation and the federal character of our polity and education system.

III. Online and Home-based Education: Arrested Freedom Struggle of Different Communities

Of course, there are individuals and groups of activists who are making creative use of digital technology to facilitate interaction of students with writers, theater artists, painters and subject experts; they are using it as a platform for exchange of ideas and experiences on

different issues. Even they might contemplate to use it for contesting the corporate model of digital or online learning itself. However, such usage is different from its utilisation as a substitute for regular teaching learning activities. Multinational companies and the state are projecting online education not simply as an interim remedy in the pandemic situation but as a cost effective solution for underdeveloped countries like India on permanent basis. It is being presented as a cost effective and flexible tool that people can use from their home or wherever they are located (including rural areas) and even when they are travelling. Therefore, during the pandemic, when economies are otherwise under tremendous pressure, global and domestic corporate houses are announcing big investments and partnerships in this area. The state has been proactively buying this logic as is evident from the announcement of E-Vidya Programme announced by the Government of India.

What are its pedagogic implications? Teaching learning activity in online mode is generally limited to the transmission of certain ideas from the teacher to the taught with some tokenistic participation as and when the former allows the latter to speak by unmuting his/her mike and by enabling or disabling his/her camera. The question answers are generally limited to yes/no whether through the chatbox or on the mike. It is much easier for teachers, resource persons or subject experts to ignore fundamental questions particularly if raised in the chatbox. For instance, if the moderator of an online faculty development programme comes to know that a particular participant raises difficult questions, he/she might find it much easier to avoid such an interjector on grounds of the paucity of time. In other words, fundamental questions can be much more easily ignored by the moderator while listing the main questions for the response of the resource person, since the conventional option of debating them outside the hall but publicly during tea or lunch break is not available. Online education is giving greater control in the hands of the teacher and the moderator. Otherwise, this is something that educationists have been already struggling with and advocating a dialogical culture as an alternative where students and teachers both learned together from each other (Freire 1970).

Let us suppose that the problems mentioned in the previous paragraph will be resolved when this technology improves further and we will have such systems where a reasonable number of participants join a class with the teacher while they all keep their mike and video in the switched-on mode: teacher cannot mute them. In fact, there are some such programmes already available in the market. But what do we do of other very crucial dynamics of formal

education present within its 'spatial enclosure'[6] where students from very heterogeneous backgrounds come together, interact with each other, learn from each other, share their feelings, and experience their touch, smells, laughter, jokes and sorrows? The historic struggles of education for diverse kinds of historically excluded groups forming an overwhelming majority of our population have been closely linked with the aspiration of going out of home and to sit with others in the school and to make friendships for sharing food, experiences and ideas (Bama 2000; Chitnis 1981; Constable 2000; Gupta 2018). For such students and aspirants, education did not simply mean learning letters, reading lessons and passing examinations to obtain certificates and degrees. Of course, these strictly academic objectives were very significant for them, at the same time strife for the fulfilment of these human-social desires was also integral to their efforts. Institutional spaces have their own dynamics through which they make certain social impact possible. Going out of home and sitting with others in a casteist and patriarchal society is an integral part of an agenda of social transformation. If there is going to be a greater reliance on e-learning to provide 'home-based education', this achievement of the freedom struggles of different communities is likely to be seriously compromised.

It would be inappropriate to think that this promotion of 'home-based education' is a contingent solution which emerged suddenly during this pandemic. Professor Michael W. Apple has already documented the steady spread of 'home-based education' in the US over last couple of decades. He has shown how 40 per cent of parents who opt for 'home-based education' for their children are Christian fundamentalists. This system enabled conservative parents in particular to ensure that their children study at home freely, away from a conventional curriculum. For example, in some cases, they do not want their children to study Darwin's theory of evolution or other modern scientific explanations of the rise of human civilisation and the life on the Earth such as the Big Bang theory. Instead they want their children to study only Biblical explanations of the rise of civilisation. They find greater freedom of this 'choice' in 'home-based education'. Some of the textbooks used in 'home-based education' sometimes even mention that worshiping in the Islamic way is like worshiping the devil. Professor Apple has also linked this rise of neo-conservatism with neoliberalism: how the market is facilitating this neo-conservatism in the name of 'choice'.[7]

However, leaving the orientation of education to be determined by the choice of the consumer may not necessarily augur well with the objective of critical knowledge about oneself and about the society at large. Think for example about the 'Allegory of the Cave' in Plato's *Republic* (2007: Book VII) where the chained people misunderstand the shadow as truth and where the philosopher king/teacher leads them to understand this fallacy undeterred by their resistance.

'Home-based education' is nothing new to India: the underprivileged often relegated to it on different pretexts. When the Right to Education Act was being formulated, different spreadsheets were prepared for calculating the possible expenditure on the implementation of this legislation. NIEPA prepared one such expenditure sheet in the year 2005, wherein the per child allocation for 'home-based education' was kept much higher than the per child expenditure on the children supposed to go for school education. I have separately written about the further spread of the idea and the practice of 'home-based education' with specific reference to children with disabilities (Gupta 2012-2013; also see Gupta 2019).

NEP 2020 advocates a 'home-based education' indirectly as an important option not only within the specially dedicated chapter on 'Technology Use and Integration' (Section 23) which concerns everyone mainly in formal education and where the overall tone is still somewhat sophisticated, but also in more unambiguous terms within its discussion on 'drop-outs' (Section 3) and 'SEDGs' or 'socio-economically disadvantaged groups' in school education (Section 6) which include 85 to 90 per cent of our population.

It seems that in context of the increasingly centralised structures of curricular knowledge and its testing and now with the adoption of these corporate models of e-learning, the teaching learning process is likely to be further alienated from the child's milieu. On the other hand, this may lead to a situation where a lot of unacceptable tenets may be brought to children in a routine manner without any scrutiny.

Under the dominant models of e-learning, the reliance on the 'home' unit is likely to become in itself an additional source of discrimination in a system where inequality already exists at an alarming level. This model, particularly in the case of smaller children relies upon the ability of the parents to provide support, which in turn depends upon their economic and educational status and on the environment of the house—how do they share their work within

the household? How much adjustment or sacrifice each member of the household is willing to make for the education of others? How will the family dynamics impinge upon education in absence of the neutralising impact of the institutional structures?

The principle of equality was the key motivation in different freedom struggles of the oppressed castes, classes, communities and genders in modern India at least from nineteenth century onwards. Still, a highly stratified system of education was created in colonial India and additional layers have been augmented during the post-Independence period particularly from 1980s onwards. The ideology of inclusion is the buzzword in contemporary times. However, the tension posed by the principle of redistributive justice between the privileged and the disprivileged and the strife for structural equality (in the conventional sense) is less prevalent in contemporary discourse (Gupta 2014, 2016, forthcoming).

Let us presuppose for a while that the underprivileged sections are provided with gadgets and services necessary for their participation in online education at par with others. It may be possible, because such an investment would be still lower than the cost of formal conventional mode of education. What will be the implications of such a measure? Will this kind of flattening of inequality produce greater equality or augment differentiation as the other aspects of learner's milieu remain essentially unchanged? Technology is very important in the transformation of life situation. Still, can we see it as an independent determinant of human predicament? Perhaps not. The impact of technology is also to be determined by human intervention.[8] It does not however mean that technological changes do not have their impact. Still, the nature and the degree of human intervention determines the orientation and the advantage/disadvantage of technological developments. In other words, it is not merely the availability of technology which determines the outcome. It is the human agency and the policies that decide what kind of results it will produce. The question arises: is this technology used in a manner that enhances and appreciates the diversity and local situation or it is used to override diversity with the steamroller of homogeneity? This would depend upon the usage. Two dominant avenues of this human intervention are the policies of the state and the market practices. Hence, a simple technical criticism of e-learning will be responded with technological refinement alone.

In fact, the technology of online education might have some beneficial impact if this is viewed as an additional resource while strengthening the already existing systems of formal education. However, it may reproduce or even augment inequality if we put greater reliance on it as a substitute compromising the formal education in conventional mode, if the corporate models are used rather than 'open source' software's, and if the emphasis is on teaching greater number of students with lesser number of teachers, materials and singular textbooks. Sadly, the Indian state seems to be following such an approach with a top-down mindset.

For instance, STARS—Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States—is a programme approved by the GoI during the Covid-19 pandemic as part of a loan agreement with the World Bank (2020) which vigorously advocates online education, ignoring the facts that 85 per cent families in the villages do not have access to internet; forty-five percent do not have even the television connections, and only 79 million DTH television subscribers exist among India's 250 million households (Oxfam 2020). STARS is to be launched on pilot basis in six states of India: Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan**,** Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha (World Bank 2020) where 'a portion of the funds are proposed to be spent in partnership with non-state actors including handing over operation and management of government schools to non-state actors, outsourcing services, seeking support of management firms/NGOs and direct benefit transfers as school vouchers' *(*Oxfam 2020). 'The STARS project risks significant diversion of Indian taxpayers' funds to an array of private actors' (ibid.). This loan agreement has been signed ignoring all critical assessments of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's conditionalities of 'Structural Adjustment' in the manner these have negatively impacted upon the quality of public provisioning of school education under the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (AIFRTE 2020b). Since 'Structural Adjustment' meant that the state should not spend on the education of those classes of people who can supposedly pay for it, therefore the DPEP and the SSA practically converted government schools into the schools for poor and the marginalised alone while prompting choice of private schools by all those who could manage to afford, thereby discrediting the ordinary government schools (Gupta, forthcoming). Still, the government of India has allowed this third round of intervention by the World Bank under a Loan Agreement with it through the

STARS Programme with even a greater thrust for 'non-state players'—private corporate investors, NGOs, civil society/charitable/religious organisations, and fee-paying parents and community level institutions—to invest in education from early childhood care to class XII (AIFRTE 2020b). Out of the total cost of this programme in these six states, the government will contribute 53.43 per cent, the state governments 31.64 per cent, and the World Bank loan towards the remaining 14.93 per cent. While the World Bank's total investment in the form of loan would be 14.93 per cent in the six identified states, it would be only 1.4 per cent of the overall expenditure on school education if seen in context of the entire country under the SSA. Still, the World Bank will be able to impose its neoliberal model of school education based on concepts like 'competencies' and 'skills' (required in the market) and 'standardised assessment mechanisms' (as carried out by outside agencies like PAISA) on the entire nation through a loan towards meeting only 1 per cent of the total cost.

These mechanisms of homogeneity and inequality as laid down under the STARS Project of the World Bank are being further institutionalised through the NEP 2020. It promotes privatisation of education in the name of philanthropic institutions: it talks of curbing commercialisation without laying any newer and effective mechanism for this objective. It has an additionally harmful principal–it seeks to provide more resources to already better performing institutions in the name of 'accreditation' linked with the adoption of 'outcome measurement approach' replacing the so-called 'input-based approach'. It thus leaves the already funds-starved and therefore under-performing and poorly maintained institutions to slowly wither away. Accordingly, it moves away for instance from the 'norms and standards' enshrined in the RTE Act. It promotes privatisation in the name of philanthropy.

The developed capitalist as well as communist countries invested in public systems of equitable quality education as a strategy for national development. Now their agencies of global capital along with the domestic corporate houses are advising India to care only for the education of those who cannot pay for it and to make education 'affordable' for others. However, our current ruling establishment otherwise immersed within the framework of cultural nationalism turns a blind eye to this fact of diplomacy. Even Adam Smith who pioneered the idea of 'invisible hand of the state' in the economic development of the nations had explained as early as 1776 the importance of keeping certain aspects of public sector—including education—outside the competitive market. He even highlighted the similarities in

the nomenclatures and durations of university degree programmes with those practiced in the artisanal guilds or corporations: the places of the production and 'reproduction' of practical knowledge (Smith 1776/1788: 82–116, 587–631). Therefore, in order to understand the actual intent of NEP 2020 going beyond the presence of a rhetoric which intends to elicit veiled consent, we need to contextualise each of its imperative provisions within the overall milieu in which over last thirty years public systems have been weakened and non-state actors have been dominating every aspect of it.

IV. Some Exemplary Alternative Frameworks of Pedagogy and Epistemology in Formal Education

In such a situation where homogeneity is being imposed on a heterogenous situation disconnecting education from the immediate and the specific, in a structure where individual agency is constantly being circumscribed, and in a system where alarming levels of inequality prevails at the very basic level, it is extremely challenging to decide what to teach and how. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to indicate some closing but informative examples that might instill some hope.

Sheila Fitzpatrick studied the experiments in education of Russian communist revolution, particularly the plans, activities and approach of the Commissariat of Enlightenment from 1917 to 1921. Lunacharsky (Head of the Commissariat), Krupskaya (Lenin's wife), Pokrovsky and Litkens were the four most important members of this Commissariat. Apart from these four, Lenin was involved in their dialogues from outside. The Commissariat propagated such an education which is in accordance with the needs of the country and local communities, which is friendlier for the child and in which the students and teachers achieve the construction and reconstruction of knowledge through practical work. These members of the Commissariat toured the country with the objective of exploring what improvements have been made in education after the revolution. They encountered diverse experiments which were attracting the attention of people from across the world. However, there were some places where no significant revolutionary transformation of education had occurred. On inquiring the reason, the members of the Commissariat were informed that they were waiting for the announcement of concrete plans by the central government. The Commissariat still did not tell them any pre-determined plan. Rather, they explained to them that no such

scheme of education would be imposed from above. They were advised that communes or local communities should adopt such plans for knowledge production and reproduction that they think are appropriate for achieving the objectives of the revolution, meeting the needs of the people and the country, and to encourage research to address existing problems (Fitzpatrick 1970).

In the United States, broadly during the same period, renowned educationist John Dewey also vigorously championed a pragmatic approach (1966). Of course, while the main emphasis of Dewey's pedagogy was on the learner's own construction of knowledge, the educational experiments of Russian Revolution, while respecting the uniqueness of each individual tried to channelise their collective work towards the resolution of social and national challenges.

Against the conventional Brahmanical hegemony over academic knowledge and the colonial state's educational policy in India which again mainly benefited upper castes and classes, Jotirao Phule in the 19th century (Phule 2002) and Mahatma Gandhi (1938) in the 20th century advocated useful practical knowledge relevant for the community to be the basis of education. However, that Indian education system has not been transformed in accordance with these or any other similar ideas is a fact. Its curriculum, textbooks and pedagogy, all have been too tightly organised on a 'strong frame' and generally disconnected from the life-experiences of children and at least consciously non-interventionist in local situations.

Basel Bernstein outlined three methods or frames of classroom teaching (1971/1990):

First, the strong frame—It is a situation where the teacher has already prepared a lesson plan and would teach neither more nor less than that. All possible questions are considered to be answered in the already prepared lesson plan. Generally, it is only the teacher who asks questions with the objective of confirming the retention by students. Students' questions must be strictly and directly related to the lesson plan. Otherwise, his/her questions will be overruled. The main objective of the teacher is to somehow complete the lesson plan. There is no scope for pedagogic engagement with and discussion on the life-experiences of learners.

Second, absence of any frame—it means teaching without any prior planning of lesson. The teacher conducts a discussion related to the topic in which the specific goal or concern of completing a particular part of the lesson does not dominate. Hence, it has scope for

pedagogically engaging with life-experiences and local milieu. Its scope for a broad orientation of an education system in any direction through curricular framework is extremely constrained for any kind of a nation-state.

Third, the week frame—within this model, the teacher goes to the classroom with a flexible pre-plan. Teacher initiates discussion on a prescribed topic. On the basis of this dialogue, he/she makes necessary relaxation and changes in his/her original plan. Here the overwhelming anxiety is not just to complete the lesson but this objective is not entirely absent either. The focus is to facilitate articulation of curiosities by the learners and to guide them to explore further.

The post-Independence period in India has witnessed several constructive pedagogic interventions by social organisations. For instance, Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP), Social Science Teaching Program (SSTP) and Prathamik Shiksha Karyakram (Primary Education Program, PRASHIKA) in the government schools in Madhya Pradesh. Sushil Joshi (2015) has documented the experiences of the HSTP which continued from 1972–2002, covering more than one thousand schools across fifteen districts of Madhya Pradesh. The HSTP questioned the conventional pedagogy; explored alternate ways of teaching and learning; and set up a programme where both teachers and children were partners in attaining a sense of freedom to experiment and learnt by doing. Joshi discusses the HSTP by focusing on development of materials and its structure, teacher involvement, and examinations and student evaluation. He underlines how the HSTP sought to encourage learning by doing, learning by discovery and learning from environment. For instance, with the purpose of achieving these objectives, special textbooks were designed; teachers were especially oriented; and an examination system was evolved in accordance with the goals of HSTP (ibid.).

Similarly, Poonam Batra has extensively reviewed the Social Science Textbooks of Eklavya to bring out progressive pedagogic perspectives and challenges of this study material (2010**)**. Avijit Pathak has presented a comparative review of the textbooks of Eklavya and the NCERT and tried to bring out different constructions of society and nation and child's milieu in them (Pathak 2002: 210–239).

Besides the above-mentioned programmes of Kishore Bharati and Eklavya, there have existed many other innovative efforts of alternative education in India. They are different from the above-mentioned interventions of Kishore Bharati and Eklavya as they mainly exist as autonomous alternatives outside the system. Vittachi and others have compiled a directory of such institutions (Vittachi et al. 2007). In the same volume, Neeraja Raghavan (2007: 45–57) argued that surely there are ways in which if not all, some of the practices of alternative schools can find applicability on a larger scale, and not just in small pockets scattered sparsely over the length and breadth of a country as vast as India. For instance, she underlined the need to keep alive the learner in the teacher, empower the teacher with a better income, make a teacher versatile, learn how to enquire and how to respond to enquiries from the students and other teachers, use the local environment and resources, a constant reappraisal of textbooks and learning material by the teaching as well as the learning community, nurture the parent-teacher bond going beyond the routine perfunctory meetings, introduce self-assessment, and periodic publications, newsletters, conferences and gatherings that invite the sharing of meaningful exchanges between the teacher and the taught.

Krishna Kumar remarked in the forward to this volume edited by Vittachi et al.:

> Systems of education evolve when alternatives to the mainstream are absorbed by it. When this does not happen and the mainstream resists the assimilation of new ideas, the system ossifies. The situation we face in India has far too many symptoms of resistance to reform for anyone to feel comfortable. As parents, teachers, principals and administrators, we must all worry and find ways to soften the system so as to make it porous enough for the new ideas developed by the seekers of alternatives to slip into the system and germinate there (Kumar 2007b: 7).

V. Some Concluding Observations

Thus, we have seen a big structural transition from diversified and pluralist arrangements to a system which has integrated very differently endowed educational institutions within a horizontal and vertical order and which has an increasing tendency to homogenise the sphere of teaching learning, curricular knowledge and evaluation. Therefore, the educational impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education is likely to be far more different from whatever it could have been in the past because of the kind of system of education that has been built over the last few centuries. Hence, governments are expected to decide upon the common

strategy to be adopted. Therefore, today, the educational impact of pandemic is not determined simply by the fact that we are face-to-face with a biological threat to our life and health. Of course, that is very much a reality. However, an equally important fact is that this pandemic coincides with a situation where epistemological and linguistic aspects of education have been much more homogenised and centralised while infrastructural and provision related aspects are marked by glaring levels of inequality. The agency of educational institutions, teachers, students and parents to find appropriate ways of dealing with the challenge posed by the pandemic in accordance with their specific local and life conditions has been almost completely eroded by this process over the last few centuries and the centralised or corporatised handling of the current crisis will further curtail it.

Despite a 'general lack of receptivity of alternative ideas within the "mainstream" system', teachers have been working hard to somehow manage it. This was noted some time ago by Padma Sarangapani (2003) in her study of a government school in a village of Delhi and by Michael W. Apple and James Beane (1999) in the USA. In his NCERT lecture, Apple even gave the call for us to become the 'success secretaries of teachers' (Gupta 2010). Just before the pandemic, Girish Khare (2019) published an interesting book in Hindi which also reconfirms hope in government schools, which is otherwise becoming a rarity in the dominant discourse today. This book contains inspiring and heroic stories of the efforts of teachers (who worked with students and the community) in different rural schools of government or local administration in different states of India. These teachers, students and parents have protected their schools in an era marked by closure and merger of government school and a mania for private schools. Their success is attributed by the writer to the interventionist pedagogy of these schools for the promotion of constitutional values in context of local settings. In doing so, these teachers, students and the parents cross over the four walls of school and work with the village community.

Of course, this involvement of community is different from the idea of community-based autonomous institutions. These schools are very much part of the government school system. Many of these schools have regained their ground against private schools. Many of them have successfully found solution of multilingual classroom in activity-based learning. Many of these teachers used online education technology in their schools even before the pandemic. For them, it was not an alternative but augmentative technology to face-to-face formal

learning. Of course, the study mainly includes smaller schools. However, the manner in which teachers, students and parents have worked hard to adopt not only innovative but interventionist pedagogy is something that may inspire bigger schools as well if such a work is well publicised and creative human agency is facilitated and respected by the bureaucracy. If official attitude, management and provisions facilitate and celebrate creative agency of teachers, students and parents, it might create space for discussing children's experiences and their narratives of exploitation and challenges.

Similarly, focus on practical knowledge might reduce the gap between official knowledge and the social environment. It might also reduce the gap between the historically dominant literati and the groups which were hitherto excluded from formal education. It would surely be a concrete and real step towards inclusiveness and for making education relevant to most people. Then, the potentials and challenges of online education will have to be also examined on the yardstick of locally relevant practical learning. It will reveal that the usage of the technologies of online learning will have to be very different from the current paradigm.

However, barring perhaps some revolutionary situations and inspiring projects—for instance in the Russian Revolution or in the Gandhian model or in various alternative schools in India and the experimental school of Jon Dewey in the USA—provision of practical knowledge within formal school education has been generally attempted in the form of a stream of lower order vocational education primarily targeting disprivileged students considered 'not so meritorious'. The privileged students are selected earlier for liberal arts and now increasingly for higher order vocational education streams like commerce, management, technology or medicine. A new term for this higher level vocational stream has been coined—professional education—while actually any such distinction between these higher and lower levels is nothing more than an artificial divide created by the market and the society. One leads to the production of blue collar and the other to the white collar workforce: both are professionals otherwise. These divides help reproduce existing social order. Utilisation of the processes of the production and reproduction of practical knowledge as a pedagogic resource for learning abstract phenomenon for all students is an altogether different programme. It tends to amount to a complete overhauling of the existing social, educational and professional orders. The liberational impact of the pedagogy based on practical work is possible when it is adopted as the most appropriate pedagogy of learning for everyone in the society. If this is adopted for

selected areas, students or social groups, it reinforces existing cleavages, because while the privileged are made to qualify for 'higher knowledge', the disprivileged are pushed back to acquire 'lower knowledge'. These pedagogic and curricular activities have to be essentially and everywhere rooted locally. However, since local communities are heavily structured around conventional prejudices and discriminations, adherence to progressive values, for instance as enshrined in the Indian Constitution, have to be ensured. Although the NEP 2020 claims to break these disciplinary distinctions, it does not provide even a clue for new arrangements in actual operational terms. On the contrary, its substandard educational provisions for SEDGs will ensure that mostly they are pushed for vocational education of the lower order and skill training in line with their conventionally assigned 'lower' caste/class social status. Further, its centralising thrust is fundamentally antithetical to this vision of diversified pedagogic arrangements based on practical knowledge.

Notes

[1] Also see *Home (Education) A Proceedings*, Government of India, particularly, January 22, 1866, Nos. 48–51; August 1871, No. 300; June 1873, No. 7; March, 1873, No. 43; April, 1877, Nos. 21–52; January, 1881, No. 33; February, 1900, Nos. 25–36; June, 1900, Nos. 6–24; October, 1900, No. 57; and October, 1900, No. 58 (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

[2] Some of these notifications and responses were summarised in Croft (1888)

[3] Also see– Home (Education) A Proceedings, Government of India, particularly, February, 1900, Nos. 25–36; June, 1900, Nos. 6–24; October, 1900, No. 57; and October, 1900, No. 58 (New Delhi: National Archives of India).

[4] The fact that it has been only approved by the Central Cabinet (meaning it awaits Parliamentary approval) is not accordingly mentioned on the Cover page of this document; we only know it through widespread media reports and the statements of the Union Minister for Education and the Prime Minister of India.

[5] I have tried to further refine Krishna Kumar's (2007a) idea of disjunction in Gupta (2017).

[6] Nita Kumar (2000: 112) and Parinitha Shetty (2008) have underscored the possibilities of change historically made available by modern schooling in colonial India through this term 'spatial enclosure'.

[7] For a discussion of authoritarian populous and the home schooling in USA, see Michael W. Apple (2001: Chapters 5 and 6).

[8] This is aptly clear in the debate on the role of printing press as an agent of change. See for instance, Johns 1998; Grafton 1980; Eisenstein 1979; Anderson 1983/1991; Robinson 1996; Ghosh 2006; Stark 2007: Introduction and Chapter 1.

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