



NEOLIBERALISM AND THE CHANGING NOTION OF INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Neoliberalism is currently the most prevalent political philosophy across the world. It is a term used to describe the 20th-century resurgence of 19th-century ideas associated with free-market capitalism. The typical policies associated with neoliberalism include free trade, globalization, privatization, and changes in government spending to stimulate the private sector. This paper aims to better understand the reasons for this neoliberal turn in higher education and explore the visible and invisible ramifications of this paradigm shift in the policies for higher education in India. The paper focuses on the origins and meaning of neoliberalism, its application and practice in higher education, as well as the issues and critiques that have been raised in this context. The author offers both a critique of the neoliberal paradigm of marketized education and a challenge to academics to act as public intellectuals, both individually and with civil society organizations, to establish a counter-hegemonic discourse to neoliberalism for higher education. The paper concludes that neoliberal education reforms have made higher education much more diverse and have given rise to more learning opportunities; however, in India, which has enshrined systemic inequalities, neoliberalism has further reinforced existing inequalities, and public universities have lost their autonomy and led to knowledge capitalism.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, knowledge capitalism, privatization

1. Introduction

Neoliberalism is currently the most dominant political philosophy across the world. It is almost difficult to read about or discuss nearly any higher education policy or practice without coming across the word 'neoliberalism.' The term 'neoliberalism' has been introduced as a new mode of regulation or form of governmentality within higher education (Olssen & Peters, 2005). It is a term used to describe the 20th-century

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resurgence of 19th-century ideas associated with free-market capitalism. The typical policies associated with neoliberalism include free trade, globalization, privatization, and changes in government spending to stimulate the private sector (Radice, 2013). It is basically a theory of the political economy that contends that the greatest way to enhance human well-being is to liberate individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional setting characterized by robust private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The responsibility of the state is to create and maintain an institutional setting suitable for such practices (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). It is a philosophy based on economic freedom that is manifested by completely endorsing capitalism while minimizing governmental intrusion on the one hand and aiming to promote the role of private sector involvement in economic activities as much as feasible on the other (Cohen, 2007). According to Olssen & Peters (2005), *“understanding this new mode of regulation or form of governmentality requires understanding that the welfare liberal mode it replaced maintained fundamentally different premises at the level of political and economic theory, as well as philosophical assumption. The central defining characteristic of this new brand of neoliberalism can be understood at one level as a revival of many of the fundamental ideas of classical liberalism, especially classical economic liberalism.”*

The key assumptions of neoliberalism described by Olssen & Peters (2005), are as follows:

- **The self-interested individual:** a view of individuals as economically self-interested subjects. This point of view depicted the individual as a rational optimizer and the best assessor of his or her own interests and requirements.
- **Free market economics:** the most efficient means of allocating resources and opportunities is through the market. The market is a more efficient as well as a morally superior process.
- **A commitment to laissez-faire:** as the free market is a self-regulating order it governs itself better than the government or any other outside force. In this, neoliberals demonstrate a clear distrust of governmental power and strive to restrict state power within a negative conception, confining its role to the protection of individual rights.
- **A commitment to free trade:** involving the elimination of tariffs or subsidies, or any other kind of state-imposed protection or assistance, as well as the preservation of floating exchange rates and ‘open’ economies.

Despite the similarities, neoliberal and classical liberal discourses cannot be considered identical and interchangeable. Understanding the differences between them is crucial for understanding the distinctive features of the neoliberal revolution and how it has influenced OECD nations over the last three decades. Whereas classical liberalism signifies a negative conception of state power in that the individual was viewed as an object to be freed from the interferences of the state, neoliberalism has come to signify a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by offering the conditions, laws, and institutions necessary for its operation. In classical liberalism, the individual is defined as possessing an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom. In neoliberalism, the state aims to produce an individual who is an inventive

and competitive entrepreneur (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The objective of this paper is to analyze the changing landscape of Indian higher education in the context of neoliberalism. Thus, the paper is bound by the following objectives: (a) to understand the reasons for this neoliberal 'turn' in higher education; (b) to map the trends in policy perspectives of higher education in response to neoliberalism, and (c) to explore the visible and invisible ramifications of this paradigm shift in the policies for higher education in India.

The methodology underlying the paper is a systematic review, with a focus on the literature on this topic that has been published in the English language. Relevant government documents, articles, books, and chapters were identified using databases and search engines, such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, Elsevier, Web of Science, ProQuest, JSTOR, NDL, ResearchGate, and Academia; copies were then obtained for scrutiny and analysis.

2. Developmental Trajectory of Neoliberalism in the Higher Education Sector in India

The first sign of the Indian government's willingness to submit to a neoliberal policy framework in education was in 1985 when the concerned Ministry of Education was changed to the Ministry of Human Resource Development. This implied a shift in the fundamental aims of education away from the constitution's intended goals of social development and citizen preparedness to those of producing a skilled but slavish workforce for the global market. Later, in 1991, to deal with a severe crisis balance of payment in international trade and the fiscal overload, the government of India was compelled to adopt neoliberal capitalist reforms i.e., 'free market.' Neoliberalism viewed private enterprise and the market as the route to success against the notion of social justice (Goswami, 2013). In tandem with the market liberalization, the state builds a new political economy of education and shaped a package of educational reforms comprised of ideas and techniques arbitrarily adopted from the western neoliberal educational paradigm, replacing egalitarian commitments in education. As a result, the neoliberal agenda has dramatically altered the character and goals of education, especially higher education in India, continuing colonial education under new guises. Universities are expected to supply a skilled workforce for the global market (Younis & Hatim, 2021).

The main framework through which neoliberal economic reforms were adopted and implemented globally has been the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), followed by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Since the 1990s, the term 'neoliberalism' has been used to refer to global market-liberalism (capitalism) and free-trade policies. Within a short period of time, every sector has been transformed and controlled by neoliberalism. Developing nations are also compelled to adopt neoliberal policy agendas in their national economic development in order to meet the requirements imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) for getting loans and assistance. In this way, developing nations are persuaded to embrace the neoliberal agenda in their own development policies (Goswami, 2013). India signed the WTO Agreement including GATS, in 1994, as part of a single undertaking, which came into

force in 1995. Therefore, the WTO has had a significant impact on India's higher education system.

The enactment of the Private Universities Act (1995) was the first step toward the implementation of the neoliberal policy agenda. It classified higher education as a 'non-merit good,' whereas school education was classified as a 'merit good.' In addition, the Ambani-Birla Report (2000) advocated for the complete removal of subsidized structure in the education sector. This report gave emphasis to converting higher education into a fully controlled lucrative sector. It argued that higher education should be entrusted to corporate sector investments so that the number of post-secondary institutions could be doubled. It desired the 'user pay' principle, with loans and grants for the needy, to be the means for making the investment profitable for the investors. Later, under the influence of the Ambani-Birla Report, the UGC recommended the restructuring of higher education in market-oriented enterprises that promote corporate values. India has decided to treat education as a tradeable service under neoliberal goals. Further, it signifies that India has agreed to global trade in education without barriers. It turns education into a commodity, and students become consumers. It has greatly altered the traditional goals of higher education. The emphasis has shifted from the production of social knowledge to prepare students for gainful employment, developing new skills, and the adaptability to deal with an increasingly competitive international labour pool. Universities have been almost compelled to change their agenda in redefining their role and functions in tune with the market ideology. The Ambani-Birla Report was further substantiated by the National Knowledge Commission, the Yashpal Committee Report, and the Narayana Murthy Committee Report, all of which backed and extended the neoliberal agendas in education. The National Knowledge Commission (2007) suggested giving institutions financial autonomy to determine student fee levels. The Yash Pal Committee Report (2009) recommended private investment to increase access to higher education in India. The Narayana Murthy Committee (Planning Commission, 2012) also advocated for the engagement of the corporate sector in investments for existing institutions and the creation of new institutions and knowledge clusters, for research and faculty development. It further recommended that the corporate sector should be given autonomy in charging fees and proposed establishing private universities with central university status and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) universities that would add to the diversity of the market.

3. Arguments in Favour of Neoliberalism

Many researchers have justified the neoliberal educational policy for varied reasons. According to Rhoades & Torres (2006), there is nothing wrong with neoliberalism itself. The theory and logic of neoliberalism are valid and have great potential. The neoliberal policy helps in the massification of higher education worldwide, and that has led to increased student-faculty ratios. It helps in the rise of competition among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and that benefits quality improvement. It demands accountability, transparency, and efficiency. It helps in the transfer of power from central

government control to individual units (universities and colleges). Sanyal & Johnstone (2011) said that at first, states have far from adequate capacity to provide the financial resources required for the critical expansion of higher education. The neoliberal policy which resulted in the privatization of higher education eradicates this inability. Further, it is the major force that makes technical, economic, and political changes in higher education. It also helps in the development of knowledge-based societies and knowledge-based economies which are compelling countries to increase access to higher education and upgrade the quality of their universities and colleges.

Wang (2011) suggested that neoliberalism is inevitable and should be promoted for many reasons. First, it should be encouraged because it enhances efficiency and promotes greater flexibility in responding to the demands of diversified customers. Second, it helps in resource mobilization. When the government is unwilling or incapable of allocating more public resources to the service or goods, it helps to meet the growing demands without asking more from the government. Third, it helps in reshaping the public-private relationship by redistributing power among social groups. Fourthly, it can be used as a tool for addressing uncertain economic or non-economic problems.

Kumar (2012) in his paper justified neoliberalism by claiming that it raises educational standards and improves the effectiveness of both teachers and students. Further, he mentioned international universities are justified in being allowed to set up their branch in India because they can (a) continuously update knowledge, (b) provide autonomy to teachers, (c) centralize the functioning of the university system, and (d) make university education relevant by offering job-oriented courses as per the needs of the job market.

Similarly, Goswami (2013) argued that the neoliberal policy frameworks in education are being justified on the basis of a number of premises, namely, the state's economic policy is limited, and there is no other choice but to rely on private domestic and foreign investors to fund education; education is a private good, and thus it is valid that the quality of education one receives is proportionate to one's capacity to pay; education is a tradable product, therefore profiteering is permissible and a legitimate objective just like any other trade and the constitutional provision of equality and social justice can be replaced by the neoliberal principle of inclusion.

Bhoi (2013) advocated that neoliberalism which resulted in the privatization of higher education appears as an argument to fulfill the desire to select the type of education. It is not a matter of financing education, rather it is a matter of choice, management, flexibility in regulation, and more accountability and efficiency as compared to public education. This has brought about major improvements in the mobility of students and resources across boundaries. It has also helped in economic growth over the decades. Scott (2016) suggested that the neoliberal turn has many guises, from the rigidly ideological to the flexibly pragmatic. However, it has created great opportunities in terms of cross-cultural or transnational learning. At the same time, it has also created a new communications revolution, or more broadly, communicative cultures.

4. Consequences: Neoliberalism Hegemony in Higher Education

The consequences of neoliberal hegemony in higher education can be seen from multiple perspectives. The neoliberal turn in India's higher education sector openly impacts the overall cultural, economic, and socio-political patterns of the society. The neoliberal policy agenda not only changes the philosophical and pedagogical components of higher education but also makes higher education the most expensive commodity in contemporary India. The following are some of the consequences of the neoliberal transformation in the higher education sector in our country.

4.1 The Changing Complexion of Equity, Equality, and Justice

The neoliberal approach in higher education is not something new but its space, intensity and moral legitimacy are what is new in the 21st century. It is now being normalized in policy and public discourses and its operational values and purposes have been encoded in the systems of all types of universities. So now the cry of the academy is, that its public interest function is being compromised by the neoliberal agenda. Universities are now increasingly transformed into powerful, consumer-oriented corporate networks, whose values of public interest have been seriously challenged (Sahoo, 2021). In the words of Kumar (2012), neoliberalism is part of a hegemonic project concentrating power and wealth in elite groups around the world, benefiting especially the financial interests within each country. It has further widened the urban-rural divide and intensified the problems of education inequalities, especially when those who can afford could enjoy far more educational opportunities. Hence, the opportunities are open only to the few who come from elite and affordable backgrounds. Students from poor and disadvantaged communities do not get opportunities and end up as second-rate individuals. The concept of merit got undermined, with less merit rich getting a greater benefit than the resources-less meritorious. It establishes a system that favours the 'have' over the 'have-nots' and undermines the basic principles of social justice, equality, and equal opportunity in education.

Schugurensky (2006) further explained that the neoliberal economic reform has drastically reshaped the educational landscape of India specifically the higher education sector by shifting egalitarian commitments in education. It provides programs covering high-private benefits and fewer social benefits. It undermines equity, inclusiveness, and educational accessibility of disadvantaged and lower strata of society. In India, which has enshrined systemic inequalities, neoliberalism has further reinforced existing inequalities. Though, the rationalization offered behind the agenda that the neoliberal approach makes higher education far more diversified and has given rise to more learning opportunities but still it can't be denied that in fact in a way it aggravates social inequities, educational inequality, regional disparity, and social injustice (Bhoi, 2013).

4.2 The Cost of Ideology: Public versus Private Goods

Higher education is viewed as a public good conventionally, helping not only individuals but also society as a whole by providing a wide variety of social benefits. However, the

emergence of neoliberal thought plays a significant role in transforming higher education. It sees the role of higher education differently. It has transformed the traditional university into an 'enterprise university' and is heading towards becoming a 'corporation.' Today, education is viewed as the economic driver and 'student-as-customer' phenomenon. The major task of education is to train future workers to fill necessary market positions (Mintz, 2021). This capitalist system has also affected the massification of higher education, the right to education, and the gains of the welfare state or social state. The state becomes the regulator and facilitator of public services rather than the provider (Aslan, 2014). Hence, the neoliberal policy changes the long-held, well-established notion of many and sees higher education as an ordinary commodity that can be traded on both domestic and foreign markets (Altbach, 2001). It dramatically changed public thinking on higher education and weakened the social commitment to higher education all over the world. It replaces academic values with commercial considerations, social concerns, and purposes by individual interests, as well as long-term needs by short-term demands which create very serious, irreversible long-term dangers to the whole society. It disappears the public good character of higher education (Lewis, 2008; Mintz, 2021). In sum, neoliberalism, with its emphasis on education as a private good, has solidified the rise of students as customers, which helps explain why we are transferring the cost of higher education from the community to the individual. This ideological shift has been used to justify the massive underfunding of higher education. Any notion of higher education as a public good that remains salient today is organized around workforce development. The tension between the public and private good plays out as a contradiction between the business interest in subsidized training of future workers, on the one hand, and the ideology that emphasizes higher education as a vehicle for personal gain, on the other.

4.3 Knowledge Capitalism

Another, most important material shift underpinning twenty-first-century neoliberalism, is the rise in the value of knowledge as capital known as 'knowledge capitalism.' It views knowledge as a modern hierarchical form of capitalism and the world's most valuable source of money. Universities are viewed as a major force in the knowledge economy, and HEIs have been encouraged to forge links with industry and business. As a result, universities promote market fundamentalism, and market-oriented courses are regarded as critical to student survival and capital growth. Disciplines such as pure sciences, humanities, arts, and even social science-related subjects are completely overlooked due to their lack of relevance to the job market. Public universities, like private universities, have altered their education programmes to reflect market trends and demands. The launch of a self-financed programme in all public HEIs is one of the pieces of evidence of it. This strategy indicates the intention of the state to abdicate its responsibility to fund higher education on the grounds that it lacks resources (Gyamera & Burke, 2017). In the words of Mampary (2017) knowledge capitalism is a significant threat to the conventional notion of higher education as a public good and associated ideals such as social inclusion, equity, democracy, and the like. A market and corporate philosophy-based educational

system do not provide pupils to acquire critical thinking skills rather it creates manpower who are figuratively blind, disarmed, and dumb. Pupils are only viewed as tools for serving global capitalism but lack a critical understanding of capitalist tyranny and injustice

4.4 Privatization in Education

The excessive diversified demand and neoliberalism resulted in the rapid privatization of higher education (Agarwal, 2006). In the last three decades, the privatization of higher education has been the most rapidly growing phenomenon. Today, private higher education has become the world's fastest-growing segment. Even in many countries, the private sector of higher education represents a strong majority (Kandiko, 2010; Sahoo, 2021). In India also according to the Ministry of Education (MoE), since independence, the higher education sector has experienced a significant expansion in the number of universities and colleges. The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Annual Report 2019-20 shows an impressive growth of HEIs. There are 49 central universities, 386 state universities, 327 state private universities, 126 deemed to be universities, 135 institutes of national importance, 15 open universities, and 5 institutions under the Special State Legislature functioning in India (p. 7). However, if we equate the number of universities with the 2010-11 AISHE Annual Report with 2019-20, which is given below, we can quickly determine that the number of public institutions both government and aided institutions has increased only marginally, while the number of private institutions has increased significantly. The effect of the new economic reform called neoliberalism is thus clearly visible in the picture. This has contributed to the exponential growth of privatization in higher education.

| Types of University | No. of Universities (2010-11) | No. of Universities (2019-20) |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Central University | 42 | 49 |
| State Public University | 281 | 386 |
| State Private University | 87 | 327 |
| Open University | 13 | 15 |
| Deemed University (Govt. & Aided) | 40 | 46 |
| Deemed University (Private) | 91 | 80 |
| Institute of National Importance | 59 | 135 |
| Institutions Establish Under State Legislation | 5 | 5 |
| Grand Total | 618 | 1043 |

Source: AISHE Annual Report 2010-11 & 2019-20.

4.5 Neoliberal Governmentality in Higher Education

The neoliberal turn has implemented a new form of governmentality within the higher education system. In this approach, education is shown as an input-output system. The essential components of this new public management are flexibility (in relation to organizations through the use of contracts); clearly defined objectives (both organizational and personal), and a results orientation (Olssen & Peters, 2005). It replaces the concept of 'governance' over 'management' where public power is handed over

directly to the capital on behalf of society. Universities are moving away from their roles, the market influences the university's inner functioning, autonomy is being diminished, the objectivity of the university is also damaged, the university becoming ready to serve certain interest groups, and moving away from its public characteristics. It has also taken away educationalists' own languages and self-conceptualizations from them, and market language and concepts are tried to be made dominant instead (Altbach, 2005; Aslan, 2014). Hence, we can say that in the neoliberal era, higher education governance is experiencing a paradigm change, with which the essence of governance moves from managing globalization to managing the conflict embedded in the global-local dynamics of agenda-setting in higher education policy.

The new form of governmentality also pushes for a transition in accountability. The transition was made from '*bureaucratic professional*' forms of accountability to '*consumer managerial*' models of accountability. Bureaucratic professional accountability is where rules and regulations are laid down in advance and accountability is computed in terms of process; expressed in terms of standards and based on the knowledge of individuals who operate in a certain field. Consumer management accountability is linked to price-based market systems in which performance is rewarded or penalized based on the attainment of pre-set targets and externally imposed objectives (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

5. Concluding Remarks

It has quite evident from the above discussion that the wake of neoliberalism has contributed to exponential changes in academics as universities shift to more corporate management models (Giroux, 2014, p. 20). Management and financial autonomy for public higher education institutions remained limited and are granted only to a small number of the top universities in the country. It also encourages social problems such as corruption, excessive consumerism, unfair distribution of wealth and income, and the abuse of human, physical, and natural resources (Sanyal & Johnstone, 2011). It undermines the basic principles of social justice, equality, and equal opportunity in education and aggravates social inequities, educational inequality, regional disparity, and social injustice (Bhoi, 2013). Addressing the above concerns requires strategic interventions at many levels. In the face of current realities, India requires pragmatic and innovative public policies. Creative ways have to be found to reverse this trend without imposing a burdensome regulatory regime on the system. There has been a great deal of unnecessary and polemical debate about public and private higher education in India. The distinction between public and private is less important than the rules of the game to which different institutions respond. Correct policies would make otherwise inflexible public institutions more responsive. Such policies could also ensure private institutions serve the public interest. Funding mechanisms can be established for both public and private institutions to encourage quality, equity, and efficiency. The right rules of the game have to be put in place. Under-investment is an issue. The level of public funding has to be increased. Considering the limitations in this regard, it is important that public

funds are strategically deployed to address equity issues and leverage change in public-funded institutions (Agarwal, 2007). Further, capitalism has developed a global economy but is unable to reconcile it with either social justice or international order. Hence, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the formation of new social policy which should emphasize the development of a 'people-oriented' social policy and social protection (Porter & Vidovich, 2000). The transition should be from a market-driven approach to a more welfare-based education system. We need to construct a counter-hegemonic discourse rather than becoming confused and distracted by neoliberal populism, a discourse focused on the values of democracy and equality which are at the root of the public education tradition. We need to revive our vision of the university as a place for universal learning (Lynch, 2006).

Overall, no matter how we assess the impact of neoliberal policy, no one can deny that it has created both new potentials and limits in education. It has greatly improved the movement of students and resources across boundaries, contributed to the massification of higher education, and has resulted in economic growth over the decades (Rhoades & Torres, 2006; Wang, 2011). It has also created great opportunities in terms of cross-cultural or transnational learning and at the same time, created a new communications revolution, or more broadly, communicative cultures (Scott, 2016). Although neoliberal regimes may reduce their social welfare role, they still promote economic development through supply-side policies. In the words of Tight (2019), although it may be roundly criticized in academic literature, for the foreseeable future, neoliberalism would appear to be the only 'game' in town for running our universities and colleges.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There are no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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