

An Education Policy for Colonising Minds*

Prabhat Patnaik

Imperialist hegemony over the third world is exercised not just through arms and economic might but also through the hegemony of ideas, by making the victims see the world the way imperialism wants them to see it. A pre-requisite for freedom in the third world therefore is to shake off this colonisation of the mind, and to seek truth beyond the distortions of imperialism. The anti-colonial struggle was aware of this; in fact the struggle begins with the dawning of this awareness. And since the imperialist project does not come to an end with formal political decolonisation, the education system in the newly independent ex-colonies must continuously aim to go beyond the falsehoods of imperialism.

This requires that the course contents and syllabi in Indian educational institutions must be different from those in metropolitan institutions. This is obvious in the case of humanities and social sciences where it is impossible to understand the present of the country without reckoning with its colonised past; and metropolitan universities scrupulously avoid making this connection, attributing the current state of underdevelopment of the country to all sorts of extraneous factors like laziness, lack of enterprise, superstition, and, above all, excessive population growth. But even in the case of natural sciences, the syllabi and course contents in third world universities cannot be identical with those in metropolitan universities, not because Einstein's theory or quantum physics have any imperialist ideology in them, but because the range of scientific concerns in the third world is not necessarily the same as in the metropolitan countries. In fact, this was the view of JD Bernal, the British scientist and Marxist intellectual, one of the great figures of the twentieth century.

To believe that the syllabi and course contents in third world universities should be identical with those in metropolitan universities is itself a symptom of being hegemonised by imperialism. Education policy in the dirigiste period in India was aware of this; despite the obvious failings of the education system the education policy of that period could not be faulted for having a wrong vision.

With neo-liberalism however things begin to change, as the Indian big bourgeoisie gets integrated with globalised finance capital, as the Indian upper middle class youth looks for employment in multinational corporations, as the nation's development is made dependent upon exporting goods to foreign markets and attracting foreign finance and foreign direct investment to the country. Significantly, even top functionaries of the government start talking of reinventing the East India Company back to India.

Since the era of neo-liberalism entails the hegemony of globalised finance capital, and since this capital requires a globalised (or at least a homogeneous) technocracy, the emphasis shifts to having a homogeneous education system internationally to train such a technocracy; and obviously such a system necessarily has to be one that emanates from the metropolis.

This means an education system not for decolonising minds but for recolonising minds. To this end, the UPA government earlier had invited several well-known foreign universities to set up branches in India, and even to "adopt" some Indian

universities that could be developed in their own image. Oxford, Harvard and Cambridge were obviously invited under this scheme not to follow in India the syllabi and course contents prepared within India, but to replicate what they follow back home. The idea was to start a process whereby there would be a uniformity of course contents and syllabi between the Indian and metropolitan universities, that is, to roll back the attempt made earlier towards a decolonisation of minds in Indian universities. In fact an Indian Human Resource Development minister had openly stated in parliament that his objective was to provide a Harvard education within India so that Indian students did not have to go abroad for it.

The NDA government has carried forward to a very great extent what the UPA government had started; and the National Education Policy it has enacted gives an official imprimatur to this idea of a uniform education system between India and the metropolis, which necessarily means the adoption of common curricula, course contents and syllabi between Indian and metropolitan universities.

Towards this uniformity it has taken two decisive steps: one is the destruction of those universities in India that were providing a counter to the imperialist discourse, and that had, for this very reason, attracted world-wide attention; the obvious examples here are the Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Hyderabad Central University, Jadavpur University, and others.

The other is the carrying out of negotiations under the pressure of the University Grants Commission between individual Indian universities and foreign universities to make the course contents in various disciplines in the former clones of those in the latter. The only caveat here is that the UGC insists on having some material on subjects like Vedic Mathematics included in the course contents of Indian universities which the foreign universities do not always agree with.

No doubt some accord will be reached on these issues in due course, in which case the Indian universities would be having curricula and course contents that represent an admixture of the demands of neo-liberalism and the demands of the Hindutva elements. It would be a colonisation of minds with a veneer of “how great our country was in ancient times”. Imperialism should not have any problem with that. As long as imperialism, which is a modern phenomenon that has emerged with the development of capitalism, is painted not as an exploitative system but as a benevolent civilising mission for countries like India, as long as the present state of underdevelopment of these countries is not in any way linked to the phenomenon of imperialism, which it would not be if there is uniformity of course contents with metropolitan universities, then what had happened in ancient times is not of much concern to imperialism, at least to the liberal imperialist viewpoint, as distinct from the extreme right which favours a white supremacist discourse.

An alternative tendency with the same consequence, of recolonising minds, is to do away with the social sciences and humanities altogether, or to reduce them to inconsequential subjects, and substitute them with courses that are exclusively “job-oriented” and do not ask questions about society, like management and cost accountancy. In fact both the Hindutva elements and the corporates have a vested interest in this, since both are keen to have students who are exclusively self-centred and do not ask questions about the trajectory of social development. This tendency too is gathering momentum at present.

An education system that recolonises minds is the counterpart of the corporate-Hindutva alliance that has acquired political hegemony in the country. Such a recolonisation is what the corporates want; and the Hindutva elements that were never associated with the anti-colonial struggle, that never understood the meaning of nation-building, that do not understand the role and significance of imperialism, and hence of the need for decolonising minds, are quite content as long as lip service is paid to the greatness of ancient India. An education system that purveys the imperialist ideology with some vedic seasoning is good enough for them. This is exactly the education system that the country is now in the process of building.

The corporate- Hindutva alliance however is a response to the crisis of neo-liberalism, when corporate capital feels the need to ally itself with the Hindutva elements to maintain its hegemony in the face of the crisis. The National Education Policy likewise is not for carrying the nation forward but for managing the crisis by destroying thought, by preventing people from asking questions and seeking the truth. The “job orientation” that this policy prides itself on is only for a handful of persons; in fact the crisis of neo-liberalism means fewer jobs overall. In sync with this, the education system excludes large numbers of persons; their minds are to be filled instead with communal poison within an altered discourse that by-passes issues of material life, and makes them potential low-wage recruits for fascistic thug-squads.

This education policy therefore can only be transitory, until the youth starts asking questions about the unemployment and distress that has become its fate. And as an alternative development trajectory beyond neo-liberal capitalism is explored, the quest for an education system beyond what the NDA government is seeking to introduce will also begin; and decolonisation of the mind will again come on to the agenda, as it had done during the anti-colonial struggle.

* This article was originally published in the [Peoples Democracy](#) on December 31, 2023.