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Teacher Education in Neoliberal India

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Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of neoliberal policies on teacher education in India. There were three important changes that marked the entry of neoliberal policy in teacher education in India. First one is the formation of a powerful national body to 'audit' and regulate teacher education. Second, it promoted the notion of economically self-reliant institutions in the public sector and positive climate for profit seeking private institutions. Third, it demanded national standards that help to commodify teacher education and thereby give opportunity to the educational consumers to assess the "quality" of the commodity. In addition to these specific trends in the Indian context, the paper, by drawing from Neo-Freierians, observes the manifestations of conservative modernisation and neoliberal accountability as two important trends in the teacher education system in India.

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Two closedowns are reported from Kerala recently. One is liquor shops and the other is teacher education institutions run by the University of Kerala. The closing down of liquor shops has become a big controversy and is known to almost all the Keralites, while the closing down of teacher education institutions has got a constricted coverage. The teacher education institutions run by the University of Kerala follows the rules and regulations of the state government institutions, except that they charge fees from the students for meeting the operational cost. The fees collected by these institutions are meager when compared to other private colleges of teacher education. In effect, these institutions were a great help to those meritorious students who could not afford high fees charged by the private colleges of teacher education. As per the latest order of the Southern Regional Council (SRC) of the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), ten such institutions are closed in 2015. Why did the news of closing down the teacher education institutions, by an order of NCTE, not attract public attention? Why is it not discussed by media and culture circles? The answer would be leading us to the growing market fundamentalism, the predominant philosophy of modern India. Education, inter alia, is considered as a consumable commodity with all the features of a monopolistic competition market condition. Media offers space for full-page advertisements of those private educational institutions and deemed universities which have world class facilities. Different institutions providing same degrees but their products are unique. These are straws in the wind of monopolistic competition in the education sector. These advertisements impose an imagery to our parents and potential students on how "temples of knowledge" must be in the "modern age". It also "educates" our policy makers about the "world class quality" and the need for adopting corporate style in promoting high quality education and thereby find its space in the policy documents like national commissions on education and national level curriculum frameworks, etc. The quality drive by the national agencies which regulate and control higher education is in line with the quality notions of private players in the education business in contemporary India.

Market fundamentalism (or as we call it as neo liberal policies) has become an irresistible wave and it percolates into almost all spheres of life, teacher education being just one among them. What are the other forces that determine the dynamics of education in India along with market fundamentalism? This question points to an array of issues to be discussed in a larger perspective. But this paper limits its scope by highlighting neoliberalism as the key dynamic force propelling teacher education in contemporary India.

Neoliberal Trend

Neoliberalism has been a predominant force that propels teacher education system in India. The turn to neoliberalism has been a key economic philosophy in the country as a result of structural changes in the economy brought about by Manmohan Singh, the then finance minister, during the 1990s. He got sufficient time to continue his policies more vigorously during his tenure as the Prime Minister for two consecutive terms. Like other sectors, neoliberalism applied free market principles in teacher education. Neoliberalism is defined by Harvey (2005) as "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 characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (p. 2). Leftist intellectuals like Apple, (2001; 2006) Davidson-Harden, Kuehn, Schugurensky, & Smaller (2009), Hill (2009), Hursh (2007), Kliebard

(2002), Lipman (2011) Robertson (2008) has highlighted the menace of free market in education. Critiques of these intellectuals signal how neo liberalism reduces the student a commodity which can be traded in the global markets. The criticism of the mentioned writers rarely focuses on neoliberal policies in teacher education. While Robertson (2013) has made an attempt to study neoliberal influence on teacher education, it is restricted to the context of within America. Here I argue that neoliberal undercurrents demanded certain institutional and cultural changes in the teacher education all over the world (Connell, 2013). These undercurrents, first of, all demanded formation of a powerful national body to "audit" and regulate teacher education. Second, it promoted the not economically self-reliant institutions in the public sector and a positive climate for seeking private institutions. Third, it demanded national standards that compel teacher education and thereby give opportunity to the educational consumers to assess the quality of the commodity. All the three are discussed in the following section.

NCTE becoming a Statutory Body

The National Council for Teacher Education, NCTE, is an ideal example for "conservative modernisation" (Apple, 200) in India. Conservative modernisation is guided by a vision of the strong state over standards, values, and conduct; and over what knowledge should be passed on to future generations; but liberal in fixing the cost of education, supportive to free market and no concern for welfare measures (Apple, 2000).

It should be noted that the NCTE has got its statutory power only in 1993, i.e., 20 years after its inception why in 1993? Is it a result of a natural call for quality in teacher education? Answers for these questions should be read along with the structural reforms in the Indian economy which happened during the 1990s. Giving statutory powers to NCTE in 1993 can be viewed as part of establishing nationalised standards in teacher education. Though NCTE was established in 1973, the organisation remained without statutory powers. NCTE's attempts to nationalise standards is explicitly manifested through two National Curriculum Frameworks (NCFTE, 1998 and 2009) and its regulation for approving teacher education institutions since it become a statutory organisation. NCFTE, 2009 made a call to standardise the curriculum at the national level. This call has been well received and syllabuses have been revised to match with the norms of NCF 2009. Syllabus revision was undertaken by a large number of universities and authorised bodies in line with NCFTE, 2009. Content considerations have become feeble or ignored and all over the nation, teacher education is unified, leading to a standardisation.

NCTE became liberal in allowing teacher education institutions at all levels, including elementary (D.Ed), Graduate (B.Ed) and Post-graduate (M.Ed), leading to a mushrooming of teacher education institutions all over the country. But the demand for teachers was never the criterion for NCTE to approve teacher education institutions. The incidents leading to the formation of a high-powered committee on teacher education constituted by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India (known as the Verma Commission, 2012) is another example of NCTE's liberal policies leading to free market mechanism. The genesis of the committee is the result of granting recognition to 291 D Ed colleges in Maharashtra by Western Regional Council of NCTE in 2008, in spite of an explicit recommendation to WRC from the state government that state does not need new DEd colleges as already there is a glut of qualified

Privatising Teacher Education

Neoliberal policies will always have a social shield to implement its strategies. Once NCTE was given with statutory powers, coincidentally, there was a torrent in the opening of new private teacher education institutions all over India. The number exceeded several fold of the existing institutions. This move is often justified in the context of lack of trained teachers in BIMARO (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa) states. In addition to BIMARO, many of the northern states face severe dearth for trained teachers. In the context of universalisation of elementary education which needs large number of trained teachers, the dearth of qualified hands become more severe. This has justified opening of new teacher education institutions to start functioning. Thus a large number of private institutions were allowed to start teacher education institutions across India.

As a result of mushrooming of private institutions the percentage of public institutions has become meager. Privatization of teacher education may be at first read as a move for meeting the demand for trained teachers, so that the long pending call for universalisation of primary education can be consummated. But what we saw is the commodification of teacher education by the new generation teacher education institutions. As Panikkar (2011) put it "the ideological structure that the private system of education constructs and disseminates contributes to the continuous exclusion of the marginalised and preserves the power of the privileged". Thus it made deserving potential teachers in contemporary India to believe that free teacher education is never a right. It shows that as it is theorized by Hill (2001) that the "social inclusion and neo-liberalism are contradictory and incompatible" teacher education in India has become another example for this.

The Fordist mass production principle followed by NCTE in the approval of teacher education institutions made structural changes in the student's preferences in selecting an institution to pursue their studies. Two important criteria- 'institutions which are near to home' and 'institutions which offers minimum fees'- has become the key criteria for selecting teacher education institutions for teacher education consumers. Quality of the programme, innovative practices in teacher education, concerns of a teacher in the contemporary class room and the ways in which it can be addressed has become not at all a criterion for the consumers of teacher education to select an institution. Since certificates issued by the universities standardized degree from any institution, convenience and comfort eclipsed all other preferences of consumers.

Thus public funded teacher education was not promoted in India after 1990's, it has resulted in restriction of service in some way (Connell, 2013). According to Connell (2013) "Provided there is a rationing of educational resources it is possible to commodity access to institutions, and to particular services within institutions. Importantly, the rationing itself can be marketed". Teacher education in India has become a rationed commodity, which only few can access as a public commodity and the rest has to fix its trust with teacher education in the open market.

teachers. Defying the recommendation of the state government, WRC approved all the 291 institutions, which was challenged in the High Court and finally leading to the Supreme Court and thereby, an order to form a committee to look into the quality and regulatory perspectives in teacher education in the country.

As NCTE on the one hand stringently insists upon criteria for approval, suggests framework for teacher education and directs values and quality standards for teacher education. On the other, NCTE becomes liberal to profit makers in teacher education and welcomes free market policy to implement its policies. Thus NCTE dovetails itself into conservative modernisation, leading to open market but with rigid restrictions on the body of knowledge, values and standards in teacher education.

National Standards

National standards have become the most important aspect of structural reforms which have its roots in Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG). NCTE has undertaken the neoliberal call for national standards in teacher education in India. It implemented regulations for the approval of institutions at the national level with no contextual adaptability. The shift to nationalised standards can be seen as part of what Lipman (2011) has called "neoliberal accountability" in which institutions are forced to make their teacher education practices, in abeyance with the national standards and have thus lost much of their agency in creating meaningful and impactful lessons that are relevant to the lives of their students in favour of a mechanistic system of accountability (Casey, 2013) for all institutions.

Neoliberal influence in teacher education explicitly manifested through the call for productivity and measurable performance. It vehemently criticises the present practices and evaluation system in line with the neoliberal demands. Lipman (2011) writes of this point "It is a shift from teacher professionalism and relatively complex, socially situated notions of learning and teaching to post welfarist [neoliberal] emphasis on instrumental efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and measurable performance" (p. 127). NCFTE (2009) advocates that "the evaluation of the student teacher should be spread over the entire duration of the teacher education programme". It also advises that "in order to evaluate the parameters (for better quality in teacher education), suitable instruments that address both the quantitative and qualitative nature of the learnings are to be employed. These include: observational schedules and records, checklists, portfolio assessment, case study, project reports, participation in workshops, seminars, discussions, open-ended questionnaire and interviews, oral and written tests, cumulative records, profiles as well as formats for self appraisal" (NCFTE 2009, P. 62). In effect, a teacher's performance has to be quantified and strictly put into numbers which will help in comparison across national level and of course at the international level too. While directions for quantification of teacher performance through tests across the nation is handed down from the statutory national agency, we are experiencing this push to standardising education as part of the larger neoliberal project to force education to justify its efficacy based on market-based conceptions of effectiveness (Casey, 2013)

Conclusion

The recent trend of opening a large number of teacher educational institutions, that too in the private sector, to address the issue of teacher shortage is not a welfare oriented one, it's an economic one. This never address the issue of quality teacher education and thereby better quality teachers at school level. Instead, just perform according to the neoliberal trend of free trade where the teacher education is commodified and available in the open market for sale. The way future teachers are trained is intimidating. Student teachers performance is converted in to 'achievement scores' in a mechanical way and this quantified score is used as an index of teacher quality. As Casey (2013) put it, "teacher education is culpable in the maintenance of neoliberal ideology in education are the ways in which it fetishizes productivity and student achievement". The achievement fetishism, thus, gradually filter down to school level ignoring manifold abilities of students and thereby putting the ability of a student on the base of a set of examinations. This syetem is exactly the same what Friere (2000) calls as "banking system of education", where knowledge is deposited in the students and is withdrawn at the time examination leading to a zero balance in the account. Further through imposing national level curriculum frame works and strictly scripted curriculum, syllabuses and teachers hand book, it provides manuals for the teachers to work like a technician. Creativity of labour is redundant in neoliberal system. Similarly, creativity of teacher is under serious attack in neo liberal teacher education and teachers are supposed to work like technicians for implementing the 'official curriculum'. Compliance and zero boredom for repetition substituted creativity in teacher education in India. This dehumanizes the process of teaching. Corporatization is exponentially increasing its influence in teacher education in modern India. As school administration, in India, is working in line with corporate style, so doe's teacher education. It is difficult to diverse teacher education from current economic realities but not impossible. We need a welfarist teacher education policy that respects teacher autonomy and creativity and a vision of teacher education as an investment for the nation rather than consumption.

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