

EDUCATIONAL CRISIS, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN INDIA: SOME VISIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

This paper is a search for the crisis of meaning attached to Higher education especially University education in India. It tries to understand the nuances of the complex domain called higher education, its larger aspirations and dialectical relationship with society. When, in a time each and every inch space of life and the larger world is colonized by neoliberalism, its instrumental rationality and culture of global capitalism and money making, this paper looks at how for example it affected the larger aspirations higher education? How, its instrumental rationality, its epistemic forms and one-dimensional individuation shapes our consciousness, imagination and praxis. How for example, this predominance of one-dimensional positivist techno-scientific culture of neoliberalism, colonizes our life world and deprives human being from the deeper questions relating to nature, culture, society, human consciousness and diverse forms of life and reduces human being into a mere consumer and reduces a genuine human right to a privilege.? In this context I invoke the transformative possibilities embedded in critical pedagogic tradition. I also invoked how some of prevalent alternative institutions of higher

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learning, with its creative possibilities can provide a possibility of an act of resistance, an alternative. In this context I focused on JNU, as an alternative university, its vision and perspectives; its critical and humanist ideals, reach academic culture and deep sensitivity for society, culture and humanity.

Introduction:

Today, the human civilization stands in a critical stage of its evolution, it is in a perpetual stage of transition, at an intense moment of loss and crisis. The, crisis I believe emanates from the kind of world we are living in, the neoliberal global world, its inherent epistemic interests; its global capitalism, one-dimensional instrumental rationality, its scientism, reductionist's humanism, moral relativism and its culture of democratic unfreedom. This powerful presence of the culture of neo-liberalism, in our time has become so hegemonic that it has become impossible not to be completely seduced by it. As a matter of fact it has gradually colonized our life world. From highly personal life situations to societal engagement, to politics, to education, to culture, to economy to our aesthetic dimension and even to the natural world, the market is everywhere, heavily affecting the larger aspirations of our civilization. Today, as the epistemological optimism of higher education; creating a better world, better civilization and better human being is drastically affected by the instrumental culture of neoliberalism, the importance and necessity of a critical look into our education has multiplied than two\three decades ago. In a globalised society like India, the critical study of education even becomes more relevant given the overwhelming presence of neoliberal agenda.

Many prevalent literatures in our time, would see higher education is at 'cross-roads' and a state of deep crisis or in a state of 'permanent crisis' (Altbach: 1972; Beteille: 2010). The educational aspiration of Indian society is constant paradox. There are selected pockets of high profile school, college and universities with all desirable facilities that one needs for academic excellence, where as there are also vast range of educational higher institutions left neglected, without minimum educational infrastructure. At the same time despite of this crisis of equitable, egalitarian distribution of educational opportunities; the huge inequalities, the educational system

also suffering from another intense crisis, which Pathak(2009) in our time raises our attention; which we would term as “a short of diploma disease”, proliferation of over-crowded collages/universities whose only function it seems, he argues is only to conduct examinations throughout the year, distribute degrees/diplomas and create an illusion of learning. Again he would warn, how for example the poor infrastructure, mass copying, irrelevant curriculum, lumpenization, campus violence and widespread de-motivation among teachers and students and absence of meaningful agenda of research and teaching has done a big damage the larger ideals and aspirations of the higher education. Therefore any meaningful discussion on Education or for that matter educational crisis would remain incomplete without focusing light on the educational crisis emanating from our engagement with higher education.

This factual reality on the condition of higher education enables us to know, about the intense difficulties our institutions of higher learning facing today, which can be termed as “Educational Crisis”; a critical condition in the domain of higher education that brutally affects its larger societal and humanistic ideals, the transformative possibilities. However the question arises, where does this crisis lies? How one would able to make sense the nuances of these educational crises?

It is therefore important to know and understand the nature of crisis, the causes of these educational crises. Because, it is against the background this the knowledge on educational crisis, that our alternative agenda of higher education can be evolved.

Educational Crisis: Situating the Context

The crisis in higher education in India in our time is essentially the crisis of meaning attached to education; the way we understand higher education today, I think can be reflected in three ways, which I believe are important for a deeper understanding of the role of education. They are: 1st, the crisis in meaning attached to education: its humanistic ideals and larger aspirations; 2nd, the crisis can be located in the context of the change in the relationship between higher education and society. And thirdly, the crisis can be understood in the context of the emergence of new forms of society, their epistemic interest and knowledge forms.

When any crisis happens in the meaning of education, that is essentially related with the following three meanings attached to higher education. First, it is a kind of transmission of entire socio-politico-economic-cultural and historical heritage, knowledge forms of society from one generation to another through formal educational institutions like college to universities and specialized institutions like polytechniques. Second, higher education ought to train and prepares the individual for certain kind of societal and institutional role for the material/cultural and aesthetic development of the world. It too also inculcates some kind of civility and a sense of citizenship, a kind of cosmopolitan imagination, the spirit of ‘I-Thou’ and ‘self –universe’, through which one begins to relate with the larger world,. (Buber:1937; Bhasker:2002). Thirdly, higher education itself the search for higher ideals and objectives; the deeper questions relating to nature, culture, society, human consciousness, the ultimate truth and reason, which inculcates ‘self-awareness, self-realization and self-criticality’, and ‘self-reflexivity’ (Barnett: 119; Gouldner: 1970). In our time the crisis in meaning of higher education is more to do with its obsession with one-dimensional –instrumental forms and the way it is increasingly becoming giving service to accelerate market rationality of the neoliberal state.

This is one extreme form of crisis of meaning which neo-liberalism attaches to higher education, there is also another equally important crisis of meaning that has taken place in Indian universities that is to do with the way institutions of higher learning seen as only degree granting institutions, where virtually nothing takes place. Neither the student and nor the teachers are sensitive, to the larger ideals of higher education, where teaching and research has no connection to the deeper questions of life, society, polity and culture. These happens in most of the state universities in India, where universities metamorphose into symbolic exam, mass copy, note detecting and distributing degree certificate, which matches to none of the ideals of the larger ideals of universities. It is in these places higher education suffers from the crisis of no purpose of its own.

The second way of looking into the crisis Higher education, which I wish to focus light on; is to do with, the way relationship between higher education and society underwent drastic change. Yes, higher education brings lot positive of transformations in the societal aspirations of larger

society, in human beings and their socio-political-cultural and material aspirations. But then I wish to argue, as we would witness, as these larger aspirations also keep in changing, 'so does the meaning of education' (Pathak:2013:67). For example in recent time, we would witness a fundamental shift in the relationship of higher education to the larger society. We are witnessing, the state is retreating its responsibilities from education, encouraging mushrooming growth of private universities, Higher education is now securing more funding from industry, and other non-government organizations and outsourcing its educational orientation to serve their interest. Very recently in India, when a premier institute of higher learning like Delhi University embraced the market, industry model of Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) embedded in vision of the National Knowledge Commission report 2009, to provide employment friendly education, it has now become clear, what are the political agenda of Indian higher education and what kind of educational Ideal it strives for?

Frankfurt school critical sociologist like, Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas have taught us, given the strength to understand these kind of complex relationships of society and its other public institutions, its politics, its hidden agenda with their understanding of the entire dialectics of the project of modernity; its power politics, one-dimensional vision, instrumental reason and reductionist to knowledge forms.

In modern society, the higher education being a subservient institution has always been in the service to its larger aspirations. As a matter of fact, we it could be argued that it has been remain neutral to its hegemonic 'instrumental interests'; its culture of scienticism and its interest in power, control and purposive action. Therefore, it's not about only modern societies, where education plays this kind of role, it is in all forms of society, where education as a social institution, as a public institution of the concern nation-state have been in tune with its dominant interest. The predominance of these one-dimensional aspirations in these societies, no wonder in their educational and knowledge orientation marginalizes other important forms of knowledge, which is 'critical, hermeneutic, communicative, and emancipatory', which also helps in knowing and understanding the world, by doing this very act it too helps to emancipate the oppressive structures of life(Habermas: 2004). As a matter of fact, modern higher educational institutions in their knowledge service, it should not forgotten, marginalizes hermeneutic knowledge forms and

further accelerate and reproduction of this dominant epistemic interest of the modern society, by neutralizing techno-scientific rationality as its 'cultural capital. (Habermas: 2004; Bourdieu: 1997). Not surprisingly, it has created a huge wall in the orientation to knowledge, "knowledge as science and knowledge as culture" (Delanty: 2001: 01). This hegemonic prevalence one form of interest, ultimately leads to what Marcuse calls the coming of 'One dimensional society'; a social order that lacks negativity, critique and transformative practice and suppresses 'communicative forms of rationality' and 'hermeneutics and emancipatory' quest (Kellner et al.:2009:8; Habermas: 2004). As a matter of fact the epistemic interest of the society becomes exceedingly One-dimensional and it produces a kind of culture and education that flourish this One-dimensionality of thinking, and suppress dialectic, critical and multidimensional knowledge forms. Higher educational institutions in their engagement with knowledge and education favors a particular forms of knowledge, which are quite 'mathematical, abstracted, techno-scientific' that favors economic and administrative needs of the advance industrial society.(Kellner:2009; Barnett: 1993). Marcuse (1964) argues in this one-dimensional society; it is quite possible that education and culture becomes an 'ambiguous institution'. At one level argues Kellner, the economy is dominated by 'unrestricted access' and 'development of knowledge' which essentially requires a more strong educational system. Here education promises equality and freedom of information access for all social classes. At another level, it's aspiration for power and control and reason limits the democratic possibilities of general education.(Kellner:11) This tension is resolved, argues Kellner, in the expansion of professional, techno-scientific education with 'market and military logic'. It is through education believes Marcuse, that this one-dimensional knowledge form and reason are instilled into those who come for education and colonize 'the conscious, the unconscious, and the body' through an efficient administration (Ibid). Not surprisingly as our education is gradually becoming subservient to the instrumental interest of the society, the nation-state, to its economy, which requires 'an educated class of doctors, lawyers, scientists, technicians', bureaucrats, efficient managers— critical higher education loses its aura and been repressed. This one-dimensional orientation of "useful" and techno-scientific knowledge in educational institutions argues Marcuse, brings 'militaristic and corporate value framework as opposed to a more humanistic and ecologically healthy one (Ibid). This Marcusean anxiety, no wonder in our time would appear as neo-liberalization; "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by

liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey: 2005:2) where ‘repression of hermeneutic forms of education is more acute’ (Giroux: 2007). These ideologies and epistemic interests, it shall not be forgotten, have over the years affected severely to the visions of universities, and made the higher educational institutions highly ideological.

This shift is visible, in the new forms of the society like ours; university’s growing acceptance to neoliberal ideology in our time resulted in huge crisis in larger educational visions. As the higher education becomes exceedingly private, a commodity, a privilege under the influence of neoliberal capitalism, the larger vision of higher education in most danger more than ever. As the logic of market, argues Harvey (2002) enters deeply into the being of all human race and their ‘culture’ and ‘institutions’ of our time[†] and colonializes the life world. It is no surprise, in neoliberal time argues Lemke (2001), and individuals are called Homo Oeconomicus; a rational economic actor, mere consumers (Giroux 2005). As the neoliberal regime increasingly hegemonizes individuals’ common sense, and colonializes the life world of twenty first century, the global capitalism begins to ‘redefine the purpose and role of social, cultural, and political institutions’ (Apple, 2001; Aronowitz, 2000; Giroux, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

In country like India, the influence market is more intense in higher education system leading to massive crisis in the meaning of education, given the context of overwhelming presence of neoliberal globalization model of national development. . As Indian increasingly becoming the hub of knowledge economy, the crisis becomes more intense and visible. From its apex Ministry of Education, which ultimately has to renamed it ‘Human Resource Department’ to classroom of the university, the air of crisis is all around. The crisis I believe more to do with the meanings attached to higher education. Which we have already mentioned how for example the policy and commission documents like NPE 1986, Ambani-Birla committee (2000) on entry of private universities and recent National Knowledge Commission 2009 would reduce education into certain forms of techno-scientific-managerial information, a mere skilled to be imparted, to create a skillful ‘human resource’ who are required for knowledge service, industry and market.

[†] <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/neoliberalism-and-higher-education/>
[retrived:10/02/2014](http://www.ijmra.us)

Therefore they would plead for a vision of institutions that would ultimately distribute different techno-scientific and managerial marketable education.

Today, when one look at the mushrooming growth private universities, their educational vision and educational ideal, in their motto and course structure, one realizes now these days that that, it is not the UGC, not the Ministry of Human resource Department , or the Radhakrishnan Report on Universities, it is essentially the dream of this Ambani-Birla report we are realizing today. When, one reads the kind of advertize these private universities publish today, the kind of knowledge they sell today, one realizes it is the dream of neoliberalism that has its overwhelming presence. An advertisement, by MSN University, in times of India, would say, “Life is a race, we will prepare you”[‡]. A university like Amity, would advertise, ‘industry oriented teaching[§]’. Most of the Private universities, in their knowledge orientation, plead for application based, service sector oriented courses, which basically falls in the category of techno-managerial science, Nano-sciences, different forms of engineering, business studies, information-technology and largely neglecting the foundational and theoretical science, humanities and liberal arts and cultural sciences. These ethos, one dimensional knowledge forms, in our times, it shall not be forgotten has further legitimized by the recent educational policy, National Knowledge Commission report, 2009 which values education and knowledge with its usability and applications in sectors like health, agriculture and industry and delivery of public service’ by increasing human capabilities’ and to create a ‘knowledge society.’

This move, in fact has done a great damage to our education and its larger aspiration to the larger societal, cultural, political, moral and aesthetic domain of our civilization. As our higher educational institutions; our colleges, universities, are becoming more into the culture positivist rationality, managerial and engineering orientation of knowledge. Look at a university like JNU, despite of its deep groundedness in the alternative tradition of learning and knowledge production, a soft form of neo-liberal politics of knowledge and education entering into its being. Despite of its affirmation for foundational multi-disciplinary teaching and reach, it is also accepting market oriented professional, specialized studies. The problem is not specific to JNU,

[‡] Life is Race, We will Prepare You. An advertisement by MVN University. The Times of India, may 27, 2013

[§] See Amity University; http://www.amity.edu/Admission/industry_oriented_teaching.asp

here it is just beginning however, and it's a bigger problem that all universities in India are facing.

Critical Pedagogy and Higher Education: towards imagining an alternative

The question, hunts I believes it hunts to everyone who cares and believes in the possibility of higher education, whether or not in such 'an uncertain' 'one-dimensional' time one can find grounds to resist a project which otherwise colonized our very existence. Nevertheless, I believe it possible by arousing our own agency, what Tagore calls "the surplus of man"; the power, which understands, cares, which make one aware, which relates and realizes, which loves, to which Hilary Rose would calls 'caring rationality', which Habermas would call 'communicative rationality' and which Roy Bhaskar(2002) would call 'the groundedness. This power, unlike the power to control, makes more human, self-reflexive, self-critical, to challenge and oppose people, structures and systems that oppresses and mechanizes and dehumanizes, more over it makes us to rethink to look at the relationship between our own agency and structure in domain of philosophy of education it is called "Critical Pedagogy."

Though the critical pedagogy as philosophy of praxis systematically began with Paulo Freire, however its root goes to Italian humanist Marxists Antonio Gramsci's critique of education as 'hegemony' and his plead for an alternative higher education that could produce, 'organic Intellectual's; 'the people' who not only studies but also 'works on behalf of people' in the domain of both education and larger socio-politico-cultural and environmental field (Ibid:65) And the Frankfurt school critical theorist specially Herbert Marcuse, his dissenting voice and powerful activism against the of instrumental, one-dimensional society and search for dialectical, multidimensional man enriched the tradition of critical pedagogy. Marcuse as a versatile intellectual given new dimension to the tradition and possibility of as public, organic and radical intellectualism. His strong and powerful resistance and plead for radical social change through 'reschooling' which, he believed would eventually bring radical change in the mental structure of individuals, in their drives, needs and values and would able to create a multidimensional human being given new direction for possibility of an alternative agenda of society, education, culture and politics. (Marcuse: 1975 in Kellner et al.:2009: 40). His alternative pedagogy to resist the inherent crisis in our higher education is a kind of education

that can be infused with existential component; the fact and value of life with critical sensibility, the civil disobedience.

This critical Pedagogic tradition, however fully emerged as one of the philosophy of learning and doing with Paulo Freire, the Brazilian school teacher. His reflection on 'Banking concept of education' which I believe characterize our present higher education is a kind of education believes education as 'an act of depositing in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor'. The teacher makes 'deposits and the student patiently receive, memorize and repeat'.(Freire, 1970:45,46). As a matter of fact the processes of banking concept of education, Freire would argue tend to reproduce a culture of silence, monologue and it prevents dialogic communication, imposes oppressive ideology of society. To overcome this oppression or the politics of conscientization, Friere plead for a libertarian Pedagogy, that not only liberated the oppressed from oppression but also liberate the oppressor from the logic of oppression. He pleads for a critical-dialogic education, instead of the monologue and detection which would enable the learner to become aware of the politics of education and the prevalent forms of knowledge; and the hidden forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness.

Henry Giroux, yet one of extraordinary critical pedagogue of our time, after Freire, would undertake the unfinished project of Freire and gave a proper shape it and popularized it. He re-established it as a domain of 'study and praxis', which helped the radical educational scholarship to go beyond the reductionists' determinism of positivistic model of knowledge and practice in higher education (Kincheloe: 2004:77). The essence of his concept of critical pedagogy for higher education arises in the optimism, to re-establishing the organic link between 'education and democracy, knowledge and public service and learning and democratic social change' (Giroux: 2009). He in his critical pedagogy pleads for a higher education or for that matter university as a 'democratic public sphere and public good' (Ibid). He sees immense possibility in the role of university in creating "Public intellectuals," who are capable of defending the role of higher education as a democratic public sphere both within and outside the university, by 'connecting academic work to public life, a sense of individual and social agency that enables

them to be both engaged citizens and active participants in the struggle for global democracy' (Ibid). Giroux's critical pedagogy, one would say is both a critique and possibility.

It is also in our time, Peter McLaren, one of the finest critical pedagogues of our time from Canada gave a new meaning and momentum to the struggle for an alternative higher education. His conceptions of critical pedagogy; 'the philosophy of praxis' made more powerful to a critical higher education (Kincheloe: 2004:86). He pleads the intellectuals to look beyond class room, to the larger world of politics, of culture, and society. His idea of 'a critical revolutionary pedagogy' in our time enriched the transformative potential of critical pedagogy to reclaim the lost public life under the assault of corporatization and privatization culture of neoliberalism.

These entire utopian alternatives are quite enchanting, reaffirms one's faith in the domain of possibilities. However without its applicability and concrete practice it has also no meaning at all. No surprise, everyone asks this question. Is there any way it can be practiced, so that it would give a radical shift to the way education is been seen and practice by this neoliberal regime. My response is yes, it is possible. In this regard I would look at Jawaharlal Nehru University, an alternative university, that have emerged in India in the 1960s located in New Delhi

Towards Conclusion:

JNU: an Existing Higher Educational Alternative in South-Asia to Neoliberal agenda of Education

Jawaharlal Nehru University, one of the well known academic hubs and a macrocosm of the Indian nation, established in 1969. It was emerged, as an alternative university out of optimism of new Knowledge creation and 'decolonization of higher education in the South Asian region.' (Kumar in Loachan: 1996:204). It was founded on a unique philosophy of education which more of a blend of Liberal and neo-humanist and critical theory tradition of higher education of the modern period; where teaching and research, academics and activism has been in practice simultaneously. Presently the university has over 7300 students, from over the country and as many part of the world. **, which has made Jnu truly the world's 'most authentic melting pot' and

** See JNU Website <http://www.jnu.ac.in/AboutJNU/Introduction.asp>

a true cosmopolitan centers of learning (Gupta in Loachan: 1998: pp-102). Its philosophy of research and teaching deeply rooted in the tradition of inter-disciplinary research makes distinct among all other Indian Universities. It is quite visible, when one looks at the academic philosophy and vision on which it is based; which is of course, many of the academic philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru; that visualizes a university which “stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of Ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of human race towards even higher objectives. If the Universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well with the Nation and the People”.

As a matter of fact since last forty years, the University has been in service to mankind to promote the principles for which Radhakrishnan commission and Kothari commission strongly plead for; that includes national integration, social justice, and secularism, democratic way of life, international understanding and scientific approach to the problems of society.

Despite of its journey of rise and fall, over last four decades its influence on larger political economy, of state, of global capitalism it has to a large extent, is successful, it has maintained its autonomy of what Giroux calls, a critical public space, of its unique dialogic pedagogy, creative research, culture of mutual and democratic learning, healthy culture of resistance, of criticality, of dissent, alternative politics, an alternative academic culture in the true sense of the term. Over the years along with supplying sufficient bureaucrats, technocrats, efficient managers, leaders in different walks of life of politics, of culture of economy, it is also able to create creative, imaginative and sensitive and self reflexive human beings who represents what we call Intellectuals; both organic and public. By doing so JNU has retained its uniqueness, in making the cognitive structure of Indian society, more reflexive and humane. Both teachers and students are active participants in every act of resistance or of need to change. It is no surprise therefore to see, both students and teachers protest in the streets of Delhi or in many places of India, against Environmental degradation, Nuclear plants, commercialization education and knowledge, violation of human rights, against patriarchy, Brahmanism, religious fundamentalism, imperialism, against global capitalism, against corruption and any oppressive forces that assaults democratic rights of humanism. It still continues to provide space for an alternative student

politics mixed with academic culture and activism. The philosophy of praxis, governs most of student engagement in the university.

The gentle blend of academics and activism (philosophy of praxis); not only to know and understand the world but also to change it through practice; going to field, meeting with people and help them, connect with them. Therefore, it's no surprise agenda of change along with philosophy has always been 'room at JNU for the passionate, tormented and upright souls who would wish to change the world', that made JNU academics relational not only simply armchair (AAJ: 2008:01).

As a matter of fact this belief of philosophy and praxis, made the JNUits go beyond their university engagement, they are very often found in street raising their voice on international and national issues with political actors of India. In a complex world, with its new and

bewildering set of fresh challenges, the JNU remains a special space devoted to advancing and examining critical theories and fostering contemporary understanding, with its open academic culture, democratic campus life, free post -dinner debates and ideal student politics.(Ibid)

It is possible because, of the presence of an alternative academic space, created in the joint venture of both teachers and students. The pedagogic practice of the university provides free the 'democratization' of learning space for a creative engagement even otherwise in a difficult one-dimensional and imperial time (Thaper: 1996),. The philosophy of critical, inter-disciplinary approach of teaching, learning and research, the overwhelming presence of 'fusion of different paradigms' and search of foundational knowledge is the main driving force behind JNU's alternative engagement with education (Singh:1996: 65). The culture of JNU is unique and gives a powerful alternative to neoliberal education, only because of its surplus of its gentle anarchic culture of education, which in a way a blend of what; all critical pedagogues have to say. It constantly challenging the politics of scientific and instrumental knowledge orientation of the state, it has beautifully flourished the possibilities lies in the social cultural sciences and its epistemological optimism of creating a better human civilization and an integrated natural universe. So here, there is a presence of organic intellectuals, public intellectuals, creative gentle

anarchists, deeply rooted scholars, creative and critical learners, who are sensible and responsible, in maintain the critical public sphere it provides. The co-existence and co-presence, of diverse approach, ideologies: modern, secular and democratic and multiple traditions of learning reaffirm one's faith in critical pedagogy, and its culture of self criticality and human agency to create an alternative space of higher learning.

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