

Teaching and the Neo-Liberal State

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Under the neo-liberal State, the idea that educational institutions can be run along market principles has gained both currency and a sense of normalcy. It is the teacher on whom the largest burden of the outcome-oriented institutional culture has fallen. Teachers are required to spend a substantial part of their time formally planning, describing, justifying and assessing their own activities.

The term “neo-liberal” is like a sponge which absorbs our anger, disbelief, and confusion. Let us briefly look at all three of these emotions, starting with anger. Neo-liberalism arouses anger when it reminds us of the losses we have suffered since the 1980s. These losses have to do with autonomy and dignity which teaching, as a profession, enjoyed, and with the extent to which research assumed the freedom to explore issues one thought were real as opposed to the ones believed to have relevance. Our sense of loss includes the gradual erosion of support services which were integral to academic life and the institutional ethos. Why neo-liberalism makes us angry is because we associate it with the breakdown of a pattern of professional life to which we had grown accustomed. Neo-liberalism arouses disbelief when we recall what all we have ended up agreeing to do in the name of efficiency, accountability and quality. Among university teachers of an older generation, no one would have heard of furnishing to administrators the details of one’s activities or an advance description of how one’s classes would be conducted.

The idea that teaching and research can be judged in terms of the kind of quality protocols which are associated with industry and business sound embarrassing if we were not so used to it as we now are. In teaching, student-inspired diversion and depth were indicators of distinction; the new regime of the laid-out powerpoint presentation forbids unplanned interaction. The third emotion neo-liberalism arouses, namely, confusion, is about figuring out what has happened and why.

It seems no theory can capture or satisfactorily explain the changes that have occurred in life at universities and schools. With predictability of outcomes and their measurability pervading the new regime

of teaching, we seem to have re-embraced behaviourism, performing a long backward jump over the cognitive revolution in psychology and its pedagogic implications, some of which appeared to have been permanently institutionalised in several parts of the so-called developed world by the 1960s. In the so-called developing world, behaviouristic practices had not received much academic challenge anyway, and now they have the full backing of school managements. In the wealthy countries of the west, the return of behaviourism is marked by a tacit consensus in which the pedagogic expert performs the responsibility to supply the enabling rhetoric of school effectiveness, pupil consultation and so on, to camouflage the market-driven transformation of the curriculum.

History of Ideas

Ever since the term “neo-liberal” came into vogue, I have tried hard to explain to my students what it might mean and how to use it when they need to. In most cases I have not been successful. No matter how hard one tries as a teacher to explain it, students born and raised in the neo-liberal era do not hesitate to use it as a footloose linguistic device which can be invoked whenever one wishes to say something forceful and critical without being analytical. It is a rare student who shows the patience to study progressive pedagogic theory in the historical context of western liberal-democratic thought and its offshoots which surfaced in India during the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. The time it takes to explore the genealogy of ideas and situate a term in a historical context is simply not available to most teachers and students. Worse still, this kind of search for the history of ideas is not regarded as being relevant for the study of education. We are not expected to undertake pedagogic journeys involving an engagement with theory and its evolution. In departments of education and teacher training, the curricular space to locate pedagogic modernism in a historical and philosophical context has greatly shrunk. Did we inadvertently surrender this space, one wonders, agreeing

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to do so as good liberals, for is not it part of being liberal to be accommodative?

Liberal thought made a breakthrough in the 19th century when it extended the discourse of utilitarianism in education and endowed an intrinsic legitimacy to the pursuit and practice of education. Utilitarian principles were devoid, even contemptuous, of democratic values, and therefore offered little role for the State except as custodian of propertied interests. These principles supplied moral legitimacy to colonial rule in collaboration with venal local elites (Kumar 1991-2005). The mutation through which utilitarian thought went during the 19th century brought forth the recognition of a new role for the State in the need to protect children from poverty and to educate them. This role drew its rationale from the idea that education imparts to the individual not just the capacity to derive greater pleasure from utilities, but also the capacity to be creative and reflective *for the sake of being so* (Macpherson 1974). The neo-liberal State uses the discourse of quality and efficiency to diffuse this focus of liberal democratic thought.

The neo-liberal programme of “extending the scope of market institutions to the limits of political possibility” (Gray 2009: 165) naturally focuses on consumption; it, therefore, requires that education should be treated as a consumable commodity and experience. It also ensures that other resources, which made education capable of enhancing the individual’s agency, also turn into consumables. Health and culture fall in this category. They offer us a case for recognising the destructive impact that the application of business models have had on the resources and conditions that enable teachers to realise their professional hopes while working with children. These two spheres intercept the teacher’s work with the young. Commercialised health services and the commoditisation of culture through the media, along with other developments, created altogether new conditions in the home space. As Helperin and Ratteree (2003: 135) point out, “classroom teachers must cope more and more with terrible social problems...which are qualitatively different from the educational

challenges that had attracted them to teaching in the first place”.

Teaching under the Neo-Liberal Regime

The idea that educational institutions can be run along market principles has gained both currency and a sense of normalcy. Privatisation of educational services has expanded, along with the acceptance of profit-making as a legitimate aim of such enterprise. Apart from profitability, efficiency, accountability and quality have acquired wide currency in the world of not just policymakers and institutional leaders (as administrators are now called), but also among teacher educators and scholars of education. It does not take much time or imagination to realise that the new parlance of quality with cost-effectiveness is targeted at teachers. The corporatisation of institutional governance means that teachers are treated as service providers who must routinely use the new information technology in order to meet stipulated quality standards, and whose own role and contribution through physical presence can be reduced by orchestrated manoeuvres of cost-cutting. It is the teacher on whom the largest burden of the outcome-oriented institutional culture has fallen. The professional worth of a teacher is now routinely discussed in terms of the predictability and measurability of the outcomes of his or her effort. A new regime has been imposed on the daily lives of teachers in many countries. Teachers are required to spend a substantial part of their time formally planning, describing, justifying and assessing their own activities. Documentation containing the record of these activities is used by management to assess quality and efficiency.

One consequence of this regime is a considerable reduction in the time that teachers can now spend with children. In countries like India, where a whole socio-economic stratum previously kept out of the education system is now able to send children to school, the bureaucratisation of teachers’ work and routine imposes on them a severe constraint of time spent directly with children. The children who constitute the first-generation of school-goers in their families need more, not less time, with the teacher. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the teachers’ own social background is going through diversification. The new teacher needs both time-sustained training, and institutional space to negotiate and adjust her own gender, class and caste identity to perform her professional role in the classroom which often contrasts with her role in the family. The new management regime of schools allows little scope for the teacher to negotiate her multiple roles and identities. Indeed, school managers and bureaucrats have no concern for the teacher as a human being; they perceive her as a service provider, and only her productivity interests them. Neither the resource-starved government schools nor the private schools of various kinds have any empathy for the teacher.

Outsourcing of Programmes

In many parts of south Asia, quality improvement programmes have been outsourced to multinational non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or their local chapters who monitor teachers’ work on behalf of their donors, and they, in turn, demand laboriously articulated details of the teacher’s efforts and the outcomes of these efforts. NGOs are a major fixture of

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neo-liberal governance in education across the developing world. The new work culture that the NGOs partnering with state agencies promote involves frequent in-service training at the hands of para-academics serving as resource persons. They typically lack classroom experience as well as theoretical knowledge of education but enjoy a higher status compared to the teacher. Cynicism and frustration characterise the teachers' response to the training programmes that they are forced to attend.

This heuristic sketch of the school environment can be completed by referring to the trivialisation of the teacher's work and identity that has resulted from the recruitment and training policies promoted under neo-liberal policy regimes in both developed and developing countries. Ideas like "good enough teaching" and "anyone can teach" have undermined the sanctity of pre-service training and the necessity to reform it. Hiring of untrained teachers, substitution of academic training courses with short-term programmes devoid of theoretical content, and use of distance education as sole means of training are among the remedies being promoted as means to cope with the shortage of teachers. The teacher is now regarded as a resource to be continuously developed with further training, not someone who has her own agency and capacity to learn from experience. The transformation in the teacher's role, her professional status and autonomy can be described as major successes of the neo-liberal outlook. It can also be described as a significant reversal of the liberal-democratic struggle to establish teaching as a modern profession which endows upon its practitioners not just dignity and autonomy, but also the confidence to act as a community of practitioners. These are the terms which can help us measure the losses that teaching has suffered and the changes that have appeared in its identity as a profession over the last quarter century or so under neo-liberal state policies and regimes. As a relational activity, teaching means imparting agency to the child and inviting substantial indeterminacy to the outcomes. As Stenhouse (1980) had pointed out, the most valued outcomes of education are the ones which cannot be predicted. Such an approach,

which resonates with humanist aims of education and the relational character of teaching, has no place in today's neo-liberal ethos which compels teachers to work with a scripted curriculum for pre-designed outcomes. It aims at intensifying competition among institutions and systems in the name of maximising efficiency.

The Larger Context

Neo-liberalism represents in the sphere of political thought what fundamentalism represents in the sphere of religion, namely, a jump over history which enables a return to the so-called original beliefs and practices. Neo-liberalism is not just about applying market principles in education; it is also about treating ideas – especially political ideas – as being of no relevance to the study and practice of education. If we want to make sense of neo-liberalism as today's dominant ideology, we have no choice but to first appreciate the historical background of liberalism, its promise as an ideology and its self-oblivion. The larger historical context of liberalism includes not just the struggle that today's western democracies went through to establish individual dignity and equality within their own geographical boundaries, but also the enterprise of empire-building through the control of colonies where these values did not apply. It is the struggle against colonial rule which created an incipient space for these values in the colonies. Before this liberal space could consolidate, neo-liberal policies have started to nibble it away. The link between the advent of liberalism in England and the extractive role of colonial rule is not a favourite beat of liberal theorists and historians. But it is an important link for us to recognise in our search for clues to understand contemporary advocacy of neo-liberal policies. The pervasive influence that the neo-liberal perspective now enjoys across the diversity of national systems has much to do with new forms of empire-building, the management of dissent in western democracies, and the management of democratic aspirations in the former colonies. When neo-liberal policies seek adherence to market fundamentalism, they also re-define democracy. Surveillance regimes and the pursuit of war as a means to promote democracy are adequately revealing

of the new approach to liberal values. Aims of education are deeply implicated in any such redefinition.

Like religious fundamentalism, neo-liberalism induces its believers not to waste time in debates and to focus, instead, on action. Thus, the discursive character of education, as a process of reflection, debate and defensible judgment, on real-world issues, is sacrificed. There is also an element of righteousness which offers to the neo-liberal promise a utopian sheen. While the religious fundamentalist is inspired by the hope of a supremely just and divine regime, the neo-liberal mind is inspired by the techno-utopianism of devices, especially those that bring about control over space by means of instantaneous reach of messages. Believers of techno-utopianism, in fact, often reduce democracy to the practice of equity in communicational reach. The promotion of technically facilitated and mediated communication between teachers and students also exacerbates the diminution of the teacher's agency and spontaneity to relate and respond. In higher education, the neo-liberal techno-utopia has resulted in serious imbalance in institutional economy, inducing measures like increase in fee and shedding of faculty.

Pedagogic modernism which is associated with child-centred methods of teaching has its roots in the liberal democratic struggle for the establishment of the welfare state. The ideology of neo-liberalism has forced a vast number of emerging welfare states in the former colonies to structurally adjust their economies to the world capitalist system. This process has resulted in drastic reduction in state-services for children, especially in health and education. Outsourcing of such services to private agencies and NGOs is quite common, and in many developing countries, the poorest strata of society are being served mainly by NGOs. The State has no direct role to play in monitoring the quality of these services or the adequacy of the coverage they provide. Ironically, this kind of withdrawal of the State from its responsibility to extend its protective cover to children has taken place concomitantly with the pursuit of millennium development goals and the enactment of children's rights.

The idea of citizen's rights is fundamental to the concept of democracy. A liberal-democratic perspective implies full awareness on the part of the State that any rights imparted to children cannot be of the same nature as the rights endowed upon adult citizens. This is because children cannot be expected to be vigilant in protecting their own rights, nor can they assert their entitlement to a right when it is violated. For these reasons, children's rights require embodiment in the State's own institutions. In other words, they cannot be outsourced or made subject to the level of conscience that voluntary or private institutions might have. From this perspective, the adoption of a rights-based approach to children's welfare – against a background of the State's withdrawal from this sphere – and the reduction of budgets available for it are obviously contradictory. Such a contradiction can be described as a symptom of neo-liberal advance in fledgling democracies where the liberal state had yet to form and function in a manner that children could depend on it. Seen in conjunction with the

analysis of the impact that neo-liberal state policies have made on teaching presented earlier, the diminution of the State's role in child welfare constitutes a major factor in the decline of teachers' professional status.

Conclusions

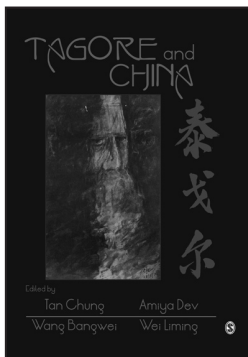
The ascent of neo-liberalism is a significant historical development of our times. I have discussed some of its implications for education, both its policy and practice, but this brief discussion can at best indicate the kind of inquiry that needs to be made for a fuller understanding. As a social activity, which requires not just vast investment and organisation but also a moral vision, education is dependent on the State. This is why the State's own character and the changes occurring therein assume significance as we attempt to unravel the social character of the teaching and learning going on in schools and universities. The discussion shows that while teachers have lost their autonomy and the dignity of their profession learning has come to be defined more and more in behaviourist terms.

The advances made in the decades following the second world war in curriculum theory and pedagogic practice are either stagnating or being squandered away. Neo-liberalism promotes a market model of welfare; in education it has already brought about state withdrawal from its wide-ranging responsibilities. In order to rescue the gains of liberal democratic thought and practices we should consider resurrecting the concept of teaching as a relational activity. One implication of such a decision is that we will have to resist the movement for making teachers accountable by following bureaucratic curricular schedules and by aiming at predictable outcomes.

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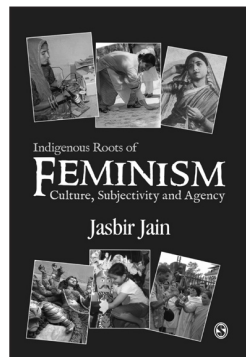
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