

The Pitfalls of Privatisation of Higher Education

DHANWANTI NAYAK

Critics of Karnataka's private universities bills, that were passed recently by the legislature, have focused on the basis on which they have been passed as well as the lack of regulatory frameworks for the functioning of the universities. Besides these very valid concerns, we need to reflect on what else is implied in the increasing privatisation of higher education and why is it important to discuss it in a broader context.

The private universities bills passed recently in both houses of the Karnataka legislature will allow 13 new private universities to come up. That they have been passed without discussion in both houses has drawn some attention which has focused largely on the basis on which the bills have been approved and the lack of regulatory frameworks for their functioning. However, other issues need to enter the discussion in order to add to our understanding of the implications of increased privatisation on the education of young adults.

Access Issue

The major rationale for privatising university education has been access: there are too few universities for the large numbers of young people who want or need to get into university education. This is a legitimate concern whose solution, it must be stated at the outset, need not necessarily be increased privatisation. That is another discussion altogether but for our immediate purposes, repeatedly framing issues concerning access in terms of low numbers of existing universities has disguised the other issues concerning access. Prominent among these is the one to do with lack of inclusiveness at the ground level in existing private universities. Indian private universities need to take this leaf out of western campuses and put in place dynamic policies to create a diverse student and faculty body.

One recommendation to do this has been to accept a percentage of the student body through the government. It is unclear whether there will be any openness to this as corporate entities in general have resisted changes in recruitment policies in their own organisations, for instance, by continuously resisting reservation. Although there is no data on the socio-economic background of students entering private campuses, it would not be incorrect to hypothesise that the currently existing private campuses continue to show a more exclusive trend, and where some measures towards inclusiveness have been taken, such as the granting of scholarships, their overall impact has been negligible. Campuses may thus be filled with "people like us" making private education the comfortable, non-challenging experience it does not have to be.

Historically, the legitimisation of private universities entering the domain of education in India has ingeniously used the argument of "non-discrimination" by arguing that the state should not come in the way of those who have the capacity to pay for their education. Following this logic, private players justified charging high fees in the name of capitation charges and built educational infrastructure. While this may have greater relevance in some applied disciplines, we must still apply caution when extrapolating its benefits to a university: Just as there is nothing romantic about poor infrastructure, non-existent labs, and slow-moving bureaucracy, there is nothing inherently or inevitably great about conducting education amidst good infrastructure, efficient administration and well-equipped studios and labs. These can only form the minimum enabling conditions for teaching-learning experiences which the Indian

Dhanwanti Nayak (*dhanwanti.nayak@manipal.edu*) teaches at the Manipal Institute of Communication, Manipal University.

public universities, for one reason or another, have not uniformly provided.

Scepticism on Infrastructure

In a media-perfused environment, educational choices nowadays are usually easily made by young adults and their parents by looking at infrastructure shown in advertisements rather than what kind of curriculum is transacted inside the classroom, how and by whom. "Good looking" universities thus score high as are those with high "learning outcomes". But while both these are important in their own way, some healthy scepticism towards both is in order: one, university education cannot afford to lose sight of the value that must be placed on intellectual capital rather than on infrastructure; two, the elementary education sector has shown us that we must be cautious in looking at learning outcomes in very reductive ways since these may be heightened in educational institutions by, for instance, "teaching the test".

Both problems arise in school education but their implications are manifold in

university education. Postgraduate degrees are educational degrees in most disciplines, and reducing them to technical ones misses the woods for the trees. These latter are usually equally, if not better, "delivered" in polytechnics and the like if educational objectives are not placed at the centre of the curriculum transaction. It is unclear whether this subtlety will be understood by private players: a university education is supposed to provide apparently "irrelevant" or indirectly related subject matter because it is essential in terms of educational goals. These could include theoretical perspectives, critical and creative thinking, all of which in the current neo-liberal economy are seen to have no relevance as they do not mimic what is happening in industry.

Going beyond material factors to educationally germane ones such as making the curriculum more relevant and challenging in conception and transaction will require the competitive recruitment of faculty who are the sine qua non of good universities. Faculty with advanced degrees may have a better

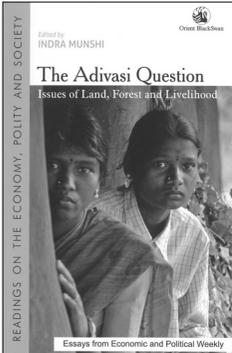
chance of making the irrelevant appear relevant as they have had a longer, and presumably deeper, engagement with such issues. Less qualified or inexperienced faculty merely simplify the complex or make the complex so opaque as to appear impregnable. While colleges can be built on faculty with no advanced degrees and no research credentials, good universities cannot be. They depend upon faculty who have the highest educational qualifications as well as sound exposure to an international academic culture, of which research is only one aspect. Universities, after all are much more than local institutions, even in the time of Nalanda.

Thus, studying in a university for the student will pay rich dividends if educational goals are kept clearly in mind, over and above "job prospects". Despite the clamour from industry that only a small per cent of our graduates are actually "job-ready", the solution, ironically, lies in a more broad-based and liberal education, not a more focused one. To enable this, university procedures need to be liberalised by allowing and

NEW

The Adivasi Question

Edited By
INDRA MUNSHI



Edited by
INDRA MUNSHI

The Adivasi Question
Issues of Land, Forest and Livelihood

Essays from Economic and Political Weekly

Depletion and destruction of forests have eroded the already fragile survival base of adivasis across the country, displacing an alarmingly large number of adivasis to make way for development projects. Many have been forced to migrate to other rural areas or cities in search of work, leading to systematic alienation.

This volume situates the issues concerning the adivasis in a historical context while discussing the challenges they face today.

The introduction examines how the loss of land and livelihood began under the British administration, making the adivasis dependent on the landlord-moneylender-trader nexus for their survival.

The articles, drawn from writings of almost four decades in EPW, discuss questions of community rights and ownership, management of forests, the state's rehabilitation policies, and the Forest Rights Act and its implications. It presents diverse perspectives in the form of case studies specific to different regions and provides valuable analytical insights.

Authors:
 Ramachandra Guha • Sanjeeva Kumar • Ashok K Upadhyaya • E Selvarajan • Nitya Rao • B B Mohanty • Brian Lobo • K Balagopal • Sohel Firdos • Pankaj Sekhsaria • DN • Judy Whitehead • Sagari R Ramdas • Neela Mukherjee • Mathew Areeparampil • Asmita Kabra • Renu Modi • M Gopinath Reddy, K Anil Kumar, P Trinadha Rao, Oliver Springate-Baginski • Indra Munshi • Jyothis Sathyapalan • Mahesh Rangarajan • Madhav Gadgil • Dev Nathan, Govind Kelkar • Emmanuel D'Silva, B Nagnath • Amita Baviskar

Pp xi + 408

ISBN 978-81-250-4716-2

2012

Rs 695

Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd
www.orientblackswan.com

Mumbai • Chennai • New Delhi • Kolkata • Bangalore • Bhubaneswar • Ernakulam • Guwahati • Jaipur • Lucknow • Patna • Chandigarh • Hyderabad

Contact: info@orientblackswan.com

encouraging students to take courses from other departments disconnected from their own. Otherwise each department becomes a minor fiefdom, competing internally for students by restricting their choices. In this sense, provincialism will persist and the culture of colleges will unnecessarily prevail.

Need for Differing Viewpoints

Another point worthy of attention is the space and ambience created for discussion and debate on private campuses. One of the hallmarks of a good university is its ability to attract, contain and engage with differing viewpoints. An inclusive campus automatically brings in people with diverse points of view and a university environment is precisely the space to engage with it. A superior quality of education for young people in fact must be defined in terms of diversity, whereby being among people different from oneself, and holding points of view and positions varied from one's

own itself becomes a learning context as these naturally stimulate dialogue and discussion.

Such differences with other people, whether students, faculty, administration or other higher-ups in the pecking order cannot be repressed in a university without an understanding of its implications for education and ultimately for democracy itself. If autocratic attitudes prevail anywhere in the university system, then opportunities particularly for intellectual development of students are compromised. Education is at least partly about critical thinking and about rationally justifying positions we take. While consensus building may not be important, and even be inappropriate in some situations which arise in a university, engagement certainly is. If universities stifle engagement, rather than create the conditions for nurturing it, then the birth of the fascist can be traced back to our campuses in the future, as much as the Naxal in the past, and the former

may involve paying a bigger price than the latter.

Lastly, while excellent branding may ensure the association of some universities with quality education in the short run, returns on “capital” will occur in the form of more intangibles than private corporations may be able to understand. Intellectual capital is not bought in a day but requires sustained building over time. Whether private universities will have the patience to cultivate this remains to be seen.

Despite all these possible situations which may arise in private universities (and it must be confessed, even in many public ones) finally the approach must be oriented by educational goals, the language must be the language of the intellect, not business, and the behaviour must be conducive to the highest democratic values. If the private sector can meet the above ideals, it would be a vindication of its own belief that it can provide “better quality” education than the public universities.