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## The Turbulent Future of Higher Education

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*Higher education in India no longer guarantees decent work in a changing and shrinking job market, even as its investment in liberal values is being challenged. Given the policy reforms and technological upheavals also underway, our universities face an uncertain future under an uncaring state.*

Higher education everywhere stands on the brink of fundamental change today, even more so in India than elsewhere. The key word here is fundamental. Change is an imperative for institutions associated with knowledge production because it is an inevitable by-product of new knowledge. But the changes looming on the horizon today are not of this variety – they are not caused by the work of higher education itself.

For starters, consider the claim that the traditional justifications for higher education – whether as an instrumental means, or as an end in itself – are severely damaged today. So much so, that we no longer have compelling answers to the question: What is higher education good for?

For the main course, consider the mounting evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified and legitimised the ongoing trend towards ‘distance education’, uniting market and state to push for ‘reforms’ that will make higher education unrecognizably different.

And finally, for the sweet dish, consider the local factors that make these changes even more dire and consequential in India than any other country in the world except China.

However, since this Western way of ordering the stages of a meal (even as a figure of speech) betrays a colonised mind, and since every true nationalist knows that an Indian meal may feature sweets at any stage, let us begin with the changes specific to Indian higher education.

### Massification and its discontents

In the last two decades, the world has seen an unprecedented ‘massification’ of higher education – that is, an expansion of enrolment in higher education (broadly defined as any formal instruction beyond high school). While significant increases have occurred in most countries in every region, the most spectacular rise in enrolment has happened in China and India, where first generation entrants are accessing higher education on a scale unknown in human history.

UNESCO estimates show that global enrolment increased two-and-half times between 2000 and 2020 (from 999 to 2507 lakhs). In comparison, enrolment in Indian higher education registered a four-and-a-half times increase, from 86 lakhs in 2000-01 to 385 lakhs in 2019-20. In the same period, the gross enrolment ratio (the percentage of persons in the age group 18-23 years who are currently enrolled) more than tripled, going from about 8% to 27%.<sup>1</sup> If the population enrolled in Indian higher education were treated like a country, it would rank 38th in the world in 2020, just above Canada.

Along with this massive expansion in size, the composition of the higher education enrolment has also changed decisively. The 21st century saw the privatisation of higher education for the first time since the beginning of western-style university education in India in 1859. Towards the end of the 1990s, roughly half the institutions were private and they catered to a little less than half of the total enrolment. But by the 2020s, around 80% of institutions are privately managed, and they account for about two-thirds of total enrolment. Indeed, private institutions have driven the expansion, enrolling between two-thirds and three-quarters of the newly enrolled students.

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An even more important change is in the social composition of the student body. Until the 1990s, higher education was largely dominated by the upper castes and the middle classes (since the middle classes at this time were overwhelmingly upper caste anyway).

Today, the lower and middle castes account for almost half of the enrolment in public institutions, helped by reservations, but also by rising incomes.

Along with this, the enrolment of girls and women has been growing steadily and has almost reached parity level (the female share of total enrolment is just under 49%). This may well be the biggest success story in higher education, although there is still some way to go before genuine parity is reached. In public institutions at the overall level, women outnumber men, but there remains a significant gender gap in the technical and professional fields.

On the whole, formal inclusion of hitherto excluded groups has expanded considerably, but groups like Muslims and Persons With Disability continue to be significantly under-represented.

These developments – the huge expansion of higher education, a more mixed student body and the near-equal participation of women – would have been cause for celebration but for some dark clouds.

The first is that the speed of expansion and its mode – largely through private, ‘standalone’ institutions which teach a single vocational-professional subject ? has led to wide variations in quality, with a host of small dysfunctional commercial establishments masquerading as educational institutes.

Second, while it is true that the public educational institution in India is more socially inclusive than ever before, this inclusion has provoked the entrenched privileged groups to erect informal barriers that block the full participation of newer entrants. Rohith Vemula’s institutionally-abetted suicide is only the visible tip of a vast iceberg of visceral resentment.

The third cloud is the darkest of them all. It is the globally acknowledged fact that the massification of higher education has not brought the benefits that it was expected to, namely: better quality of work, social mobility and reduced inequalities. In India, this has been aggravated by the coming together of an unprecedented expansion in higher education enrolment and an equally unprecedented contraction of the job market. In fact, developments over the last decade seem to force a reconsideration of the relationship between higher education and employment.

### **Education and employment: Separation or divorce?**

The 20th century was the century of hope built around the ideas of science, technology, and state-led development. This hope was a braid of many interwoven strands, one of which was the taken-for-granted connection between higher education and employment. In the 1950s, development theory saw a direct causal link between economic growth and investment in education, especially higher education. Particularly important for developing countries anxious to ‘catch up’ with the West, in India this took the form of the national imperative to build up ‘scientific and technical manpower’.

The developmental state was the central actor in this drama, driving both the ‘supply side’ of employment through the establishment of institutions of higher and especially technical education, and the ‘demand side’ by initiating gigantic public sector projects in heavy industries and infrastructure. Despite the early emergence of the problem of the ‘educated unemployed’, this was on the whole a positive period for the education-employment link.

However, for a variety of reasons, this kind of developmentalism gave way in the 1980s to a very different framework of economic governance commonly labelled as ‘neoliberal’. The new regime repositioned the state as the enabler of free markets rather than as a direct investor. It discouraged government spending – unless it was intended to help market forces – and insisted that the state reduce corporate taxation and provide cheap finance to corporate capital. These measures were intended to stimulate growth by easing ‘supply-side constraints’ rather than Keynesian demand management by the state. This growth strategy was reasonably successful in the early stages of liberalisation and globalisation, and the employment situation remained positive as job creation accelerated.

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Today, after four decades of neoliberal ‘restructuring’ of economies in most of the world, the character of economies has changed, and so has the relationship between employment and growth. Areas of the economy which use relatively more labour have shrunk in importance, whereas the fast-growing sectors of the economy need relatively less labour. The financialization of the economy has

created a situation where financial companies and those leveraging global platforms can generate large profits with relatively few employees. In India, this situation is made worse by the fact that the share of the working-age population is higher than in most other countries. Jobless growth – and more recently, ‘job-loss growth’ (Kannan and Raveendran, 2019) – have arrived precisely when the workforce is expanding rapidly, turning the ‘demographic dividend’ into a demographic disaster.

The direct causal link between higher education and employment that was once firmly established in the popular imagination has now been broken. That causality was always an illusion – education and training did not automatically guarantee jobs – but for a while it was easy to believe that they did. One of the terms used to explain this mismatch is ‘employability’. Made popular in the media in recent times, particularly by the IT industry, the term takes the point of view of corporate employers who argue that the training provided by higher education institutions (including technical-professional ones) is either substandard or irrelevant, so that degree-holders are not ‘job-ready’.

The problem of the highly uneven quality of education in the massification phase is certainly a global problem that is particularly severe in India. But this is far from being the full story, since things look very different from other points of view than that of the corporate employer. The employment seeker, for example, would wish that her education makes her ‘career-ready’ rather than just ‘job-ready’. Moreover, today, it is not only the quality of education but also the quality of work that is a global problem. In the era of downsizing, outsourcing, and precarity, ‘decent work’ can no longer be taken for granted and the ILO has had to devote a major campaign for it. In a number of industries in the IT sector, giant corporations like [Google](#), [Netflix](#) and [Apple](#) find it advantageous to recruit a significant proportion of their workforce directly from school-leavers, bypassing higher education entirely.

Employment creation may have been an objective of the developmental state, but profits and market advantage remain the primary objectives of private corporations. If profits can be created without having to create jobs, they are perfectly happy to do so, leaving the state to worry about unemployment. There is not much difference between the 1990s and the 2020s when it comes to the quality of higher education. And yet the boom of the 1990s saw little mention of the ‘unemployability’ of graduates. But today, when market returns can be assured with a much smaller workforce, we are told that graduates are not ‘ready’ for jobs.

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In a situation of acute job scarcity, two more factors come into play. The first is ‘credential inflation’, or the perceived need for job-seekers to be ‘over-qualified’ for a given job in order to rise above the competition. This imposes a wasteful burden on higher education as superfluous degrees and certificates are accumulated solely to improve prospects of selection. The second factor is the increasingly decisive role of social capital in securing jobs, reducing the educational credential to something necessary but far from sufficient. More than the degree, it is the candidate’s social connections and money power that win the job.

Thus, though the actual facts of the matter were (and are) messier and more mixed, the old popular belief that education begets jobs is now giving way to a new belief that education (at least of the traditional kind) does not bring employment. Ideologically, this is a big blow for higher education since the instrumental connection to middle-class livelihoods has been the main source of its prestige in modern times. The impact of this blow is magnified by the simultaneous weakening of the traditional non-instrumental justifications for higher education.

### **Displacement of liberal education**

Two contemporary developments seem to have aligned with each other to undermine the public stature of the values associated with the Western conception of liberal education as an end in itself. These were non-instrumental, or at least only indirectly instrumental, values that viewed higher education as the cultural cultivation of the self, combined with the quest for the truth in the sciences and the sublime in the arts – C.P. Snow’s famous ‘two cultures’.

The first and more comprehensive change is the coming of the internet along with search engine technologies and portable digital devices like laptops, notebooks, and smart phones. These ‘ICTs’, or internet and communication technologies, have irreversibly transformed the public’s relationship to information, and perhaps also to what is considered ‘knowledge’. More accurately, the internet age is enabling and encouraging ordinary people to, on the one hand, misrecognize information as knowledge, and on the other hand, to build and propagate their own forms of knowledge underwritten by a new kind of authority.

What has been happening over the past decade-and-a-half could arguably be described as the ‘democratization’ of knowledge. But the cautionary quote marks are also needed, because, along with many positive things, the kinds of ‘knowledge’ being propagated today prominently include forms of racism, misogyny, and ethnic-religious bigotry that are very far from liberal values. The social media are being leveraged to bring a new kind of authority based on numbers to legitimise popular forms of belief that are profoundly anti-liberal. The modern census and its enumeration of communities is said to have stimulated the formation of electorally powerful collective identities. In a roughly analogous way, the social media’s ability to enumerate ‘likes’ and ‘followers’ seems to have created a new form of legitimation for popular knowledge. ‘Going viral’ on social media appears to bestow a kind of legitimacy and validity that is immune to the usual forms of scrutiny or verification. Seen from another angle, this can also be seen as the ultimate triumph of market logic: if the consumer is indeed king, then why can’t he consume the kind of knowledge that he likes?

This brings us to the second major change that has helped to reduce respect for liberal education: the emergence, in many parts of the world, of what is being called ‘authoritarian populism’. These are mostly right-wing regimes based on some form of chauvinistic ideology, and centred around lone charismatic leaders who are popular with a large enough plurality from a dominant community so that they can be authoritarians. These are the leaders who are able to say, with the emperors of old, “I am the state”; but also, in an uncomfortably modern idiom, “I am the people” (Chatterjee, 2020).

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Because they are founded on exclusionary, aggressively chauvinist identities of one kind or another, such regimes are hostile to liberal education. In the words made famous by the Trump regime, they want to promote ‘alternative facts’ focussed on affirming their own beliefs and prejudices. They have no interest in – indeed they are actively opposed to – the ‘critical thinking’ and the ‘multi-culturalism’ often espoused by liberal institutions. There thus develops a kind of natural enmity between such regimes (backed by state power) and modern universities, intellectuals and students. The public power wielded by such regimes explicitly tries to undercut the authority of these enemies.

As the age of development, the 20th century was the age of professional-technical ‘experts’ who were invested (not always justifiably) with considerable moral and cultural prestige. The 21st century looks like it will be the age of the ‘WhatsApp University’ ? or populist, crowd-sourced knowledge produced and disseminated by social media.

## Unprecedented estrangement

Let me turn now to those aspects of the hostile relationship between liberal higher education and authoritarian populist regimes that are specific to India.

First is the fact that unlike almost any other non-Western country, India has a history – documented and popularised by Western Orientalist scholars – of a ‘great and ancient civilization’ with (arguably) living links to the present. This civilization can boast of many spectacular achievements in the sciences, arts and in governance, but these are from the ancient past with its own completely different context. However, the general fact of the existence of a ‘glorious past’ has acted as a major ideological resource for a kind of chauvinist indigenism for more than a century.

Second, India is the largest country – or at least the largest contiguous territory with a significant proportion of shared cultural and social traits – to have been colonised directly by a European power for around 200 years. This means that India has a unique place in the history of colonialism. It also means that, conversely, British colonialism has had a deep and continuing impact on Indian society despite the fact that the colonial rulers did not make India their home – unlike the early Muslim rulers who settled in India and cut links with their places of origin. An example of this impact is the English language and its enduring appeal (to this day) for elite and masses alike. It is therefore hardly surprising that higher education in India has been conducted almost entirely in English.

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The point is that, from the perspective of the virulent hyper-nationalism being stoked in India today, academics and intellectuals (with the partial exception of writers in the rich literary traditions of Indian languages) are easy to target as ‘anti-nationals’ with ‘colonised minds’. The crude, violent hectoring that passes for ‘debate’ today makes it impossible for a genuine critical discussion on the many ifs, buts and what-ifs of our history. As we know, what-if questions are counterfactuals that belong to a world beyond history. What actually exists in India – and is highlighted by authoritarian populism – is the schizophrenic attitude towards the West, at once obsequious and defiant, prizing Western accolades while simultaneously denouncing elite institutions and academics for their alleged neglect of our glorious traditions.

Third, notwithstanding everything said so far, unlike public schooling, public higher educational institutions still remain the most sought after, including by the elite. We are already in a phase when what was done to public schooling in the 1970s is being done to public higher education. With the Modi regime’s sustained attacks on some of our best institutions, backed by funding cuts and an ill-conceived tsunami of ‘reforms’, the balance may be shifting decisively in favour of private institutions even in the non-technical fields. However, what is relevant is that the regime chose to take this path despite the fact that the institutions it was attacking were also objects of desire for many, including, presumably, those who form the constituency of the right-wing today. If the Modi regime has nevertheless decided that it would not hesitate to destroy defiant institutions regardless of their value to the nation, this is a sign that the regime has no use whatsoever for the elite academic establishment – highlighting the most frightening of all the specificities mentioned so far. This is not only a matter of the social sciences and humanities, though they are the worst affected; the fundamental sciences are also subject to the schizophrenic attitude of blind acceptance and equally blind assertion of the superiority (wherever such claims are possible) of India’s ancient forms of ‘Hindu’ knowledge.

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Fourth, for the very first time in Independent India, there exists a complete divide between academics-intellectuals and the ruling class. ‘Academics-intellectuals’ here refers to established practitioners who did not need the patronage of the current regime to gain their status, and the ruling class refers to those who control state power at the highest levels. For intellectuals as a class, and especially for those of its members who consider themselves independent-minded, it is sobering to reflect on how they have in fact been historically aligned with and protected by the ruling classes, no matter how much they dissented.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu spoke of something called the ‘doxa’.<sup>2</sup> This is the underlying, mostly invisible cultural framework within which the mutually opposed schools of ‘ortho-doxy’ and ‘hetero-doxy’ are embedded. In other words, the doxa is the unspoken, taken-for-granted common ground which everyone (including opposing sides) may share in the form of a larger culture and its beliefs and values. In this sense, doxa is prior to (beneath the threshold of) conscious ‘opinion’ – it forms the larger context in which the latter may operate. In India until now, the intellectual world and the world of power shared something like a doxa, no matter how strongly heterodox intellectuals opposed their orthodox rulers. Today this is no longer true. The ruling class – or those who matter within it – have no regard for the world of ideas as it has been shaped by the institutions (universities, academia, research institutes) nurtured by previous ruling classes. They are interested in only two things ? technical expertise that can help them achieve their immediate goals, or institutional confirmation of their claims about ancient achievements.

It is this unprecedented and complete estrangement between the academic-intellectual world and the world of power that explains the current regime’s willingness to adopt a scorched earth policy towards dissenting institutions. It is also the reason why the future of higher education in India is more uncertain today than ever before.

### **In place of a conclusion**

It is only after considering this background of higher education in the world and in India – including the disappointing results of massification, the weakening of the instrumental and idealist justifications for liberal education, and especially the unbridgeable chasm between intellectuals and state power – that any meaningful discussion is possible on topics like the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP). That discussion is already happening, including in *The India Forum* (Jayal, 2020; D’souza 2022). Without entering into the details of the proposed changes, only three broad features are discussed briefly.

As already mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the global pandemic has pushed both states and markets to promote online methods of education. The big advantages involved – including scalability, cost effectiveness and ease of administrative control – are

far too significant to be ignored. ‘Distance’ education is hardly new, having established itself globally as a powerful supplement to traditional methods. It has been promoted by the state in India as a way of boosting enrolment rates, and it already accounts for 10% of total enrolment. The question is whether it will be positioned as a substitute for face-to-face instruction, and the possible consequences of such a shift. At the global level, [some analysts](#) are predicting mega tie-ups between the big internet platforms (such as Google, Amazon or Microsoft) and the top brand-names in higher education (like Harvard, MIT or Oxford). Market observers expect a major shakedown, with the top 200 or so universities continuing to do well, while the rest go through a major restructuring and culling process.

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Whatever the transformations at the global level, in India the key questions remain the old ones of quality, access, and equity. The prognoses with respect to each of these are ambiguous at best, and the net effect is difficult to predict. This is because comparisons between online and offline methods of education need to be made across the entire quality spectrum of each mode. However, on the whole, online methods seem more likely to worsen rather than improve the situation. An important but often overlooked consideration here is the role of the campuses of public higher educational institutions as a uniquely inclusive and egalitarian space in contemporary India. As the rare public spaces where young people from almost all sections of society, including substantial numbers of young women, are able to meet in relations of relative equality, campuses have played a vital role in the social education of new generations. There is much to be lost if these spaces are marginalised by the turn to a ‘place-less’ online education, which will restrict students to spaces pre-determined by their family’s social status. For many reasons, young women are likely to lose the most if they no longer have access to campuses.

The second and third features of policy have to do with its concrete modalities. An ongoing subject of concern is the importation of international guidelines and formats without sufficient customisation for Indian conditions. Some of the language and recommendations of the NEP seem to be derived from the UNESCO World Education Forum’s [Incheon Declaration](#) of May 2015, which, in turn, incorporates the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. There is nothing wrong with joining multilateral campaigns provided sufficient thought and care is given to adapting specific initiatives for the Indian context, but sometimes this does not seem to happen even for major new policies. A case in point here is the new Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) with the Multiple Entry-Exit System (MEES). For numerous reasons, MEES for an undergraduate degree simply does not make sense in India, even if it might in richer countries with high minimum wages and a buoyant labour market. In a situation of acute job scarcity, it is hard to see who will benefit from the ‘option’ to leave the FYUP after, say, one year with a certificate. This is quite apart from the impossible challenge of designing a single curriculum that can meet the requirements of four different degrees. And yet the NEP has launched the FYUP-MEES as its ‘preferred’ mode for undergraduate education across the country.

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Finally, the world of policy in India – especially, but not only, in higher education – seems to suffer from what might be called a ‘clean slate syndrome’. This is the tendency to assume that institutions have no past, and that major reforms will begin afresh, unencumbered by the inertia of existing systems and modalities. That is why ‘implementation’ has always been subordinated to ‘new announcements’; it is also why, in India, most ‘reforms’ end up looking very different in practice from what they were intended to be in principle. But this is not the place for a detailed discussion of policy, only a mention of some overall features that often go unnoticed.

After all is said and done, only two things are certain about the future of higher education in India – that it is going to witness massive, irreversible changes; and that the impact of these changes is going to be strongly shaped by the unprecedented lack of any common ground between state power and the intellectual-academic world.

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#### Footnotes:

**1** Educational Statistics at a Glance (MHRD, 2018) for 2001-02, and All India Survey of Higher Education 2019-20 for 2020. The other statistics mentioned below are all from the AISHE survey cited here.

2 For a concise summary of this concept with nuanced, contextual meanings, see Deer, 2014.

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