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## INVITING FOREIGN UNIVERSITIES TO INDIA

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When Mahatma Gandhi had asked students to leave their educational institutions and join the anti-colonial struggle, Tagore had questioned the wisdom of his doing so. Tagore's argument was that in a colonial setting which offered so little educational opportunity to Indians, asking even those few who had access to education to give up their studies, made little sense. Gandhi's reply was that the education that Indian students were getting at the institutions set up by the colonial government only prepared them to become servitors of the British *raj*; it was not an education that was of any use to the Indian people. And for the education of those who had given up their studies at official institutions in response to his call, Gandhi set up several new institutions like the Kashi Vidyapeeth and the Gujarat Vidyapeeth that became nurseries for freedom fighters.

Gandhi's response to Tagore revealed an understanding that went far beyond its immediate context. It recognized that education played a *social* role, so that the type of education that was imparted was not independent of the type of social role for which the recipient of that education was being prepared. As a corollary it recognized that education was not a homogeneous "thing" that a student got, no matter what kind of institution he or she went to.

This last point is profoundly significant. The emphasis on education as a homogeneous "thing" is central to the epistemology of any oppressing entity: in a class society it leads to the establishment of the hegemony of the ruling class in the minds of the oppressed in the name of "knowledge"; in a colonial setting it leads to the establishment of the hegemony of imperialism in the minds of the colonized people in the name of "knowledge". If education is a homogeneous "thing" which entails the imparting of a homogeneous "thing" called knowledge, then the education imparted by institutions set up by the oppressing entity, which actually obscure the fact of oppression, would nonetheless have to be accepted as true "knowledge" by the oppressed. Such education therefore serves to disarm the victims of oppression by obfuscating the reality of their oppression. In the language of Antonio Gramsci such education creates "organic intellectuals" of the ruling class, or, in the present case

“organic intellectuals” of the imperialist order who are deliberately incapacitated by their education from leading their people to freedom.

The starting point of education that is of use to the people therefore must be a recognition that education is not a homogeneous “thing”, a point that Gandhi had appreciated. Moreover, the concept of “usefulness” here means something much deeper than its mere utility; it is concerned with whether education truly imparts *scientific knowledge*, that is, knowledge based on the application of reason to a study of an unfragmented reality. Marx had noted that it is the oppressed class which has a stake in *scientific* understanding, while the interest of the oppressing class lies in the dissemination of *ideology that* obfuscates reality in order to conceal the existence of oppression, as opposed to science. The rejection of education as a homogeneous *thing* amounts *ipso facto* therefore to drawing a distinction between science and ideology, not between my ideology and your ideology, or between ideology that is empirically useful to the people and ideology that is not. The pursuit of *science* is in the interest of the people; education that imparts science rather than ideology is what the people need to have.

The Vidyapeeths set up by Gandhi were only stop-gap arrangements; independent India set up an entire educational system that was based on the implicit acceptance that education in India must be different from education in the metropolis. It must be devoted to an uncovering of the truth which educational institutions in the metropolis had an interest in suppressing, at least in the realm of social sciences and humanities, in order to camouflage the phenomenon of colonial exploitation. Even in the realm of the natural sciences, while there was no reason for such camouflaging, and hence no reason *on this score* for having education with a different content from what prevails in the metropolis, there was nonetheless a case for such a difference, which arose from the fact that our priorities and concerns were different. In fact, J.D. Bernal, the great British scientist, was of the view that the science syllabus taught in India should not be identical with what is taught in Britain, since India’s problems to which science had to provide an answer were very different.

The understanding that what is taught in India must be *sui generis* and not identical with what is taught in the metropolis, and hence our educational institutions must not be mere clones of metropolitan institutions, was pervasive in India immediately after independence. This view had a number of corollaries not all of which however were necessarily appreciated. One corollary, for instance was that attention should not be paid to the evaluation of our institutions by yardsticks devised to judge metropolitan institutions; that is, we should not get

disturbed if our institutions did not figure among the top 200 ranked by *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. If education is not a homogeneous thing, then there cannot be a common yardstick for evaluating the quality of educational institutions; there have to be different yardsticks. This does not mean that our institutions need not be evaluated, just that we have to have our own yardstick for evaluating our institutions.

Educationists in India often *did* get disturbed by the fact that Indian institutions did not figure among the top 200 or so globally, which went against the need of our institutions to be *sui generis*. Even so however the perception that our education system must be *sui generis* was generally held, rather like the perception that our view of our own history must be different from the view of it held in the metropolis.

In fact, when the official papers relating to the period leading up to 1947 became declassified, British historians brought out several volumes of edited papers which were titled *Transfer of Power*. The Indian Council of Historical Research, aware of the ideological nature of this title (which downplayed the fact that we *won* our freedom through a struggle) and the choice of its contents, made plans to bring out ten volumes of edited papers relating to the same period under the title *Towards Freedom*.

It is against the background of this awareness of the *sui generis* nature of knowledge production and dissemination in a society like ours, that the decision to invite foreign universities to set up branches in India appears as a complete *volte-face*. It constitutes a jettisoning of our earlier understanding that education is not a homogeneous thing, an understanding that Gandhi and the anti-colonial struggle had-, and that underlay post-independence education policy; it amounts to a capitulation to the ideology of imperialism propagated by the metropolis and its educational institutions. But then it will be asked: is this not a sweeping and unfair judgement on metropolitan educational institutions?

## II

The statement that metropolitan educational institutions propagate the ideology of imperialism must be carefully interpreted. Propagation here must not be interpreted in a crude way as propaganda; and it must refer to the totality of what is propagated, both in words and *through silences*. There is of course much to admire about the immense scholarship, conscientiousness, hard work, and perceptiveness that goes into the academic activities carried out in metropolitan institutions; in fact in all these respects they are far ahead of institutions in India and other third world countries. But all these are employed to build a perception

that corresponds on the whole to the world-view of imperialism. Let me give a few examples from my own discipline, economics.

An economy like ours has undergone a structural transformation in order to develop into what we call an underdeveloped economy. This transformation was imposed upon our economy by colonial rule. Our economy in other words was not always like what it has become; it has become like this under the impact of colonialism. But in courses on underdevelopment in metropolitan universities, one would scarcely come across any mention of the impact of colonialism. The general emphasis would be on treating these economies as if they were always like what they are today, and then to analyse with great meticulousness and erudition their particular features.

Likewise in trade theory there is an emphasis on how international trade is beneficial for all participating countries, even though we know from experience that trade has caused deindustrialization and unemployment in economies like ours, and till this day takes away primary commodities from third world economies by imposing demand compression on the local inhabitants.

The entire effort on the part of the economics discipline as taught in the metropolitan countries is to show capitalist growth as a self-contained phenomenon which does not require any subjugation of "outside regions", that is, any imperialism. Instead of cognizing the phenomenon of imperialism and finding an explanation for it, the effort is to keep this phenomenon outside of the universe of economic analysis; if it is cognized at all, then it is attributed not to any economic motives but to non-economic factors like political aggrandizement, if not the desire to carry out the "white man's burden".

A clear manifestation of this tendency to see capitalist economies as essentially self-contained with no economic compulsion to subjugate outlying regions can be found in the "mainstream" theory of economic growth. This holds that a capitalist economy settles down over time at a growth rate that is determined by the rate of growth of its work-force in "efficiency units" (that is, the natural rate of growth of the work-force plus the effective increase in work-force caused by the rise in labour productivity brought about through technological progress). This amounts to an unbelievable level of fudging.

When millions of people have been transferred across the globe to meet the requirements of capital, to claim that capital accumulation in any metropolitan country simply adjusts to the rate of growth of the work-force within that country is the height of ignorance. It leaves unexplained why over 20 million slaves were transported across the

Atlantic Ocean from Africa to the New World in the period before the mid-nineteenth century, or why about 50 million Indian and Chinese workers were transferred to other tropical and semi-tropical lands as coolie or indentured labourers to meet the requirements of capital between the mid-nineteenth century and the first world war.

The suggestion here is not that students should not be exposed to these ideas. They must be exposed to a whole range of ideas including those one considers false and apologetic. The point in short is not to exclude the teaching of "mainstream" bourgeois economics; the point is to prevent a situation where such economics *alone* is taught, as happens in metropolitan universities, for it represents pure ideology and not science. And inviting foreign universities to set up branches in India, as I argue below, will mean that such economics *alone* will be taught, not just in these foreign off-shoots, but, over time, in domestic educational institutions as well.

To say this is not to suggest that metropolitan universities are peopled only by persons who are mere bourgeois ideologues. On the contrary they have on their faculties a very large number of scholars who are not only meticulous in their research but also honest in their endeavour. They are necessarily constrained however by the demands of the "profession", so that asking certain questions, approaching certain areas of study, is simply ruled out; doing so jeopardizes one's prospects of advance within the profession, or even one's prospects of finding employment. It is this which explains the paradox of so many outstanding scholars being engaged in teaching and research in areas that essentially, and largely unwittingly, obfuscates reality by excluding imperialism from analysis.

Now, the branches of foreign universities set up in India will not be teaching a syllabus prepared by any Indian body; they would be teaching their own syllabus that would be broadly based upon what they teach in the metropolis. Indeed that is precisely what is supposed to constitute their "marketability" and hence their attraction for Indian students. But, this means that they would be teaching a syllabus that is imbued with the ideology of imperialism, in the sense at the very least of excluding any cognition of imperialism; and as we have seen, such exclusion itself is part of the ideology of imperialism. And since two distinct syllabi cannot be maintained, except temporarily, in a world where students are made to compete against one another for scarce jobs, the syllabus imbued with imperialist ideology and introduced in the branches of foreign universities set up in the country, will come to prevail over the educational institutions as a whole (with an admixture, no doubt, of *Hindutva* ideas in the domestic educational institutions).

There are two further points to note here. One is of a sociological nature. It is a well-known fact that institutions in the third world are considered by the third world literati itself to be "inferior" to those in the metropolis, which is a symptom of the hegemony of imperialism over middle class consciousness. It is only when there is an awareness of this hegemony that this ordering in terms of "superiority" and "inferiority" *may* recede to the background, but in normal times it is pervasive. Among students there is the ambition to study in the metropolis with the aim of eventually settling there; among teachers there is the urge to somehow migrate there, if not permanently then at least for as long as possible. The setting up of branches of foreign universities in India therefore would necessarily make these branches into potential stepping stones for moving to the metropolis.

A hierarchy would develop in the minds of both teachers and students, where the ordering in terms of preference will be: first, metropolitan institutions; second, their branches in India; and third, indigenous institutions. Such a perception, apart from reinforcing metropolitan social and ideological hegemony, will also destroy the quality of teaching and research in the country: those in indigenous institutions will be trying forever to move to the local branches of metropolitan institutions, while those in these branches will be trying forever to move to the metropolis itself. And since all cannot so migrate, those left in their original institutions will remain a frustrated and demoralized lot, who can hardly be expected to aspire to any excellence.

To some extent this is already happening, with several private universities that have come up of late, drawing at least a part of their faculty from foreign universities on a visiting basis, playing such an "intermediate" role; with the actual entry of foreign universities this "chip-on-the-shoulder" attitude will get further strengthened. And such an attitude will doom our educational institutions, both the indigenous ones and the "stepping stone" ones, to perpetual mediocrity.

The second point has to do with the fact that campuses in the U.S. and elsewhere in the metropolis are locations where a good deal of military research is carried out. There had been much opposition to such research by the student movement during the Vietnam War, because of which there was a certain pause; but there has been a resurgence of such research of late (see the article "The Pentagon has been recolonizing university campuses" in *MR Online*, 12 May).

Opposition to such research on metropolitan campuses, e.g. on germ warfare, or artificial intelligence, or new weapon systems, may well build up again, because of which it may be considered "safe" to shift its location to the third world where there will be less awareness and

hostility. The branches of foreign universities could then emerge as locations for such research, conducted by foreign faculty visiting from their home institutions. This research will typically involve serious health hazards or moral objections.

### III

Why has such a *volte-face*, such a shift from building our own educational institutions as *distinct* from metropolitan ones, to inviting the latter to act as “models” for our own institutions, occurred? This shift, which is *ipso facto* also a shift from a perception of education as being apposite to a social context, to a perception of education as a homogeneous thing (which Gandhi had opposed), has not come with the New Education Policy. This shift, which, in the perception of Marxism, amounts to an obliteration of the distinction between science and ideology, long predates the new policy and is a necessary accompaniment of the neo-liberal economic regime.

Neo-liberalism entails the hegemony of globalized capital; it sees the creation *everywhere* of a congenial environment, an environment as similar as possible to what this capital enjoys in its home base, i.e. the metropolis, as the panacea for underdevelopment. Only if such similar conditions are created elsewhere will capital move to such locations to set up production units there. And these similar conditions include similar educational institutions.

Put differently, globalized capital requires a globalized technocracy, and hence a globalized education system that produces such a globalized, and therefore homogeneous, technocracy. This requires that the education system should be as similar as possible to what prevails in the metropolis, and hence as similar as possible to what comes to prevail everywhere else. It requires in short a *detachment* of the education system from its specific social context, instead of its being rooted in the specific social context as the anti-colonial struggle had wanted.

The shift in the education paradigm we mentioned above can be alternatively seen as a shift from a perception of education that produces the “organic intellectuals” of the people of a free India, to one that produces the “organic intellectuals” of international finance capital. And the point being made above means that among the “organic intellectuals” of international finance capital, those that remain in the country will generally be mediocre, for the more innovative ones will be allowed to migrate to the metropolis where they will be accommodated in metropolitan institutions.

The idea in short is to produce the modern equivalents of the servitors of the *raj*, namely, the servitors of globalized capital. For this

purpose an education system has to be created along the lines that Gandhi and the anti-colonial struggle had considered useless for the Indian people. Besides, whatever creativity is possible within this global education system will occur in the metropolis; our education system will simply be a conduit for the local dissemination of ideas developed in the metropolis.

It is not surprising that the main social support for inviting foreign universities to India, as for neo-liberalism in general, comes (apart from the big bourgeoisie) from the urban upper middle class, consisting of professionals and the higher salariat. This group has been an important beneficiary of the neo-liberal regime. In fact, the erstwhile Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal had defended the policy of inviting foreign universities to India on the grounds that Indian students would then not have to go abroad to enrol in such universities; they would be able to get the benefits of a foreign education at a much lower cost within the country itself. Sibal was obviously not referring to students coming from poor or deprived backgrounds; his reference was to middle class students who would now get a Harvard education at a fraction of the amount they would have paid for going to Harvard itself.

The job opportunities that opened up under neo-liberalism largely benefited this particular class, and it wants to expand its opportunities by altering the paradigm of education in a direction favoured by globalized capital. In fact if India can steal a march over other third world countries in setting up educational institutions to the satisfaction of globalized capital, then it can produce the technocracy required by such capital for its operations *in other countries too*.

#### IV

Such a paradigm is perfectly capable of accommodating the anti-intellectualism of the fascistic *Hindutva* forces. The *Hindutva weltanschauung* may not find a place in the syllabi of the branches of foreign universities, but it will permeate those of the indigenous educational institutions, in addition to the syllabi they borrow from the foreign university branches. The "chip-on-the-shoulder" of the students and teachers in domestic educational institutions will then become even larger, as they become aware of the quiet, sneering, contempt for their bigoted attitudes of their peers located in the branches of foreign universities. Their demoralization, even as they get infected with animosity towards the minority, will become even greater. And the hierarchy among institutions that the neo-liberal education paradigm establishes will become even more pronounced. But they can and will continue to co-exist.



A counterpart of the neo-liberal-neo-fascist alliance that has acquired hegemony over the polity can thus be established in the realm of education, with no immediate contradiction between the two poles of this alliance.

The irony however is that this shift towards a neo-liberal paradigm in education is occurring at a time when neo-liberalism itself is in a crisis, when the need for transcending neo-liberalism is on the historical agenda and when education should instead be tasked with preparing the grounds as well as the roadmap for such a shift. Being hegemonized by imperialist ideology is enfeebling for the country in any case; but even the fig-leaf of an argument that it is essential to achieve a trajectory that provides jobs to at least a segment of the population has lost its relevance in the present juncture.

The fact that neo-liberal capitalism has lost whatever steam it ever had is now recognized even by the most ardent defenders of capitalism. Lawrence Summers, a former Treasury Secretary of the U.S. and a staunch bourgeois economist is now talking about a "secular stagnation" having afflicted the system, a view shared by many other bourgeois economists. The "easy money" policy pursued in the U.S. in the hope of stimulating the economy has resulted instead in an acceleration of inflation, forcing a jack-up of interest rates, and an engineering of a world-wide recession to counter it. Going beyond neo-liberal capitalism is required to overcome the present crisis, for which the subordination of our higher education system to the ideology of imperialism that preaches the virtues of "liberalization", makes us particularly ill-prepared.

This however raises a deeper question. *Any* social arrangement, not just neo-liberal capitalism, which does not provide employment for all, will necessarily make the education system into a mere tool for employment provision and thereby subvert its broader social role of producing "organic intellectuals" of the people of a free India. Even a public education system, which of course is a must for preventing the commoditization of education, in a society where there is significant unemployment, will necessarily get subverted: an industry will get built up *around* it, promising to help students to get jobs through coaching classes, and such like.

In other words, preventing the commoditization of education requires of course the pervasive provision of public education; but it also requires something more, namely, the elimination of insecurity with regard to employment from the minds of the students, so that they can devote themselves entirely to the pursuit of ideas. The social role of education is necessarily in conflict with a system of education that is

geared only for obtaining jobs; and in a society with job insecurity the latter will always trump the former.

But since job insecurity gets eliminated only in a socialist society, where there is no question of even a minimal reserve army of labour being maintained, let alone large-scale unemployment as under capitalism, does this mean that instead of demanding education reforms under capitalism, we should only be concerned with praxis for ushering in socialism? The answer has to be in the negative, since the demand for a system of education that produces “organic intellectuals” of the people, has to be raised within capitalism itself, and quite separately from the demand for socialism. While capitalism cannot overcome unemployment, the *right* to employment, failing which the *right* to a statutorily fixed wage as compensation for unemployment, can be, and must be, demanded even within the capitalist system, not just as a means of overcoming employment insecurity, but also as a means of creating an appropriate education system.

The struggle for a universal right to education in other words must be complemented by the struggle for a universal right to employment, as *part of educational reforms themselves*, even as we oppose the entry of foreign universities that is currently visualized.