

GOI moves towards Online Learning

All-India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE)

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Government of India (GOI) is exploiting the disruption of the educational calendar at school and university level resulting from the Corona virus pandemic and the subsequent unplanned and hastily imposed lock-down across the nation. Under guise of concern for the students who may drop out and the pressure to "complete syllabi" and hold examinations, GOI is pushing for online solutions to the crisis. However, Government knows full well that neither teachers, students nor the administration are at all prepared or equipped for implementing such a "solution".

E-learning is no substitute for classroom interaction. It is at best ONE possible solution - easy for the administration no doubt - for keeping a small section of students engaged for a short period of time during the crisis generated by the lock-down and the continuing spread of the virus. But even in these conditions, it is not a viable option for a country like India with its diverse student population,

the majority of whom are already disempowered to a great extent by discrimination on the basis of caste, income, gender, religion, linguistic, tribal, regional and disability criteria.

We need to understand why the GOI is pursuing this path.

Today the right to dissent is being totally crushed as Hindutva supremacist policies and practices on the one hand and the neoliberal economic loot of the working people on the other are being steam-rolled across the country. There is an undeclared Emergency in the country as the Central Government of India (GOI) under Narendra Modi advances its harshly authoritarian mode of 'governance'. It has adopted a stridently anti-democratic approach to demolish the republican character of the Indian Constitution which embodies the secular, socialist values of the freedom movement and to set up in its place Hindutva's foremost ambition of the "Hindu Rashtra".

It has used a brute majority in Parliament to push through anti-constitutional legislation like the Citizenship (Amendment) Act which can cast doubt on and even repudiate the citizenship of lakhs of Indians, particularly Muslims, while promising automatic citizenship to non-Muslims from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Aman Wadud, attorney at the Guwahati High Court: "the right to a nationality is a basic human right which is fundamental to all accompanying political and civil rights. Denying individuals of fundamental recognition not only deprives them of their rights but also denies them the ability to participate in the political process and legalizes systematic discrimination and persecution."(addressing the virtual Congressional Briefing on May 21, 2020 of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom which had listed India as a "country of particular concern" in its Annual Report 2020)

Government has used the infamous anti-sedition law of British colonialism against student leaders and activists struggling against GOI's policies of fee hikes, budgetary cuts, privatization and corporatization of education which are part and parcel of the neoliberal strategy of "opening up" for profit all sectors including the social sectors of health, education and public utilities. In fact, the past year has seen probably the worst assault against the most prominent central universities, their faculty and students, since independence. GOI has changed the already draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) which allows for persons to be held without trial for up to seven years. It is now not only applicable to members of designated terrorist organizations but to any individual whom the state may declare on grounds of mere suspicion to be a terror threat. As a result, poets, academics, lawyers, public intellectuals, students and trade unionists, human rights and civil liberties activists have been picked up on fabricated charges and incarcerated, some for

more than a year already, for having raised their voices in defence of the constitutional rights of the people.

The storm troopers of the regime, the self-styled patriots or 'desh-bhakts' more commonly referred to as 'Modi-bhakts' or just 'bhakts', have the run of the country. They viciously troll and try to silence oppositional and critical voices on social media and on TV channels. On the streets, they attack targeted minorities and peaceful protestors mobilized against anti-people policies and actions. They endanger the democratic right to protest by spreading violence and fomenting communal tensions. They act with impunity, unafraid of being identified on CCTV footage as they are 'escorted' by the police, protected by the ruling Hindutva regime and never held accountable even if their assaults result in the deaths of their victims.

Since the Bhima Koregaon riots of 2018-19, we have seen through the escalating violence in the attacks on JNU students, the brutality by the police on the students and faculty at the Jamia Milia Islamia campus and the vandalism perpetrated there in libraries, labs and hostels, and finally in the terrible riots in north-east Delhi, that it is the victims of the violence who are charged with heinous crimes for having instigated the trouble. Hindutva leaders and their right-wing storm-troopers, even those who are identifiable, are either never touched or else are immediately released on bail for minor offences.

The one strong ray of hope in this dismal situation was the spontaneous but critically self-conscious resistance and spread of the anti-CAA movement which brought alive once again the power of the Constitution, its values and its significance in the peaceful but resolute protection of citizens rights. The intensity and determination which characterized this movement showed unambiguously that the Indian people cannot be taken for granted by the ruling elite even when it resorts to draconian, fascist methods against them.

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis

The complete lock-down announced on March 23, 2020 forced the anti-CAA movement to a halt. The space for democratic dissent disintegrated as people were locked down on the one hand, and hunger, misery and destitution stalked lakhs of migrant workers families with breadwinners rendered unemployed but who could not return to their towns and villages as all road and train transport was stopped without warning and with no provision for an alternative. Lakhs of people were forced to make the journey on foot, hundreds have already lost their lives. Yet even two months later, the GOI refused to work out a plan with all state governments for providing

immediate financial relief, food and health facilities and steps to ensure their return home in humane conditions.

Instead it is exploiting this massive disarray and displacement of workers to push through its own political and neoliberal agenda. Jamia students are being picked up by the police, charged and imprisoned under UAPA for 'conspiring' to cause riots in north-east Delhi. Elsewhere, anti-CAA activists are being imprisoned without bail for offences threatening 'national security'.

The lock-down and the Corona virus scare are also being used to bring in a series of anti-constitutional ordinances and push through pending legislation affecting education, health and the environment, when the Parliament is not functioning and statutory regulations are being replaced by arbitrary executive fiat in all institutions .

The anti-democratic and flawed character of decisions taken under lock-down conditions is clearly evident. With the strictest restrictions on democratic protest, the GOI is pursuing neoliberal reforms at breakneck speed to meet the demands and advance the interests of international finance capital and its big business cronies in India. It is disinvesting the profitable core public sector enterprises, privatizing nationalized banks, the Indian Railways and Air India, legalizing the privatization of Electricity, opening up defence production for entry of international and national private corporations, speedily granting licences for as many as 191 environmentally threatening large-scale mining, infrastructural and industrial projects through 'video-meetings' of the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) and so on.

Educational 'Reform' and the NEP 2020

The strategy of destroying the democratic structure and institutions of the country to serve the interests of the 1% beneficiaries of the neoliberal reforms, requires also the destruction of the social and political values and outlook that had become the basis of Independent India as expressed in the Preamble of the Constitution - liberty, equality and social justice for all India's diverse peoples and regions.

Democracy and federalism lie at the core of the Constitution drawn up by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Both are under severe attack and this is evident in the area of educational 'reform' as much as any other.

On May 1, 2020 the PM chaired a virtual meeting on "reforming" the education system from early childhood care and education (ECCE), foundational literacy and numeracy through elementary education and up to secondary and higher education by "adapting contemporary pedagogy,

preserving the cultural and linguistic diversity of India with a special focus on early vocationalization of education". All children in Grade 5 will achieve literacy and numeracy by 2025, and a new National Curriculum and Pedagogical framework for ECCE, school and teachers training is to be launched which is "integrated with global and 21st century skill requirements". It should not surprise us that the World Bank (1999) had already found "literacy, numeracy and other skills" to be "vital" in education since competition is foremost in a volatile economic environment.

The deliberations in the meeting centred on the National Education Policy (NEP) to bring about "uniformity" in access to "quality" education and "to achieve all these goals and to ensure efficient educational governance (the) extensive use of technology including artificial intelligence will be promoted". Technology in various modes (online platforms, educational portals, TV channels, radio, podcasts etc.) is to be promoted at school and higher levels. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, GOI was stated to be "actively promoting online education" through internet-based digital platforms and broadcasting educational content on TV through dedicated education channels.

The PM's e-Vidya programme aims at providing students and teachers with multimode access to digital education and allows over 100 universities to automatically start online courses, including MOOC's, by May 30, 2020. Union HRD minister tweeted that this would "provide enhanced learning opportunities to 3.7 crore students in higher education and expand e-learning by liberalizing open, distance, and online education regulatory framework Online components in conventional Universities and ODL programmes will also be raised from 20% to 40%".

Similarly, to 'benefit' nearly 25 crore school going children across the country, DIKSHA a "one nation, one digital platform" for school education in states and union territories would provide e-content and QR coded energised textbooks for all grades. Presently DIKSHA has content in 14 languages - Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Odia, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Chhattisgarhi. Over the next three months a large number of "high-quality e-resources" for learning and teaching will be made available on DIKSHA through the recently launched VIDYADAAN Program which is conceptualised as a "common national program for individuals & organizations across the country" to donate/contribute e-learning resources for school education.

Under a "one class, one channel programme", a dedicated TV channel for each class from Grades 1 to 12 would be provided. There will be extensive use of radio and community radio among students. The use of 289 Community Radio Stations will be attempted for school education. SHIKSHA VANI

Podcasts of the CBSE, (available on Play Store for Android phone users), already disseminate audio content on approximately 400 pieces of content in accordance with the NCERT curriculum for Grades 9 to 12 in "a timely, educative, lucid and seamless manner".

In order to support and reach out to those who do not have "much access to the internet", MHRD has introduced SWAYAM PRABHA a group of 32 DTH channels devoted to telecast of educational programs. Four of these channels (27- Panini, 28-Sharda, 30- Gyanamrit and 32- Vagda) are already being used by NIOS and one channel (31- Kishore Manch) by NCERT to telecast school education-related learning and teaching material. These channels can be accessed through DD, Dish TV and Jio TV App.

NIOS organises live interactive web-streaming of Personal Contact Programmes (PCPs) on various subjects of Secondary, Senior Secondary and Vocational courses for its enrolled learners through MUKTA VIDYA VANI. Radio Vahini broadcasts these PCPs to maximize their reach among learners and the masses in general.

For the visually impaired all NIOS study material has been developed in Digitally Accessible Information System(DAISY), a technical standard for digital audiobooks, periodicals and computerized text. These lessons are also broadcast on Gyanamrit, Channel 30 of SWAYAM PRABHA.

For hearing impaired learners selected course content of NIOS has been recorded in sign language which is placed on NIOS website as well as on YouTube. The recorded content can be sent to hearing impaired learners on DVD.

The network of technologically equipped learning platforms and programs is thus sought to be extended across all stages of the educational system. Of course, the claims far exceed what is actually available and accessible, but the design for introducing e-learning as an ALTERNATIVE to the formal system of education for the majority of India's children who get 'pushed out' as early as the lower primary stage is obvious. The crisis-ridden, cash-strapped education system is not being strengthened by providing for adequate infrastructure, faculty strength, text-books and laboratory facilities etc. Previous governments had also side-stepped these basic issues and opted for creating more and more discriminatory streams with select model schools on the one hand and with the closure and merger of thousands of ill-equipped regular government schools on the other. This has led to the gradual collapse and dismantling of the system itself.

However, the entire project of e-learning being promoted by the present Government as an alternative to a system of formal education has features that are quite specific to the political and ideological bias of the existing regime and constitutes a grave threat to the values enshrined in the

Constitution. Firstly, there is a centralization inherent in technologically determining the nature of the programs. This undermines the constitutional federal powers of the states but fits in with the current centralization of political power and decision-making in the PMO. Secondly, there is a heavy-handed imposition of uniformity of all school education across states and union territories that is sought to be justified by the spurious claim that "one nation, one digital platform" is most appropriate to the country. This is reinforced in the national program for television of "one class, one channel" which would promote the standardization of syllabi, learning and teaching methodologies and textual material.

In fact, the states should be free to exercise their constitutional rights in determining and contributing to the character of education so that the system as a whole is encouraged to reflect the diversities that constitute Indian life and experience. It is well worth recalling how disastrous were the results of attempting to reform the school system in 'mission mode' from the 1990's onwards through programmes like DPEP and SSA, which were imposed bureaucratically across all states without taking into consideration the distinct ground realities of our diverse country. This ill-conceived strategy succeeded in breaking the backbone of the government school system across the country.

The scheme of the VIDYADAAN is unmistakably the brainchild of the RSS. At its core is the understanding that knowledge is handed down by the 'guru' as an act of benevolence to students who must uncritically accept it as the truth. Education is not recognised as a right to be exercised by every young person as the basis for a life of dignity for all citizens of a democratic state and society. This is not only a conceptual issue because in practice VIDYADAAN is proposed to rapidly open the doors for organisations and persons to 'volunteer' as prolific donors of teaching materials for this "common national program".

One can hardly be blamed for seeing that a path is being cleared for RSS workers and pracharaks to utilize this VIDYADAAN program for their indoctrination activities. The dominance of Sanskritized terminology for naming and defining the various programs of the e-vidya scheme also reflects the Brahmanical chauvinism of the RSS with which it is attempting to homogenize the education system across the country.

In Higher Education, public universities are being forced to start self financing courses, to collaborate with private institutions, and to hike fees exponentially to raise their own resources in order to adhere to the UGC's 70/30 grant pattern. UGC's regulations for granting autonomy to institutions of higher education directly introduces privatization and also brings in anti-democratic and opaque forms of governance under completely unregulated Boards of Governors. The Boards privilege

investors and managers over academicians in their composition revealing how the changed prime focus of institutions of higher education is now being conceived.

With every move in this direction, equal access to quality education is becoming a more and more distant dream for the masses and their exclusion from realizing their constitutional rights becomes increasingly entrenched in a social order marked by injustice and discrimination.

Pedagogical limitations of e-learning

GOI is using the Covid-19 crisis to push through a policy for promoting the corporate and investor-friendly 'e-learning' alternative without a critical nation-wide debate to identify and evaluate its pedagogical limitations. These limitations make it suitable only as a supplementary means in an adequately functioning formal system of education. Educationists do not respond favourably to 'e-learning' as an alternative system since it is far less effective than the collective physical participation possible in an actual classroom in generating a teaching-learning environment conducive to a creative, critical and discursive engagement between teachers and students.

Let us look at the constitution of the virtual classroom. Who gets 'invited' to join it? And who does not even merit an 'invitation'? Who is unable to accept the invitation? The choice is neither that of the teacher nor that of the student. It is determined by whether one has access to or owns the appropriate technological device and internet connectivity. Within the virtual classroom the socially disempowered, less vocal invitee is further marginalized and feels disconnected because the space for interpersonal interaction has shrunk. Finally, the lack of conducive space at home for undisturbed online learning and the lack of a timely availability of devices for all children at different stages of education in the family are crucial absences of necessary "resources" that increase anxiety and tensions for financially insecure students .

The basic assumption underlying the universalizing of e-learning is that every student, or parent, has uninterrupted access to Internet and each student, or parent, possesses a resourceful gadget for the same. This assumption is not only unfounded but also hazardous for the future of education. For the e-classroom does not aim at the 'universalization' of education, but only of the consumerist aspiration for acquiring uninterrupted Internet access and ownership of appropriate gadgets.

The homogenization of learning, and indeed of knowledge itself, is a global feature of the commercialization of education. Education is becoming a means to profitably recoup through market mechanisms the investment made either in providing or in acquiring it. This is the era of the "merchandization" of education which is now required to conform more closely to the needs of the

market and so initiate its own transformation into a new and highly lucrative market. Private tutoring, private institutions with private managements, and online learning, the technological 'cherry' on top of the cake of global Education Business characterize this edu-market.

Knowledge as a resource for critically comprehending our world, society and cultural value systems is now regarded as "too heavy" for contemporary learning methodologies. The "skills approach", an integrated and functional assembly of know-how, personal behaviour qualities that facilitate "team-work", and encouraging individuals to adapt and solve problems in changing situations, is being promoted as the preferred option. However, since it lacks an adequate knowledge base this "new knowledge" will end up restricting those who acquire it to remain confined throughout their lives to basic competencies - mastering a new software, using a new machine, adapting to a changed working environment. This knowledge involves a deliberate reduction of "one's being to the condition of a cog in the techno-economic machine".

This process increases profits for investors, but severely hinders cognitive interests which are blunted. A tedious conformism in thinking diminishes creativity and discourages change. A new pedagogic and political culture of silence and suppression of dissent is thereby created.

Lock-down under the Covid-19 pandemic is being used by governmental and private agencies and institutions to promote distance teaching, learning and evaluation in virtual modes: schools, colleges, universities and regulatory authorities like the provincial Directorates/Departments of School Education and the UGC etc. Teachers are being asked to organize virtual classes to 'complete the syllabus' even during this emergency situation. Directions for organizing online exams are being issued despite overwhelming opposition from students and teachers in several universities.

Universities are organizing webinars and online conferences where private universities are being associated and advertised and persons from industry are being given a prominent role. Distance education in Digital mode is being promoted by different corporate enterprises and the media today. Home-based schooling is being glorified. The pandemic is being utilized by global companies to tell us that India can afford to provide primary education through virtual technology itself. It is being proposed not merely as an interim solution, but as a viable substitute for conventional face-to-face, interactive education.

Revive and strengthen the government funded formal system of education

Prior to the pandemic, academicians, teachers and students organizations had already been raising fears about the threat of a systemic divide between those who will gain admission to an increasingly privatized formal system of elite education supplemented by full access to online resources, and

those who would have to pay only to receive an online education. A majority of more than 80% children, those belonging to the most oppressed categories of scheduled castes and tribes, adivasis, minorities, and regionally and linguistically marginalized, would of course simply be excluded from any meaningful access to formal education at all and would be reduced to merely receiving the 'skills' required for low-paid employment.

The task of redesigning, strengthening and expanding the present crisis-ridden formal education system from pre-school up to post-graduation and research in order to provide all India's children with their constitutional right to quality education is certainly a demanding task. It needs a commitment to principles of equality and non-discrimination in policy-making on the part of the Central government in collaboration with the state governments.

It requires well-directed and adequate public investment, and its smooth functioning needs the continuing democratic participation of students, teachers, administrators and communities. The school and classroom must reflect the diversity and heterogeneity of the community that constitutes it.

The promotion of E-learning as an alternative on the other hand is the very opposite of this desired goal. It is part and parcel of the project for commercialization of education and a drastic withdrawal of government funding, regulation and accountability for the sector. It shifts the entire burden of education on the individual who must now finance and participate in the learning process as a consumer. The government is left free to collaborate with the corporate sector, winning kudos from them on the one hand for not investing public funds in a national system of education, and on the other for creating a profitable edu-market for corporate producers of digital technology and gadgets.

The Digital Divide

According to the 2017-18 National Sample Survey (NSS) report on education, only 8% of all households with members aged between 5 and 24 years have both a computer and an internet connection. Although 66% of India's population lives in villages, only a little over 15% of rural households have access to internet services. For urban households, the proportion is 42%. Significantly, as per the National Sample Survey definition, identifying a household as having access to an appropriate device or internet facility does not necessarily imply that the connection and devices are owned by the household. Access at an educational institution, at a cyber cafe or even at a neighbouring home are all included, although in such cases the circumstantial favourability, consistency and time-bound nature of the access are likely to be seriously affected and would have a negative educational impact.

Among the poorest 20% households, only 2.7% have access to a computer and 8.9% have access to internet facilities. In case of the top 20% households, the proportions are 27.6% and 50.5% respectively. The obvious digital divide is not only evident across class and income, but also across categories of caste, gender, linguistic and religious marginalization, region and place of residence.

Caste status deeply affects access. NSS 2014 figures for Higher Education (the latest released by GOI) are revealing for households with at least one member in higher education. In Scheduled Caste (SC) households, 69% have no access to any device, and 40% have no access to the internet. The comparable proportions for Scheduled Tribe (ST) households are 65% and 40% respectively and for Other Backward Caste (OBC) households the proportions are 59% and 31% respectively. However, for non-backward castes i.e. upper caste households the comparable figures are 48% and 23% respectively. This shows the depth of impact of caste status on access to necessary digital assets for those occupying different places on the ladder of caste discrimination. There is a difference of approximately 20% between the upper caste access and what can only be termed as SC 'technological exclusion'. Other discriminated castes fair only marginally better.

Gender based inequalities are also sharp. Whereas 67% men had access to internet, only 33% of the women did. In rural India, the figures are 72% and 28% for men and women, respectively. (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2019).

Stark differences also obtain between regions and states. For example, the proportion of households with access to a computer varies from 4.6% in Bihar to 23.5% in Kerala and 35% in Delhi. More than 40% households have access to internet in states like Delhi, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Uttarakhand but the proportion is less than 20% for Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal.

Being a digital 'consumer' is not the same thing as being a digital 'learner'. Familiarity with social media apps doesn't prepare students sufficiently. Substantial absenteeism and loss of concentration are intractable problems that confront even students with access to all facilities. Further, E-learning requires a conducive environment for study, but when 37% of households in India have only one dwelling room, how many students who even manage to gain access would be able to attend to e-learning classes?

Having online classes on a regular basis means that students have to bear the cost not only of the course but also of internet services. In the current situation, many students will not be able to afford this, in particular the large numbers from families whose earning members have lost jobs and

incomes as a result of the lock-down. While GOI is promoting online learning, it is silent on whether it is going to provide free or subsidised data packs or else reimburse students who have incurred these expenses.

In spite of this dismal picture and for all its projection of e-learning as the "new policy" in education, the GOI has shown no intention of investing adequately for extending, equalizing and improving the digital infrastructure for distance learning. In fact, the Ministry of Human Resource Development's budget for 2020-21 for e-learning has been further reduced to Rs 469 crore from the paltry Rs 604 crore allocated in 2019-20.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the deep structural imbalances in the country with regard to digital learning even as a possible solution to the Covid crisis. With the existing digital divide and the entrenched inequity in education, the rush to expand online education will only reinforce the denial of access to learning for the majority of children who are already deprived and marginalized.

A policy which would result in such a high degree of exclusion can hardly be looked upon as a solution even temporarily for the Covid-19 crisis. Still less can it be projected as a solution to the long term crisis of the education system.

Suggested Changes in the NEP for the post-Covid future

The NEP had proposed to introduce School Complexes amalgamating several primary, secondary and senior secondary schools in order to more efficiently utilize infrastructural and pedagogical materials and also "rationalize", as they put it, local neighbourhood schools with fewer students through the policy of merger/closure. At the graduate and post-graduate level too, NEP suggests huge campuses with several thousands of students.

The pandemic has made one thing abundantly clear. The corporate strategy of enlarging institutions of Higher Education up to 50,000 plus, and School Complexes running into approximately 10,000 students is completely non-viable in the post-Covid future and the plans for these inflated campuses should immediately be dropped.

Pedagogically, educationists have favoured and advocated Common Neighbourhood Schools as more conducive to learning and social interaction. Post-Covid a serious consideration of such schools would be most encouraging from the health point of view as well. Their smaller and socially more representative character would enable testing, tracing and treatment without delay and with greater

efficiency. Such schools would protect against the community spread of this or future viruses and also make it possible not to face the kind of disruption of the academic calendar as we have currently seen. Thus they would also allow the community to retain the importance of social interaction in the process of teaching and learning.

Similarly for graduate and post-graduate institutions, intellectually more coherent working groups and classes could focus on particular disciplines and engage in more well-defined inter-disciplinary exchanges rather than only offering a wide-open shopping mall array of 'options' on huge overcrowded campuses. A wider range of inter-disciplinary subject options could be made available to students through exchange programs with other similar institutes.

What would then be required immediately is to rapidly increase common neighbourhood schools at habitat level and institutions of higher education at district level and to expand the cadre of permanent teachers for these schools/institutions. Social and financial resources could then be invested in developing these schools and campuses so that quality and diversity can become the hallmark of education once again and creativity and critical thinking could be encouraged among the students.

Such a structure of education would not only be a health advantage, it would also ensure the spread of a socially enriching and transformatory system of education. Once the edu-market and the race for profit is dismantled, learning will become the prime focus of the system once more and investing in education to make money will not overwhelm the desire to see the growth of disciplinary expertise.