

National University of Educational Planning and Administration
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The Eleventh Foundation Day Lecture

Changing Perspectives Neo-liberal Policy Reforms and Education in India

by

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National University of Educational Planning and Administration

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Changing Perspectives

Neo-liberal Policy Reform and Education in India

Kuldeep Mathur

I consider it a great honour for being invited this year to speak at the Foundation Day of National University of Educational Planning and Administration. I had the privilege to be formally associated with it in its earlier avatar and therefore find this invitation as very special. On this occasion, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my best wishes to the Vice-Chancellor and his team of faculty and staff. I am confident that the pursuit for excellence will continue unabated and the University will rise to new heights.

During the last two decades we have been facing the challenge of transforming the way we govern ourselves. It is widely accepted that the traditional system has not fulfilled the expectations of our development, and we are now looking for transforming or changing it to a system that can stand up to our aspirations. On the one hand, this involves dismantling an institutional structure that is entrenched and has deep roots in our society. On the other hand, it is choosing an institutional structure that can replace it.

It is easy to dismantle but the challenge lies in making choices of new institutions and determining their relationship with state and society. A large number of decision-makers in our country have turned to neo-liberalism as the only framework in which these choices seem to lie. Globalization is a strong source of active influence in closing doors to all other alternatives. India has accepted the neo-liberal strategy of development and is an active participant in the globalized world. It is therefore important to understand this framework and particularly explore its consequences in determining public policies in the education sector.

What I intend to do in my presentation is draw upon the institutional consequences of the neo-liberal agenda and point to the direction of the kind of transformation that is taking place in the education sector. I try to argue that neoliberalism has introduced new modes of institutional management in higher education and these can be best understood by understanding its tenets of governance reform. The question is whether the issues that we are facing in education can be resolved by these new institutional arrangements. There does not appear to be an easy answer to this question. As a matter of fact contradictions and dilemmas are emerging which are leading further to uncertainties.

Broadly speaking neo-liberalism is a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating the individual entrepreneur's freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (see Harvey:2007) The core concepts in this theory are of holding individuals responsible and accountable for their own actions and well-being. This principle extends to designing institutions in the realm of welfare, education and health such that the individual expresses his own choices for his own welfare and becomes responsible for them. Together with this is the concept of competition. Individuals bring out the best when they compete with others and this is true for institutions as for individuals. Competition is a way to improve performance and giving opportunity to individuals and institutions to excel. Therefore the culture of competition is to be inculcated by the state and society. The role of state, in this theorizing, is clearly demarcated. It is to provide an institutional framework for neo-liberal practices to thrive.

The major concern that led to the adoption of neo-liberal strategy was frustration with the traditional system not being able to fulfill the promises held out. It was a reaction to the growth

of inefficiencies in the role of state and its inability to be effective in generating and implementing public policies. In 1980s and 1990s, the search for efficiency led to the movement for limiting the scope of state activity. Conventionally, education including higher education was included as a public good and hence responsibility of state. With financial and bureaucratic deficiencies state did not seem to undertake its responsibilities fully. With wide acceptance of liberal ideas, the scope of state activities was redefined and higher education was claimed to be a private good allowing for the participation of the private sector in state endeavors.

Governance, the term given to the provisioning of institutional framework in the neo-liberal agenda, in which the role of state was clearly defined, had two very important implications. One was that the pursuit of good governance became essentially a pursuit of establishing such institutions and processes that would facilitate the functioning of markets. State began to be seen as a facilitator for non-state actors to operate and not an institution to intervene in society. Consequently, providing support for successful operation of business and civil society became the central theme of state's role and activity. The second implication flowing from the first was that business assumed greater power and influence than other segments of society. Large

corporate houses began to see themselves as partners of state in development. Thus, good governance came to mean the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within public and private sectors became blurred. (Stoker, 1998:155) The new formulation underlined that political institutions no longer exercise a monopoly of the orchestration of governance. (Pierre, 2000:4) The concept of governance indicated a shift away from well-established notions of the way government sought to resolve social issues through top down approach.

In this formulation, the state itself was enjoined to generate public policies in conjunction with non-state actors. It was no more an independent entity intervening or guiding society. Thus, it must be emphasised that it gave up its perceived neutral role and was expected to work in collaboration with business and non-governmental sector.

Thus the new conceptualization of governance was based on the idea of network relationships of three actors – state, market and civil society. It is this concept of relationship that became core thrust of the idea of governance. Governance is seen as an interactive process where institutions work together to achieve results. What is significant in this conceptualization is that the

role of government is considerably diluted to give space to private sector and civil society actors. The idea that public and private sectors are distinct is being subsumed by the idea of cooperation and working together.

In this new world view, the primary role of the government is not merely to direct the actions of the public through regulation and decree, nor is it merely to establish a set of rules and incentives through which people will be guided in the proper direction. Rather government becomes another player in the process of moving society in one direction or the other. Where traditionally government response to needs has been ‘yes, we can provide service’ or ‘no, we cannot’, governance mode would be a response like saying ‘yes, let us work together to figure out what we are going to do and then make it happen’.

Markets are relied upon for optimal solutions but markets need certain conditions to succeed. When these conditions do not prevail, markets fail. States could also fail in their obligations. Thus both failures of market and state can occur. Quest for establishing new institutions which could cope up with challenges from both state and market failures thus began. Public Private Partnerships offered new institutional arrangement that would mitigate the perverse effects of the state and market. In this normative

formulation, PPPs are associated with desirable attributes of collaboration, trust, responsibility and participation. (Utting and Zammit, 2006:3)

The emphasis on public -private partnerships changed the pattern of governance, as well as adaptations in management practices and in perceptions regarding the role and responsibilities of different development actors in the context of globalization and liberalization. This transformation has also been termed as a pragmatic turn in official development practice and as pointed out 'approaches to development interventions, and in particular the role of the private sector, are said to be driven by “what works” and less by ideology.' (Utting and Zammit 2006:2)

PPPs appeared even more as a pragmatic turn because of the context where the financial circumstances of both the government and private sector were changing. Governments were suffering from financial crisis and fiscal deficits in the 1980s while the corporate sector was doing well with good returns and technological advancement. Government sought to tap these private resources for public good. Across the world partnership among the three actors – state, market and civil society began to be promoted as a strategy of good governance. The partnerships promise to avoid duplication of efforts and are seen to draw on their

complementary resources and capabilities to design more effective problem solving mechanisms. They promise to increase responsiveness of policies and create accountability by including other actors- market and civil society- into decision-making processes. They are also presumed to improve compliance with and implementation of political decisions.

Public-Private Partnerships began with infrastructure projects as these demanded heavy investments which only the private sector could provide. Now they are being tried in the social sector. The Government is moving towards different forms of public-private partnerships at various education levels. There are frequent announcements that it is establishing more schools in this mode. Sometime back, an erstwhile HRD Minister announced that the Government was planning to set up over 2,500 model and 200 central schools on public-private- partnership (PPP) basis in the country in next two years. (Indian Express, 29 August 2009). He added that the schools would be set up in public-private partnership as part of our efforts to strengthen the human resource base and then went on to ask the corporate houses to invest in a big way in the education sector emphasizing that developing human resources is key to success of any nation.

Other institutions and researchers have also joined in stressing the need of introducing PPPs in education sector for similar reasons and also for fulfilling the commitment of raising literacy levels. A World Bank study, (Jagannathan 2001) has explored the working of six NGOs that extend primary education to rural children in India. It is argued that these NGOs have demonstrated effective grassroots action to enhance the quality of basic education and have also influenced mainstreamed education through replication of their models and through policy dialogue with the Government. While suggesting that NGOs are best suited for small projects and micro-level interventions, the study strongly advocates sustainable and enduring partnership with the voluntary sector that will strengthen the Government's efforts to actualize the goal of universal elementary education. In their official documents both World Bank as well as Asian Development have been advocating the policy of 'pppisation'.

Centre for Civil Society launched a School Choice Campaign in 2007 arguing that what the poor need today 'is not just Right to Education, but the Right to Education of Choice.' It advocates public-private partnership through the use of voucher system. At a recent Conference in 2009, the speakers included representatives of the World Bank and the private sector and stressed the need

of quality education by providing choices to the poor. This scheme was called as funding the students and not schools and giving choice to the students through a voucher system.

Ambani-Birla Committee appointed by Prime Minister's Council of Trade and Industry went on to recommend in its Report in the year 2000 that there needs to be greater association of the private sector in higher education. Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry has been holding summits in higher education from 2004. It has been organizing them as annual international events with the support of Ministry Human Resources Development and the Planning Commission, Government of India. For some time now, Ernst and Young has joined FICCI to prepare the background paper in these meetings. In the paper prepared for the 2009 summit, titled 'Leveraging Partnerships in India in Education Sector' the need for PPPs in higher education sector is underlined. This is necessary to meet the financial constraints of the government and to meet the demand of skilled persons of the industry. It identifies various types of partnerships and also recommends collaboration with foreign universities for research and student exchange.

Thus, the international donor agencies, corporate houses and some civil society organizations are demanding greater public-private

partnership in the education sector. Government having articulated its commitment to provide education for all through the enactment of the Right to Education into law is also becoming receptive to these ideas. For it is facing resource crunch and lack of capacity to run a responsive and efficient educational system.

But Government having articulated its commitment to PPPs in education is still at the stage of experimentation. For one thing, the forms that partnerships can take in education are diverse. Government aid to schools is a form of partnership that has existed from a long time but does not fit into the current mould. In this partnership, a private entrepreneur or trust provided the school buildings and infrastructure while the government paid for the salary of teachers and regulated the curriculum and quality of teaching. There are also alternatives where the government just provides the land and infrastructural facilities at varying rates of subsidy. There are now many other openings like financing of services like those of IT, underwriting mid-day meals or handing over of a school to the private sector to provide management services.

At the higher education level the forms it can take is in establishing research collaboration between government and industry, giving space to private entrepreneurs to enter the field and opening

up for partnership with foreign universities. For quite sometime, large business has been a big player in the field of higher education like engineering and medical education. These institutions were primarily colleges affiliated to Universities which exercised control over their academic norms. These colleges were seen as a response to the market need of more professionals as doctors and technologists. By the mid-1990s, promoters of private colleges saw the regulatory control of the affiliating university and state governments as cumbersome, impeding the full utilization of the colleges' market potential. Thus, they wanted university status to wriggle out of control of state governments and the affiliating universities. This resulted in the proliferation of private universities and private deemed universities. Earlier, the deemed university provision that empowered an institution to award its own degree was sparingly used to allow leading institutions to offer programs at an advanced level in a particular field or specialization. The Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore and the Indian Agricultural Research Institute in Delhi were the first two institutions to be declared deemed universities in 1958. This number increased to 29 in 1990/91 and 38 in 1998 and now stands at 122 as of 2017. Most of the post-1998 deemed universities are private. (Agarwal, 2007) The current Minister of HRD is soliciting partnerships

with Universities in USA and UK to enhance the quality of education India.

It is the resource deficiency that is driving the government to seek partnership with private sector in the field of higher education but at the primary school level this is not the only reason. It is also inefficiencies in the delivery system. It is argued that the bureaucratic ways of delivery have led to leakages of various kinds where the citizens are ill-served. Thus, in both health and education, government is seeking partnership – at the local and grassroots level with the NGOs and at higher level with for profit private sector.

In Delhi the traditional mode of providing land and infrastructural facilities at subsidized rates has dominated the scene of school education. But within this sector primary schools have not been so attractive to the private sector. Therefore, this responsibility lies with the municipality and Delhi administration. After the passage of the Right to Education Act, the Supreme Court has made it mandatory for private unaided schools to admit 25% of its students from the economically weaker sections. Delhi administration has begun enforcing this mandate but has not been very successful. This insistence has met with reluctance as well as some form of resistance from many private managements of schools.

Within this mode of thinking of inviting private players to participate in generating and implementing public policy, other kinds of institutional arrangements have also emerged. These have taken the form creating either semi-autonomous agencies or contracting out services to the private sector. Ministries are being encouraged to apply the concept of such agencies to carry out specific executive functions.

The significant feature of these institutions, including public-private partnerships, is their flexibility and being out of the direct loop of ministerial accountability. They also present the view that development is a technical process amenable only to expert decision making. JNURM, water user committees, implementation of mid-day meal schemes in schools, running ambulances are recent examples. Equally important dimension of this feature is that issues that are declared technical are simultaneously rendered as non-political. This notion is widely espoused in the new governance style as disenchantment with politics grows. Both the government as well as corporate sources join to voice the need to insulate economic reforms from politics.

One serious implication of this kind of thinking is dilution of public accountability of these institutions. Governance institutions are

based on customer accountability and of those who are stakeholders in the endeavor. The larger public or panchayat, for example, does not fall into this domain of accountability. Constitutionally, the Comptroller and Auditor General has the responsibility to certify the legal and financial basis of public expenditure. However, in the case of partnerships, the CAG continues to grapple with ambiguities of scope of audit of PPPs. The guidelines issued for audit of PPPs state that the purpose of audit is not to audit private sector but to review the end results rather than the way they were achieved. The erstwhile Planning Commission insisted that only the public part of the PPP should be audited and not its component of private sector. The CAG insists that every rupee spent out of the public exchequer is within its purview. Despite the hesitation of government, the CAG has gone ahead and has submitted audit reports on some PPP projects including those of the construction of international airports at Delhi and Bengaluru and substantiated many comments of misdemeanor that were already in public domain. These related to many decisions that favoured private sector in face of public interest. Is PPP a public authority within the scope of public audit? Or is it a private institution?

The introduction of the Right to Information Act has further brought to the fore issues of transparency and accountability. It is welcome

move in democracy that recognizes transparency as a key to accountability. However, information on this count is given hesitatingly. The Chief Information Commissioner insists that PPP is a public authority. However, the erstwhile Planning Commission questioned this by saying how a private concessionaire, a private firm, performs its job is not relevant from the RTI point of view.

In both cases of audit and right to information, there is hesitation to make the operations of PPPs public. It must be realized that there appears to be a trend in which transparency and openness in decision making is actively discouraged to the extent that violence against the information gatherers acts as a warning to dissuade others from seeking information. Parliament is another institution in our democracy that can seek information. But that is also not a success story. A recent survey of questions asked in Parliament showed that questions were few and rare and those that were, were in the form in which written replies were given. No debate has been raised. (For this see Mathur et.al. 2013)

A consequence of this understanding is that a crisis of redressal of grievances is growing. As these new institutions exist on the basis of contracts, legal basis has to be found to enforce the demands of public. This comes out clearly in case of schools which have been contracted out services

or have been enjoined to provide some in return of what the government has assured. For parents in Delhi, remedy lies in court action if certain proportion of seats for weaker sections have to be filled or mid-day meals schemes have to be more effective. As a matter of fact, in a partnership in which a hospital was supposed to provide certain number of beds to the poor and the marginalized, it took the High Court to issue a notice to the hospital in response to a doctor's appeal.

As mentioned above, privatization in higher education went apace with greater adherence to the governance model laid out in the neo-liberal framework. Colleges providing professional education in engineering and medicine and schools at secondary and higher secondary levels multiplied in the private sector. Private sector was hesitant in entering primary schooling for it perceived that it did not give adequate dividends.

In the past four decades, the number of universities has grown more than six times. Out of 33,023 colleges, one-third was set-up only during past five years. The number of private institutions grew faster than public institutions. (Gupta 2016:360) Some of these institutions are now vigorously seeking alliance with foreign universities to enhance their credibility. The current government is actively encouraging this outreach for this provides the ladder to compete

with international institutions and have a place in world rankings.

Privatization has also meant that these institutions are out of direct control of the government. For this reason they have been loosely regulated by it. In any case there are some regulatory bodies like the UGC and AICTE and some professional councils. Many professional institutions are directly under relevant Ministries that finance and regulate them.

For-profit organizations, however, have entered for personal gain introducing unscrupulous practices that seem to exploit the students and the community. These practices are not only related to what is taught and how but to financial misdemeanors. There are now capitation fee colleges which demand high admission fees and the students are asked to bear the costs of services that may be advertised but not provided. There is now increasing risk that financial costs and fees may be out reach of a vast number of students and may lead to restricting education to those who have the ability to pay. Economic deprivation may also result in educational deprivation.

Another equally important, if not more, is the fear that for-profit institutions and foreign collaborations may not fulfill India's quest of social equity. Broadening access may leave out the

socially deprived segment of the population. Policies of affirmative action have been pursued in government institutions while private institutions are not mandated to do so. Such expansion in education may not fulfill social aspirations unless adequate steps are taken. Recent surveys and data alert us to what the future may hold.

Government has turned to establishing regulatory bodies that can play a more effective role in seeing that private institutions fulfill social goals and work in an ethical fashion. At the same time also allow them adequate autonomy to function well. But it is still struggling to develop an appropriate design. In 2010 then government had introduced several bills in Parliament to regulate higher educational institutions. Most of them lapsed with the coming of new government in 2014. These bills could not be passed due to stiff resistance from the votaries of both public and private sectors. In the meanwhile, government is going ahead attempting to open the education sector to privatization and international higher education institutions.

If ‘partnerships’ have to be equitable and accountable, they need an interventionist state which can or be willing to mediate and use its institutional, financial and regulatory resources to create a level playing field. However, if the state itself turns out to be the enabler of market only,

such an interventionist role is doubtful. Partnerships by their very nature mean equality of partners but over the years it has emerged that the corporate houses have used their financial and managerial strength to leverage greater advantages for themselves. Clearly the strength of the corporate sector lies in its ability to refuse to participate in a venture that is not profitable to it.

It appears that neo-liberal solutions privatization or partnerships may be creating more problems than one can foresee. In a country where backwardness is not defined by economic factors alone, the major goal of any public policy is equity and justice. This was recognized by our founders and incorporated into various dimensions of affirmative action. Goals of neo-liberalism and governance hold individual incentives and market values of efficiency in high esteem but it is questionable if they can tread the path of equity and justice.

Regulatory agencies are being proposed as mechanisms to keep educational institutions on track. Past experience has not been particularly a happy one and establishing new ones are already facing problems in their embryonic stage.

What is needed is a re-evaluation of the role of the state in education. Government needs to strengthen its own commitment to education.

Outlays in this sector have not kept pace with demand and have actually been falling in the last few years. But falling outlays is only one part of the problem and is magnified as the only problem. It is not the only culprit. Educational institutions are being allowed to decay due to mismanagement and government's neglect of its responsibilities of taking timely action in appointments of teachers and heads of institutions and release of already budgeted funds. It appears that there is a deliberate effort to allow public institutions to fail and thus create a policy context for privatization and partnership with the private sector. State needs to rearrange its priorities, by strengthening its own public institutions and demonstrate that non-state actors only supplement state action and not replace it.

What I am trying to stress is that we are responding to the slow decline of public educational institutions as if it just happened because there is a resource crunch without realizing that it is embedded in a coherent philosophy of neo-liberalism. Its ideas have become so common place that we seldom recognize it as an ideology, a framework in which policies are determined. (Monibiot 2016)

Let me conclude by saying that government's commitment to education has shifted to looking at the private sector in fulfilling its

ambitions and goals of raising the stature of India in the world of education. The process generated in the neo-liberal framework, represents education as an input-output model. Public-Private Partnerships or contracting out of services to private players rest on terms on what has to be achieved. A contract is signed in which objectives are clearly defined and quantitatively measured outputs are indicated. Much store is laid by, for example, on number of students passed, number of them recruited after graduation or expectation from faculty is on number of research papers published or seminars attended.

These measures of quantitative outputs are taken as indicators of excellence in institutions of higher learning. Much attention is paid on devising measuring indices that could rank these institutions and thus permit their evaluation. These rankings are seen as source of encouragement of competitive spirit among institutions and a spur for a competitive spirit as valued in neo-liberalism.

The whole concept of an institution of higher learning is being redefined in this input-output model. The opportunities of intellectual debate or quality of contribution to knowledge finds little space in this model. Notions of professional norms are not measurable and therefore not included in its evaluation. The traditional professional culture of open intellectual

enquiry and debate has been replaced by institutional stress on performance as measured by measurable indicators. (see Olssen and Peters 2010) The underlying ethos of higher education is a spirit of curiosity, a spirit of tolerance of differing views. What seems to be evolving in this framework is a narrowly instrumental educational system that closes horizons instead of broadening them.

How do you produce an argumentative Indian?

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