

Political Economy of Higher Education in India Comparative Perspective on the Principles, Policies and Institutions of Reform

SYNOPTIC REPORT

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Political Economy of Higher Education in India

Comparative Perspective on the Principles, Policies and Institutions of Reform

Introduction

That mass higher education is a desirable goal of national development, is now widely accepted across the developed and the developing world. It is an imperative for national development today as knowledge societies are the drivers of global economies. In post-colonial societies, higher education has also been a part of the mass aspirations for democratisation and post-independence national development as self-reliance. This is so in the case of India too, where the efforts for higher education of its population have been embedded in its struggle against British colonialism. So, for reasons of growth, development, and democratisation, the attainment of higher education has been a priority for public policy. These aspirations, and the policy emphasis notwithstanding, there are several nuanced arguments that come to the fore as we analyse the contemporary transitions in public higher education in India. Specially as a top-down prescriptive agenda for “reforms” is posed before institutional arenas of public universities. While reforms are a centrally driven agenda, public universities in India are mostly state-level actors, within a regional trajectory of growth and institutionalisation. The template of reforms counterpose ideas of change, in many instances drawn from a global political- economy of market-oriented reforms, and advocate adaptations of institutions that exist within local arenas and respond to pulls and pressures of a local political economy. Besides, many Indian public universities also have long and complex histories, going back to colonial modernity, or to the nationalist struggle opposed to colonisation. Given this embeddedness in a contested process of colonisation, taking account of long-term horizons of policy change necessitates that we consider the complexities of introduction of contemporary norms of global governance, its adaptations in local arenas, and all this in the midst of path dependence of universities as institutions.

Another level of complexity is introduced by the nature of institutions that provide for higher education—i.e. the public university, especially in the Global South. The autonomy of the university, its responsibility towards producing knowledge that can withstand the touch-stone of truth, and its social commitment to

produce knowledge for the public benefit, and knowledge that is relevant, makes it a reflexive institution. The provision of higher education therefore requires institutions that bring together knowledge, scholarship, research, training, critical ideas and arguments more generally. This is in essence a normative pursuit of knowledge for its own sake—non-utilitarian in its aims and ambitions. However, many of the prescriptions for contemporary reforms come from a template of the ‘New Public Management’ school and emphasise efficiency and tangible outcomes—mandating the university to create a calculus of outcomes with a value in the market, in place of its reflexive and self-critical work.

An important outcome of this reflexivity of the public university in India, is its recognition of social caste-based inequality. The critical gaze towards caste-based inequality and its ordering within knowledge principles that privilege certain social castes, and the social exclusion of the marginalised social castes informs the university’s work of knowledge production. This critique is a poised one, such that merit does not remain a neutral argument in the Indian context. Further, affirmative action policies with respect to equalising access are some important public policy measures in higher education. The university thus is a site for creating equalities of opportunity and inspiring aspirations for social mobility.

Key Questions

Some of the questions that I ask in this research are: How does a reflexive organisation such as the public university in the global south respond to such pressures? In what ways does this utilitarian turn induced by policy reforms in higher education, conflict with the mission of the public university to create knowledge for the public good? And in what ways do historical pathways differentiate public universities as they adapt to contemporary reforms? Finally, do the universities fulfil their mission of reversing entrenched social inequalities?

Reforms are in essence a set of policy instruments that seek to introduce changes in structure, aligning them to avowed policy objectives. In the phase of planned economic development in India, university reforms were linked to the process of planning, providing skilled manpower and improving aspects of academic environment. The impact of globalisation on education reforms has been to fuel competition-oriented policies (often at the expense of equity-oriented policies), and

promote highly internationalised policies in higher education. Aligning national systems with global templates of excellence and an emphasis on performance has been an important feature of contemporary higher education reforms. The principles for reforms that are considered here, are not a mere consideration of technical design for structural alignment to globally ordained norms of university excellence. They need to take account of issues of inequality and redistribution, as much as they aver growth and competition. And prior histories, social arrangements, and democratic regime forms matter as we take account of the political economy of higher education reforms.

Methodological Approach: Comparative Institutional Analysis

In this case, the structures I consider are that of public universities in a colonial context as an instrument of introducing modernity in a colonial society, then as institutions of national self-development and regional aspirations, and now as sites for massification of higher education that must now adopt to global templates of reforms. This research is an attempt to take account of these complexities of the principles and policies around reforms in higher education in India.

Theories of political economy help us analyse this process of institutional change—when policy intends to realign rule-bound structures such as universities to new paradigms of development and public benefit. The selection of a comparative approach is an appropriate methodological frame. Contemporary studies on the political economy of higher education reforms have indeed adopted a comparative approach (see Durazzi, 2018). But this is for cross-country case comparisons (the countries' cases studied are Britain, Germany and South Korea in the case of Durazzi, 2018). The federal diversity of Indian states provides an appropriate justification for a frame for sub-national comparisons. Here, a diversity of levels of development (of) and participation (in) higher education provides opportunities for understanding variations and analysing whether Indian states themselves provide models for institutional development and reforms in higher education. This makes possible to apply both the 'most similar systems design' and the 'most different systems design' for comparisons. In this study, the states of Karnataka and Bihar have been selected for their contrasting performance—the former for its high performance as viewed in terms of institutional growth and student participation; and the latter, the state of Bihar noted for its poor institutional density (of) and lower participation in

higher education. In each state, the case of one large university—the University of Mysore and Patna has been given a special focus. Each of the two universities served as an ‘umbrella organisation’ for their regions, forming the locus for further organic growth of universities and higher education in each state.

Fieldwork

On the basis of secondary literature, archival material, and empirical evidence from field work, gathered in over 20 focus group discussions with students, and over 50 interviews with elite actors in both universities (including current and former vice chancellors, professors, alumni, teacher union representatives) in the two states, I analyse the historical trajectories of growth, and the contested processes of functioning of the two universities, especially as they adapt to global templates of change within local political economies. To further deepen my understanding of declining public universities and of the nature of youth agency of first-generation learners, I have engaged in long-term ethnography with youth in the university and in private coaching centres, supplementing their university education. The incorporation of youth aspirations within formal institutional approaches can be considered a more “culturally sensitive political economy approach” (Jeffrey 2010).

Organisation of Ideas

The organisation of ideas is done in a manner where the conceptual and idea framework is stated first—as the conundrum of the public university in India. The public university in India is conceptualised as a post-colonial institution of modernity that must be examined in its historical context and social embeddedness. Then case comparative method is adopted to present the two selected cases for comparison—from Bihar and Karnataka. Finally, comparative reflections provide insights on the current challenges of quality, employability (or lack of it), and governance. Based on the empirical findings, it is the argument of this research that globalise templates of efficiency-oriented reforms and global ranking have very little relevance for state universities. Local agendas for reforms must be developed that address specific institutional challenges and power centres that block governance. Also, public universities need to align themselves to social aspirations of a new generation—essentially first-generation learners.

Research Findings

Viewed in the long-*duree* of institutional change, some of the following appear to be premises of comparison of state universities in their path-dependence and situatedness in local political economies:

Both universities encounter three shifts of political economy/developmental paradigm—these are the colonial phase, nationalist assertion prior to independence and national development after independence; and finally, a phase of regional, provincial existence since the late 1990s. Since the 1990s, both state universities are somewhat engulfed by discursive terrains of public policy that seek to align higher education state systems to federal templates, that in turn draw from global political economies of university reforms.

The two universities have also differed over time. Yet, their colonial history remains an overarching structural frame within which we can understand them as contemporary institutions. Mysore University was established as an attempt by the princely ruler of Mysore and Diwan Visvesvaraya to establish Mysore as a modern region—a form of ‘monarchical modernity’ within an overall control of the British colonial rule. It became a leading institution to anchor regional aspirations and a centre for Kannada literary expression. The exigencies of direct colonial control over a poor peasant society are especially seen in the creation of the Patna University. It was a part of the British design of the separation of Bihar and Bengal, and it remained a model of colonial control (Nathan Committee’ 1913). The geographical limits placed on the Patna University by colonial policies for drawing up the university perimeter remained an important pillar of limiting its expansion.

Imprints can also be seen of the original design of the Mumbai University/Calcutta University in the Mysore University and Patna University respectively. Many faculty from Mumbai joined the Mysore university (for example, Professor A.R. Wadia who helped the development of the faculties of sociology and social anthropology). Mysore University also had close links with Madras University—the latter was the examining university for Mysore and faculty collaborations were close. Similarly, Patna University retained close links with Calcutta University. Professor Jadunath Sarkar, eminent historian joined Patna University from Calcutta University. Many other elements of policy feedback, and

intellectual linkages remained between these large universities established by the British in the three Presidency towns (Bombay, Calcutta and Madras).

Reforms were an agenda of discussion in both universities even in colonial times. The first wave of reforms mainly called for a change in institutional structures—change the university from being merely examining bodies to become teaching and research institutions. Ideas of self-rule as discussed in the Governor General’s Council left an imprint on the Patna University. Both the Patna University and the High Court in Patna were seen as part of demand for “*poorna rajya*” or complete statehood for Bihar. In the years 1926-28, in the provincial Legislative Assembly debates, there were calls for greater representation of Indians (and thereby reduction of bureaucratic colonial control). In the case of the Patna University, the university came about as a part of colonial design and demands from the colonial ruler for an institution of modern education.

The establishment of the Mysore University was a complete contrast—it was an act of representing a traditional ruler within a frame of modernization. Visvesvaraya—a man of technology and development set up the university as modern institution in the city of Mysore. This was a part of his full idea of technical modern governance. He had been exposed earlier to the educational ideas of Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and the working of the Bombay University, including having served on its committees.

In Mysore, the Provincial Legislative Assembly had been set up by the ruler. There were early debates on representation here, including on asserting the representation of non-Brahmin castes in education and in jobs. The espousal of this measure of policy reform led to the resignation of Viswesaraiah. Two principal political developments that engulfed the University, were the rise of the national movement that was late in coming to Mysore; and the Karnataka *aikikaran* movement with linguistic identity as the unifying force.

After independence, especially after the establishment of the UGC, both universities (in two different states of India) were placed under standardised central control. There was emphasis on improving academic standards and university governance as prescribed in UGC norms. However, Mysore University undertook rapid expansion through the affiliating route, whereas Patna University did not expand

beyond its constituent colleges all located in the city of Patna itself. Both universities are noted to be reasonably well governed until the 1970s—attracting reputed faculty and students. However, after the 1980s, there has been an exit of good faculty, and the relatively well to do families have adopted Bangalore as their destination for education. Currently, Mysore University is home mostly to students from disadvantaged social castes, with state support for their higher education (including for their residence and meals), fulfilling the agenda of social justice.

Both universities have been sites of explicit politics—Mysore University of the anti-Brahmin movement, and Kannada linguistic identity. And the Patna University became the site of the anti-Congress Movement led by political leader Jai Prakash Narain. Since the 1980s, there has been a noticeable decline of academic standards and politicisation of both universities, but they have varied in their specificities.

But the Mysore University was a strong part of the Kannada literary public sphere. So academic and literary discourses of the university have survived in the literary public sphere. Three former principals of the Maharaja's College, including UR Ananthamurthy, have been recipients of the reputed national Jnanpeeth Awards. The Mysore University was surrounded by a vibrant public sphere, especially Kannada literary studies. In the Patna University, the university never became a site for local literary studies—there was a domination of English, and competitive spheres of Hindi, Mythili, Urdu, Bengali as other languages. The claim for modernity of the Patna University was on the basis of its reliance on the English language.

A wave of neo-liberal governmentality engulfs both universities now—since the late 1990s. There is an emphasis on measurable outcomes, performance and efficiency, and for visibility in national rankings. The discourse on globalisation is much more in Karnataka, given the important role of Bangalore in the Silicon-valley, and the city acting as a geographical assemblage of the global knowledge economy. Yet, the Mysore University remains isolated from this discourse. The University, today, is home to first-generation learners from rural areas, who study in the Kannada medium, and belong to socially disadvantaged castes.

Patna University remained an elite sphere for long, though the nature of the elite changes. Early domination by Muslim nobility, professional class of Kayasthas,

and landed gentry upper castes. By the 1980s, complete exit of the nobility. A circulation of elite, and domination by Privatization: Two different pathways are apparent. The University of Mysore becomes the hub for affiliating institutions, courses. Pathways to privatisation in Patna University are affected by the political economy of governance in Bihar: There is a far greater institutional fragmentation and decline in Bihar. Unlike in Bengaluru/ Karnataka, in Bihar big capital and private players of higher education never really come in. Three different pathways for poor quality privatisation become rampant in Bihar. First, in-situ privatisation by way of rise of self-financing courses in Patna University (and elsewhere in Bihar). This is largely due to a demand for anything “professional” at low-cost that can lead to employment. Second, there is casualisation of teaching by way of “*Atithi Shikshak*” or guest teachers, leading to adoption of low-cost, second track teaching in public colleges. Another form of privatisation is what I call “spill-over privatisation” that refers to rampant low-cost private coaching just across the street from Patna University. In the cram shops, educated unemployed from Patna University offer low-cost coaching for degree completion (of courses offered in Patna University). This is a form of shadow education or tutoring. Besides, the more prominent coaching is for preparation for competitive examinations for ordinary government jobs. Both forms of private coaching are premised on failures of the Patna University system. Mainly the poor quality of education, lack of good teachers, and the inability of university education to prepare the youth for entrance examinations.

A third form of privatisation is what I label as “rent-seeking privatisation”. Here, professional courses are offered by private institutions or providers in “affiliation” with universities. The process of “affiliation” is replete with opportunities for bureaucratic and political discretion. This process builds a complete link between politicians and private providers, and uses discretionary powers vested in the office of the governor.

Recently, the government of the state of Bihar has installed biometric machines in its colleges and university departments, and later, enforced compulsory attendance of classes for its students as well. This was done to cut down on teacher absenteeism, ghost pay rolls, and teachers moonlighting to work in coaching centres. On the other hand, the coaching centres oppose the biometric attendance as the students have to be in their university classes from 9.00 am to 4.00 pm. And coaching

classes cannot run during these hours. Coaching class owners say that students are going back, vacating their hostel rooms. Specially girls cannot come to attend classes in the evening. Bipin Sinha, owner of *Shreshtha* coaching academy for English, argues that there is a lot of subsidiary industry around coaching that will close, and *rozgaar* will be lost if coaching classes are shut down. Rental accommodation used by coaching classes and students, private mess, small eats shops and vendors that provide food to students, photocopy shops, private libraries—all these depend on the running of coaching centres. This small enterprise of private education (all at low cost), that I have labelled as “spill over privatisation” based on the failures and weaknesses of the public university, is an invisible run-off privatisation that is shifting public faith towards private provision. The poor now believe in some form of private provision of post-secondary education as a more certain route to secure futures. The model of non-utilitarian model of knowledge provided in the university is seen as useless in securing futures.

I conclude that notwithstanding the avowed pursuit of equity goals within a national policy template, federal variations within India are significant. These show up specially in the grounded accounts of university functioning in its ordinary, everyday sense. The policies for higher education reforms are linear in their focus on output goals—the same for different states and different universities critiqued as a “one-size fits all approach”—whereas universities are complex institutional actors, specially within their regional and local contexts. Also, the discursive nature of reform policies hardly address issues of power or of vested interests that operate within a local political economy of rent seeking—these issues are high on the agenda of the variety of political economy approaches that seek to understand long-term institutional dynamics and constraints to change. However, formal political economy approaches and parsimonious economic models of institutions and the policy process, fail to account for the possible role of historical context, sociological embeddedness of formal institutions, and of power politics in institutional reforms. An alternative within the gamut of political economy approaches is that of comparative historical institutionalism—this offers an opportunity for taking on board history, path dependence, grounded processes of change, and agency perspectives. It is a departure in understanding templates of educational reforms as mere technological change engineered by experts from above, as against a more grounded account of change.

Rooted in comparative historical institutionalism and more sociologically grounded approaches to political economy, I attempt to draw some meanings from the complexity of working of the two selected public universities. These approaches form the basis of my understanding of the principles that underlie the functioning of the university. Finally, higher education in both states remains a work-in-progress, especially as global quality is ordained to be achieved for further institutional relevance.

Conclusion

The use of comparative approach in educational analysis is helpful in elucidating variations in educational development across Indian states. So, location within the same India federal framework, and I conclude that notwithstanding the avowed pursuit of equity goals within a national policy template, federal variations within India are significant. These show up specially in the grounded accounts of university functioning in its ordinary, everyday sense. The policies for higher education reforms are linear in their focus on output goals—the same for different states and different universities critiqued as a “one-size fits all approach”—whereas universities are complex institutional actors, specially within their regional and local contexts. Also, the discursive nature of reform polices hardly address issues of power or of vested interests that operate within a local political economy of rent seeking—these issues are high on the agenda of the variety of political economy approaches that seek to understand long-term institutional dynamics and constraints to change. However, formal political economy approaches and parsimonious economic models of institutions and the policy process fail to account for the possible role of historical context, sociological embeddedness of formal institutions, and of power politics in institutional reforms. An alternative within the gamut of political economy approaches is that of comparative historical institutionalism—this offers an opportunity for taking on board history, path dependence, grounded processes of change, and agency perspectives. It is a departure in understanding templates of educational reforms as mere technological change engineered by experts from above, as against a more grounded account of change.

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complexity of working of the two selected public universities. These approaches form the basis of my understanding of the principles that underlie the functioning of the university. Finally, higher education in both states remains a work-in-progress, especially as global quality is ordained to be achieved for further institutional relevance.

Policy Relevance

1. University reforms must address the current challenges of poor quality, employability (or lack of it), and governance.
2. Based on the empirical findings, it is the argument of this research that globalised templates of efficiency-oriented reforms and global ranking have very little relevance for state universities.
3. Local agendas for university reforms must be developed that address specific institutional challenges and power centres that block governance. This requires building of state capacity, resolution of conflicts with office of governor, and a resolution of large number of court cases.
4. Large teacher vacancies and contractual teachers are a challenge as the Patna University appears almost to a ‘teacher less’ university. The state must fill up vacancies at the earliest for continued relevance of the university.
5. Also, public universities need to align themselves to social aspirations of a new generation—essentially first- generation learners.
6. The issue of local languages for state public universities is a relevant recommendation, specially as first-generation learners constitute large number of students in these universities.



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