

## **For a System of Free Higher Education\***

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A unique feature of Jawaharlal Nehru University is its student composition. A substantial proportion of students come from socially and economically underprivileged families; and yet there is considerable social inter-mixing among students, made possible perhaps by campus politics which breaks down insularities. JNU's having a large proportion of impecunious students is the result of major student struggles in the past. One of the first events I had encountered when I joined JNU in 1973 was a student strike over admissions policy. The students had then ensured not only that applicants got extra points for social, economic and regional deprivation, but also that the student members of the Student-Faculty Committees had access to the admissions files to detect and correct violations.

The admission procedure has changed since then. It has been computerized and outsourced; but the emphasis on getting a proper social mix has always been there, until recently when an effort began to change it. The recent whopping increase in hostel fees is part of this effort. The "partial roll-back" announced by the Executive Council means little: it is "a hundred steps forward and fifty steps back" and that too in an entirely wrong direction.

Many would agree that a jump in hostel fees which makes a JNU education beyond the reach of students from deprived backgrounds, should be avoided. They would argue, however, that the better-off students whose parents can easily afford higher fees, should be paying more. This could be arranged in one of two ways: either by jacking up fees for all and providing adequate scholarships to the impecunious students, or by charging higher fees to some and not to others.

These however are completely untenable suggestions. They would require obtaining information about the precise income status of each student (except perhaps of a minority that couldn't care less); but getting accurate information about the income status of the parents or benefactor of each student is an impossible task, as the critics of the old JNU admissions policy involving deprivation points, used to argue repeatedly.

Of the two, charging higher fees to some and not to others may appear the better alternative, since the errors of exclusion would be less in this case: one can easily miss giving a scholarship to somebody which would ruin his or her prospects, but one would charge higher fees only when one is absolutely sure. Critics of the JNU students' current agitation who have written in the media asking why the better-off students shouldn't pay more, generally prefer this option.

But opting for it shows a total lack of understanding of the ethos of a university. Differential fees are almost certain to destroy all camaraderie among students. Those who are forced to pay higher fees would resent the others who have escaped this fate; they may even develop the attitude of "this person is getting an education because of my generosity". Under these circumstances, a sense of equality which is the basis of camaraderie among students would disappear, to be replaced by a sense of hierarchy. It would be an institutional reproduction of the odious caste system of Indian society within a university, and that too a university like the JNU that has striven with some

success to overcome its shadow being cast on students' social life. A sense of equality, and hence camaraderie, among students presupposes equal treatment for all by the institution to which they belong; institutionally-imposed inequality breeds a corresponding sense of inequality among students.

There is however a deeper point here. It is wrong to force young adults to rely on their parents for support during the period they are getting educated. To be sure, the better-off students would still have access to their parents' purses; but it is wrong to force them to rely on their parents' purses, both for their own self-respect, and also for their freedom. Even if the parents do not interfere in their daughter's or son's choice of courses and career, it is still demeaning for the daughter or son to ask parents for help. But if parents do interfere, then of course it abrogates the freedom of the off-spring. The education system therefore must refrain from pressurising students into becoming unduly dependent on parents.

This objective in fact is best served if higher education in public institutions is made completely free. The case for free higher education in other words arises not only on account of the large number of impecunious students, to prevent their exclusion; it arises on account of all students, as a condition for preserving their dignity as young adults and for their exercising freedom of choice. (One would of course argue for free primary and secondary education on the same grounds).

This is particularly important for women students. Educating daughters is generally accorded a lower priority in India than educating sons, so that even among better-off parents with many children, the tendency is to concentrate resources on educating sons and to get the daughters, even those passionate about pursuing higher education, married off early. If young women are to have the freedom to exercise their choice with regard to their future, they should be able to pursue higher education without being dependent upon their parents or without being prematurely pushed into the job-market; the best way of ensuring this is to make higher education absolutely free in public institutions.

It may be argued against the above that these objectives, such as the preservation of dignity and freedom of choice among all students, especially among female students, can be equally well-served, if higher education is not made free but students are given loans instead to pursue higher education. But in a society where there is massive unemployment even among the educated, repayment of loans would become a problem, which may even cause suicides among students unable to repay, as is happening with peasants. And the anticipation of this very eventuality would prevent impecunious students from seeking loans to finance their higher education. In fact the student loan crisis in the U.S. is a significant pointer to what might happen.

Besides, the suggestion that rather than making higher education free, students should be advised to use loans for their study, is based on a perception of higher education that is flawed. It presumes that higher education is basically to be acquired for the purpose of obtaining a more lucrative job, that it is essentially an input for the production of a more finished commodity that commands a higher value on the market. This perception treats higher education as a commodity. In fact the commoditization of education that is occurring at present in India and elsewhere under the neo-liberal dispensation, is based on this view of higher education.

The problem with the commoditization of education however is that the object that is supplied as a commodity called education, is not really education. It is a capsule of information or a certain kind of skill, but not education, whose essence lies in training minds to raise questions. It neither introduces students to the grandeur of the world of ideas, nor makes them ask questions, nor makes them realize their creative potential, nor makes them socially sensitive. On the contrary it encourages them to become self-centred, self-absorbed individuals with little originality and creativity, whose conformism makes them well-suited to become servitors of international finance capital.

Commoditization of higher education completely ignores the social role of education, its importance for building a society in accordance with the values enshrined in our Constitution and inherited from our anti-colonial struggle; it ignores, to put it succinctly, the need for developing what Gramsci would have called the “organic intellectuals” of the people of a free India.

To achieve this latter end, higher education must not only be primarily provided through public institutions (apart perhaps from a few philanthropic institutions) which are not run on a commercial basis, but must also be completely free, not allowing any exclusion on grounds of impecuniousness. Instead of becoming an exclusive stamping ground for wealthy students whose lack of sympathy towards the less privileged, and bland acceptance of social and economic inequity find general acceptance, institutions of higher education must be places of vibrant debate and free social mixing.

A system of free higher education is necessary for this, for it breaks away from a perception of education as adding value to oneself in the market and underscores the social role of education. If society has need for “organic intellectuals” then society must find the resources for producing them.

It would be argued that free higher education does not exist even in the advanced capitalist countries; then why should we in India institutionalize it? This is a non-sequitur: we do not have to imitate the practices of advanced capitalist countries. Besides, the social role of education is particularly important in a third world country that is forging a nation, whose people are striving to shake off the legacy of centuries of domination.

To be sure, in return for free higher education in public institutions, society has the right to make demands upon the recipients of such free education in various forms, from a minimum number of years of obligatory service in the country, to the performance of academic duties gratis during the period of one’s studentship. Free higher education in short must not be allowed to become a means of private enrichment at public expense, through, for instance, migrating abroad.

The obvious question that would be asked is: where can one find the resources for making education absolutely free, when even the existing facilities for students cannot be maintained at the existing level of fees owing to a shortage of resources, which after all is the justification provided by the JNU authorities for the hike in hostel charges?

Shortage of resources however is a red herring. India has one of the lowest tax-GDP ratios among all the countries of the world including much poorer developing

countries. Raising this ratio should not pose any serious problem for the economy, especially when we remember that India has virtually no wealth tax, while wealth concentration has increased immensely during the neo-liberal years. What is needed for raising the tax-GDP ratio is a willingness on the part of the government to tax the rich. Successive governments however have gone on giving tax concessions to the rich in the name of inducing higher GDP growth in the country; higher GDP growth in turn is always justified in the name of improving the condition of the common people. But unless taxes on the rich are raised significantly, and therewith the tax-GDP ratio, such an improvement in the condition of the people will remain elusive, and the country will be forever caught in an absurd spiral, of appeasing the rich in the name of the poor.

Apart from this there is a second point underlying the paucity of funds for higher education, and that is the way higher education is perceived: it is seen essentially as a means of individual enrichment. Within such a perception, the commoditization of higher education appears not as a problem but as a solution, not as a phenomenon that would subvert the true education which society should have, but as a means of financing an education system for which the government feels less and less obliged to raise resources.

But unless both these tendencies are overcome, the tendency to appease the rich in the name of growth, and the tendency to commoditise and privatise education and destroy the public character of the public higher educational institutions, by making them mimic the private ones, the India dreamt of by the anti-colonial struggle will remain forever elusive.

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