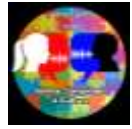


Mind over Matter: The Higher Education Bonanza

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One of the liabilities of popping up in a colonised nation is the automatic inheritance of a bastard mind. Basking in the glory of a predominantly western education, the eternal quest for the holy grail of secular democracy beckons us with the promise of valour and elusive powers that will render us free from all that is servile. By the time we came to understand democracy in the desi context, the divine goblet had been transformed into a poisoned chalice...in a little more than seventy years. The educated clones spewed out of the much vilified Macaulay's minutes have tied themselves up in abortive bureaucratic knots leaving the reins in the hands of marauding crusaders from the past. These knights of yore have emerged time and again as vigilante, at the opportune moment. Since the timeless have no particular lineage, they now build higher castle walls and replenish the horn of plenty for a chosen few. Their opulence must be guarded without stepping out into the lurking dangers of the forest. Those outside these resurrected walls are gifted a shrine dedicated to this cornucopia which is beyond their reach. They can join hands and dance around it in a trance. All is well. As long as we dance in unison, ignorance is bliss. The bungling educated lot who can barge in any moment must once again learn to be enterprising vassals...competing outside the wall...ideal subjects without agency...on the other side of the widening moat. Only the white knight of 1835 has been replaced by the black knight now, for the sake of effective camouflage, considering the terrain. It is brilliant. A saga to be narrated to the future generations, to those who survive this epic ruse. Of course, it will not be smooth. There will be a few dragons to slay.

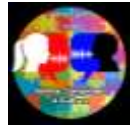
It is true that the precondition to democracy is education. When drastic educational reforms arrive as an afterthought, the issue is further complicated. The leap from 'country' to 'nation' has carried us westward. Leaping back at the same time is incomprehensible and absurd. So we remain suspended in limbo between the east and the west, the global and the local, pedagogy and research, skill and knowledge, the union list and the state list, basic and digital infrastructure. Meanwhile the beast must be fed and the transition from autonomous universities (at least in notion) to



standardized institutes must be conjured to ensure servitude and perpetuate power structures that are inimical to individual liberty.

Higher education must subscribe to global standards and cater to local needs simultaneously and NEP 2020 claims a programme to achieve this ambitious target. Meanwhile the great divide between the global business of education and the ground reality of a failing economy, non-existing infrastructure, lack of resources, and absence of any kind of accountability...leaves us squint-eyed in disbelief. The bubble is indeed colourful. It contains some long awaited reforms, steps away from endless segregations/specialisations and opts for a holistic approach enabling students to choose from a wider and more liberal spectrum. Flexibility in the credit system combined with skill development or vocational training at school level may provide the incentive to join the work force earlier and return back to Higher Studies as per convenience. The custom made product is an ideal subjects, an enterprising self-employed citizen who will ensure greater productivity, resulting in an efficient management of Human Resource. Not surprisingly, changing the nomenclature of the ministry allows it to work both ways. The moot point is whether resources are deployed for human development, sustainable in the immediate environment, or that education becomes a mere ploy to perpetuate the great divide between the haves and have-nots ensuring subservience and convenient resources for the privileged few. Ironically enough, health and education languish in the constitutional framework of our country. Yet, the constitutional fathers did have the foresight to relegate education to the state list, consolidating the federal characteristics of our country. Since then, education has tip-toed to the concurrent list and now inexorably creeps towards the lair of the union list.

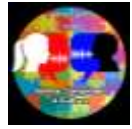
As universities with their separate positionings and unique ethos are dissolved, education will cease to be intrepid in advocating multiple perspectives. Localised universities not only represent a community, they also help it to evolve. Universities do not just conduct courses...they have the ability to nurture and empower diversity and shape the course of a nation. By inviting global competition and rendering educational institutes autonomous, NEP 2020 is heralding the privatisation of the educational sector. When private and government institutions are declared to be at



par, it is evident that the government is shedding responsibility and burning the bridges after them. Combined with this is the integration of the three language programme at the primary level, the local language being the medium of instruction. The strategic importance of English in the international market will accelerate the divorce between the urban and rural sectors. It is a bid to sweep away all resistance through convenient standardisations. The vocational handle is a ruse to hoodwink us with the semblance of equal opportunities, when the vernacular card at the primary level has already marginalised a major section.

One is instinctively circumspect about the grand integration prescribed in these educational reforms. It is impossible to read them as innocuous and sincere postulates, out of context, considering the current climate of the country. The centre is always notional, acting as a centripetal force to balance the centrifugal chaos of the ground reality in the states amidst a society beset by inequalities. Everything depends on this equilibrium which is extremely fragile. When the centre recommends sweeping reforms without parliamentary debates and concrete plans of implementation, it is empty propaganda, a bid to avoid the reality check. Especially where there is a marked lack of enthusiasm in disbursing state funds and a stilted judicial mechanism struggling to maintain its constitutional autonomy. Unfortunately, our constitutional fathers did not foresee the increasing role of the media monster which has mutated from being the gutsy champion of free speech to the diabolic doorkeeper of the echelons of power. Moreover there is a dearth of stringent laws to restrain this ogre whose rapacious appetite and unhinged desires have begun to consume its own appendages. This conduit between the powerful and powerless now only works in a single direction and smothers healthy criticism.

It is interesting to note that a couple of sections in NEP 2020 are predictably devoted to the development of digital infrastructure. Call it lazy thinking or devious ingenuity, progress today has boiled down to the phenomenon of being digitally equipped. It is a global malady when social media goons and mafia conglomerates are colluding to play mind games with the future generations and reducing them to stultified zombies. As long as the package is attractive, the millennials are happy to be imprisoned in a world of floating desires without fruition or concrete outcomes. The allure of a vocational skill like carpentry co-existing with rocket science truly triggers the



imagination. There is nothing more glamorous than conjuring a campus where an open amphitheatre for performing arts and a sophisticated bio-engineering lab can operate side by side. A magical vision, a thrilling Hogwartsian experience which can be pinged any moment. Unfortunately, even today, excellence in college or university sports does not ensure a safe berth at state or national level. The pipeline is jammed, or to put it without euphemism, does not even exist. These grand plans are there to set us blissfully afloat from any gravitational pull. Even the best of universities in the country would require an architectural revolution. In fact, institutes have to be replaced by educational towns considering the scale of the utopia. Vocational skills require sophisticated work stations unless the intention is to undermine them. Further, at the level of Higher Education, where students have already chosen their fields and opted for a particular route, vocational institutes and business schools need to be strictly segregated from liberal arts and sciences since they have a utilitarian agenda. The spirit of humanism can be instilled into any course and does not entail sharing a common building! To recall Cardinal Newman, knowledge is its own end, and it can open new vistas for the future by shaking the youth out of the torpor of zombieland. It can equip the young minds to circumvent standardised platitudes and manipulations of social media. Newman also said that liberal education makes us more human.

Knowledge is power, not the handmaiden of power serving a crass utilitarian purpose. Dignity of labour can be ensured by making vocational institutes more relevant in the economy, instead of doling out the hoax of a shared status. Education does not yield instant dividends. Its accountability is to the future. Social capital need not immediately start filling the coffers. In this regard, we could have actually opted for a more Indian and traditional approach but that would not suit the purpose. Of course, a pedagogy that liberates the mind is sacrilege in a banana republic. Hence, we must settle for a wider subject choice, to mix and match whimsically, creating the illusion of freedom in a climate that stifles all dissent.

In the spirit of the carnival, let us set aside caution and wildly celebrate around the bonfire of existing structures and ashes of conspiracy theories. Let us eulogise a more democratic system of education and keep our fingers crossed that this does not emulate the fate of democracy in our nation. No wonder, the promise of a secular education has been quietly retracted. After all, education must serve its purpose. It must serve time.