

DEMOCRATIZING TEACHING-LEARNING SPACES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of socio-cultural and economic matrix creates a complex consortium of students in public universities. While the point of access has challenges of its own, not all those who enter the system have equal opportunity to learn and proceed to finish. However the public institutions will continue to hold a place of high esteem in people's imaginary of higher education while regularly reaching out to newer social fringes, consistently touching lives of many through possibility of access. The process of inclusion is continually discussed as intrusion into privileged spaces. Hence merely the idea of ability nurturing may be threatening for those who manoeuvre to maintain the position of dominance by creating certain impenetrable systems. The primary focus of this paper is to share observations about the possibilities of creating democratic teaching-learning spaces at higher education. The paper does not attempt to generalize but raise concerns, which surround higher education, from the viewpoint of a range of stakeholders. The observations on comparison among private and public universities argue that since the purpose of both types of universities is conclusively incomparable, it is irrational to argue one against the other. It proposes that the institutional ethos at places of higher education has be redefined through the undisguised lens of acknowledging inherent discrimination and thus leading towards the process of democratizing teaching-learning spaces while negotiating the belief systems of all the participants to create a culture of mutual respect and harmony.

Key words: Higher Education, Public and Private University, Institutional Ethos, Marginalization.

Prelude

The teaching-learning spaces in higher education have undergone a major change since its inception in India. The existing form of university system maintains a range of features comparable to the first three universities (Bombay, Calcutta & Madras (then names)) established in 1857, but for one significant deviation- the social fabric of these universities. The earlier universities were socially exclusive whereas the present-day public universities are socially inclusive. One of the major contributors to this emerging trend is the ever-evolving socio-political consciousness (may be read as a compulsion). The unwritten dictate of majoritarian-democracy necessitates that social and economic margins appear blurring while simultaneously strategizing to maintain the status-quo through other control mechanisms.

It may sound like an allegation looking at the statistics wherein the total numbers of state-run universities/colleges and central universities/colleges have multiplied manifold; the reservation policy is at the place, and there is a visibly consistent effort to formulate all-inclusive policies. But the lived realities of the individuals in the system have a completely different narrative. Social, cultural and economic variants create power hierarchies which even now work systematically to maintain a range of advantages for the

already privileged segments of society. The dominant groups secure their power not only through numbers but holding commanding positions to define ways for others. The term dominant more often than not is contextual and has a direct relation with numbers in a given context and not in total population.

The cumulative impact of civil rights movements coupled with the financially driven agenda of globalization is quite noticeable via various state policies and provisions thereafter. The access to the tertiary level of education has thus been attempted and legislatively ensured for many, certainly not for all. A large number of youth is still on the other side of the margins struggling to access though completely aware that the degree will not ensure economic wellness but would surely help gain the social reputation and possibility of access to advanced professional choices.

The next segment of struggle starts from this point of entry. It is after been included that the individuals begin to recognize their level of disadvantage which is often linked with the region, gender, religion, language, appearance as also the communication and soft skills. Individuals are treated as token representatives of the groups they belong to. *When people are tokens, one of the relatively few members of their group in a social context, they feel particularly vulnerable to being stereotyped by other. Tokens experience a high level of self-consciousness and threat, which reduces their ability to think and act effectively (Dovido et.al, 2010).*

In the specific context of higher education, the university/college is usually located at places which can be approached even from remote neighbourhoods. These are comparatively few in numbers. So the students come from various distant places and the classrooms are mostly heterogeneous. This requires creating an environment of acceptance and collaborations despite individual differences. The teaching-learning processes need to be based on inclusive principles of wider access enabling individuals for continued existence. This calls for teachers to be sensitive to the diversity among students and also be prepared to mediate through a range of pedagogical processes to facilitate student's progress. Most of the times the teachers in institutes of higher education are focused on the complexity of the subject content and expect students to possess required thinking and process skills all by themselves. The gap between the potential and performance thus remain unattended in many cases.

This paper attempts to discuss the various impediments as observed mainly through narrative analysis of various stake holders. It is based on multiple experiences gained through teaching and interacting with university teachers and students . Thus the narratives are experiential and are located in the context of universities in and around Delhi. The paper does not attempt to generalize but raise concerns, which surround higher education, from the viewpoint of a range of stakeholders.

The Context

In fact the exclusiveness in the sector of higher education has emerged as a new phenomenon with government encouraging the private sector to enter the higher education scenarios and setup universities to offer various liberal and professional courses. This idea has been multilayered and has touched many lives in multiple ways. The conventional university courses are seen as too theoretical, many time labelled as redundant, with very little focus on inculcating the spirit of collaborations and networking. The corporate houses are dissatisfied with the lack of preparation of first level employees and argued that the regular university system did not provide essential skills and attitude to the candidates. The intensity and frequency

of demanding utilitarian dimension of higher education provided rationale for the corporate houses to design programmes with an eclectic approach having a mix of theoretical grounding along with skills required for nurturing the financial health of these business houses. In this way, they would ensure that skilled entry-level executives are prepared. They also need people to be trained in organizational behaviour, a must to work in places which have the responsibility to sail the system towards a predetermined financial goal. So it has been a welcoming offer for corporate houses to setup universities. After all, it was a great opportunity for them to train people's minds and control their thinking patterns. To add further, but obviously these organisations would have calculated margins on balance sheet by keeping the students of their universities as interns in their (or each other's) organisations and saving on the salaries for many first level employees.

The school education is already bifurcated into the systems of haves and have-nots. The priority of the state has also shifted from providing education at any level to other domains. The budgetary allocations to education especially higher education are significant indicators of the same. Lack of public money for developing essential number of quality institutions has promoted the idea of self-financing courses even in public universities. By now the government has created enough noise about its inefficacy to meet the requirement of institutions at higher education. It is already under scanner for its unsuccessful attempt at providing quality school education to all children through public schools. Letting corporate houses share the responsibility is presented as a unique way to attend to all those families whose children have studied in elite public schools and wanted a similar type of infrastructure and social environment at higher level.

I found people involved in some critical discussion outside the canteen. Well most of these were teachers teaching in a public university of high repute. The public universities pay their faculty members quite well and most of the faculty members were capable of sending their children to elite public schools. The argument in favor of private schools was twofold one quality and two the families whose children come to study there. And since the kids have impressionable minds we should only sent them to school which provide such socio-cultural environment which the upper middle class family aspires for. I thought this argument rested with secondary education and for tertiary education the focus would probably be different. I took my cup of tea and joined the discussion. To my surprise my colleague were talking about how the university has lost all that glory and is so much unsuitable for their own children. Three signature sentences that I heard were- first 'look at the infrastructure of these colleges, my son/daughter cannot use these toilets and eat in this canteen, they hardly serve any variety.'; Second 'my son asked me whether there will be Hindi speaking teachers and students in the college, and when I said that sometimes even the classroom discussions could be in Hindi my son just lost it. He said no I don't want to study at such place.' Third 'most of the colleges are understaffed, the fresh appointment will have faculty members from reserved categories as well, the quality of teaching in these colleges has been severely impacted due to these compulsion in the past year Such problems are not there in private universities.' I tried to discuss further and said that but we all eat and drink in these canteens only and the students can bring their own food as well, also the condition of toilets depend upon the users, so if we have students who are sensitive about use of public utility services the condition will be different. I added that I am sure since these students have studied in such elite private institutions we can expect them to bring with them a sense of responsibility towards public utilities which their schools must have inculcated in them. The response to this was rather unexpected,

since I was ridiculed for thinking like someone who will sacrifice their own wealth and opportunities for bringing in change. 'Our children have to build their future; we don't want them to get into bringing change to society, if they are able to change their own lives it is enough for families like us. In any case, we had given them enough resources and need not use any public utility service anymore' Next when another colleague spoke about the biased opinion discussing quality vis-à-vis appointment of faculty members under reservation, his proposition met strong dissent among others. He tried to say that everyone who is appointed in the university has proper qualifications at par with other appointments under unreserved category. As also the majority of the vacancies are in reserved quota because these have been left vacant for so many years whereas the faculty positions in unreserved category were filled regularly.' He was told that the university had maintained quality by not appointing such people but will now have to suffer the quality due to such policies. The quality of education in public universities is bound to decline. The colleague 'A' who was questioning the correlation of appointment with quality asked the other set of colleagues so if given an opportunity will they like to work in any one of these upcoming private universities. And it met with a loud laughter as his question was dismissed with everyone getting up and saying 'yeh tum logo ka akhri hattiyar hota hai (this question is like the last weapon in such argument for people like you).' And as always the question remained unanswered. The security of job, high-income returns and a social reputation which sanction them a position to criticize their own system, after all, could not be surrendered.

What are some of the significant points of observation here? Should people not have a choice about the place to educate their own children in private institutions just because they themselves teach in a public university? For sure everyone can choose the institution at par with their aspirations. But when the choice is justified not as a choice but as a compulsion the notion needs to be critically examined. The choice could be absolute in the sense that it may be based upon the course design, career options, enhanced possibility of further studies and alike. But when the justification is compromised quality of resources at a public university, the comparison needs scrutiny. The primary focus of discussion, here, could have been the purpose of both the setups. After all, the discussion was among informed people, who are fully aware of system of higher education. The public universities are setup to provide higher education opportunities in an all inclusive manner. The state has the responsibility to create provisions for access to all stages of education including the tertiary level. The public universities cater to large number of students each year, whereas the private universities can be accessed only by those who have already demonstrated excellence (promising and self motivated) and come from families having substantially higher annual income. In more than one way these universities are essentially the places reserved for those belonging to a particular class of society. It remains to be argued whether anyone will ever question this reservation based on the economic status of the families. Is it not reservation for students from families with high economic status?

The students who study at elite public schools grow up with a thought of being different. *The system here poses a stiff challenge to the process of inclusion. The young adults unconsciously carry the stereotypes with them through generations with no opportunity to negotiate or rebuilt them (Saxena, 2012).* They develop irresolvable margins around themselves and prefer to stay inside keeping others outside the periphery. These ghettos are shifted as it is to the places of higher education. There is reluctance to merge. The students in these universities do not compete through a rigorous merit of few hundred being selected from thousands of applicants. In fact these universities make sure that the students with high marks are

given admissions - after all a corporate house is under no compulsion to provide an opportunity for social mobility. The public universities, on the other hand, have the agenda to create prospects of social mobility to those who are disadvantaged in multiple ways. The complex socio-economic matrix of this country makes a strong case for caste and class based reservation. The public university thus caters to large numbers with provision for all to access higher education. The primary objective of both the systems is absolutely different and thus incomparable. So should large numbers be a reason for compromise in quality? For this one needs to exemplify the meaning of quality. If quality means infrastructure, adjunct faculty from foreign universities and medium of instruction, it is very narrowly described and a clear representative of social and individual biases that higher education was expected to address. If non-ac classrooms, faculty members from all segments of society and multiple mediums of instruction are indicators of poor quality, then the purpose of tertiary education needs to be revisited. It is symptomatic of maintaining hegemonic mind sets leading to a one way corridor of assimilation.

The intersection of socio-cultural and economic matrix creates a complex consortium of students in public universities. The students approach the university with diverse abilities as also the expectations. The courses offered by such universities thus need to be versatile. A multilayered approach across the varying level of difficulty is designed to provide a gamut of educational experiences. It is of critical importance to understand the scope of the course and choose accordingly.

The Spiral Interlock

While the point of access has challenges of its own, not all those who enter the system have equal opportunity to learn and proceed to finish. This is typically true of any public university where in multi-ability students are present in classrooms. *While a barrier-free environment in the context of inclusive education technically refers to physical infrastructure enabling access, how can the notion of barrier-free environment be explicated in terms of enriched thought ensuring retention (Saxena, 2016)?* The students who join in are often left to fend for themselves. The classroom processes are usually undifferentiated. The linear, one directional teaching procedure creates situations of alienation. The university teachers join in without any orientation to teaching for the purpose of learning. They habitually present the content without making any effort to locate the level of comprehension across students. Sometimes it may be purposive.

Come the month of May and universities start buzzing with talks around admission. Most usually this is that time of the year when formal classes are over and the focus is primarily on examination, result and admission. On one of these days while discussions were focused on admission to research degree, many colleagues wanted to control the entry of students from marginalized segment, labelling these as less able and incapable of managing the academic thoroughness. Sometimes they actually scored low on entrance test and interview. Among many reasons was the reason of language. It's fundamental to understand the question to respond accurately, but many of the colleagues were heard saying there are many ways to keep them out, one is to use language with extraordinary level of complexity. It could be any- Hindi or English. In yet another conversation when few faculty members objected to taking candidates in certain categories due to low marks, they were advised that we have to take them as per the law, 'but don't worry we shall have our own standards of course and when they don't meet these they don't get the degree. The legislative provision for intake only but no law compels us to pass these students.'

The public universities have taken stringent steps to fix the number of seats across all levels of courses. This means a guaranteed intake of students from various social and economic groups in a certain proportion. This has ensured access, but the hegemonic mind sets of those at the position of privilege are reluctant to create any provisions for learning. It is only natural to expect students enter a course with a certain level of proficiency. But when the expectation is fixed more in mannerism than potential, the situation demands critical examination. Is it about lowering the bars out of sympathy or some socio-political motives? Or preparing the system to nurture potentials? Is everyone who is selected for any programme equally competent or have many of them mastered the trick of fairing well in examination? After all that is the biggest critique of the examination system. So can there be a system which entails the provision of nurturing individual potentials? Does it require profusion of material and financial resources or teachers with an apt belief-system? Do university teachers even believe in their own selves as being capable of managing the plethora of diversity the students bring with them at higher education? Are they disappointed that despite all efforts and setting up, the long years of school education have failed to ensure filtering a homogenous herd of students? Is that the reason why the system keeps on revisiting the process of schooling to develop well-designed intense provisions for unmistakably ensuring either assimilation or exit?

Drawing a Few Tangents

While in most cases the situation can be addressed through promoting differentiated teaching-learning processes, in some cases additional support or some bridge courses may be required. The university teachers are often unprepared for such situations simply because they do not find it fundamental. They criticize the policies which let *'these'* students enter the system with unmatched potential and accuse the system of promoting mediocrity in higher education. The students thus have a range of views towards higher education based on their own life situations. For many of students higher education is simply not an option. For many others it can be a way of delaying adulthood or just a time pass.

'Graduation is essential. Everyone does graduation these days. There may not any purpose, but at least I shall be a graduate'

'There is no work to do at this moment. So I am enrolled in a graduation programme. Yes I know this degree does not prepare me for any work later, but every job needs graduates only. There are so many graduates available these days; this has become a basic qualification to apply for any level of job.'

'I come to college to freak out. After all I am young and need to enjoy my life. Shall think of work after the college. What is the hurry I shall only be twenty-one years old by the time I finish graduation.'

'My parents say they never enjoyed life and want me to live their lives as well. They both are earning and I am under no pressure to earn for the family. They can sustain me through whatever time I wish to.'

As discussed in the earlier part of this paper as well, the composition of classroom at university level is quite complex. The students come with varying aspiration and commitment towards work and life. In

absence of any pedagogical provisions or future professional directions, a large number of youth continues to be engaged in non-purposive routine for three years during the graduation degree. They defer the planning for their own life. Some blame it on system others on their own miserable social and economic profiles. So the issue of what is next continuously haunt most of them. The colleges are compelled to call themselves as inclusive but make little effort to create inclusive ethos.

It remains to be analyzed whether the quality of public universities is deliberately compromised or it is notional. If number of achievers per year is the criteria, then numbers of those who enrol have to be comparable. But for sure the public universities have the provision of access for youth from all social and economic segments of the society. However the situation is critical for many of those who enter higher education with an aspiration to create avenues for economic mobility for themselves. The entry to any non-manual job requires a university degree. The stories of middle class and lower middle class persons making it big to the white collar, high paying jobs are doing rounds through various media sources. Many of these are real-life stories. A critical review of such episodes can help distinguish whether the success was achieved through individual efforts or there was a systemic support to ensure success. And the best practices whether individual or systemic needs to be compiled for reference of multiple others.

The higher education scenarios offer a range of experiences, and personal intrinsic motivation is often the key to success. A well-resourced college/university would mean having access to library facilities, interactive sessions among students and with teachers and duly equipped computer-based facility to further resources. Such an environment will enrich the life experiences of the students and facilitate them to design their future aspiration. But for all those students who are yet to familiarize themselves with the fact that they actually have equal access to all the available resources, the institutional ethos is the first indicators. These students might come with experiences of limited access and controlled participation and would need hand-holding mechanisms to perform and excel. Access is surely the first step but is not sufficient to facilitate retention and progression. This requires creating an environment of shared spaces and collaborations. If graduation degree is seen connected to entering the world of work, multiplicity among human culture and abilities needs to be learnt during the course itself.

To Conclude for Continuity

The primary focus of this paper is to share observations about the possibilities of creating democratic teaching-learning spaces at higher education. The sharing of narratives represent the mind sets of three primary stakeholders one the university teachers who think differently as parents, two the faculty members of the universities and three the university students. The observations on comparison among private and public universities argue that private universities will exist and continue to cater to a select few with already demonstrated potential and who can afford that cost of education. Also since the purpose of both types of universities is conclusively incomparable it is irrational to argue one against the other. The private universities, in fact, have the potential to grow further since they capture the imagination of many middle and upper middle-class segment of the society. However, it remains to be seen how these universities will capacitate its students as social beings in a diverse global scenarios. At this juncture, one can only hope that these universities will not become the profit-making ventures capitalizing upon the hope and aspirations of those who see '*brands in education*' as means of social and economic mobility.

With privatization being a comparatively new phenomenon (post liberalization-early nineties) and blooming only in certain parts of India, there is a little possibility that it may pose any potential threat to the public institution. The public institutions will continue to hold a place of high esteem in people's imaginary of higher education while regularly reaching out to newer social fringes, consistently touching lives of many through possibility of access. Not all those who join these universities lack resources. Many choose these universities due to a range of possibilities offered here. Most of these universities are still not governed by industrial agendas and are potential loci of nurturing the thoughtful professional capable of envisioning a previously unfamiliar social order. Indeed the public universities have emerged as sites with diverse social, cultural and economic blends. The discussions around provisions of access to these places need not be reduced to an act of political appeasement. These spaces have the potential to provide opportunities for forward mobility of all segments of society.

The process of inclusion need not be confused with intrusion into privileged spaces. Merely the idea of ability nurturing may be threatening for those who manoeuvre to maintain the position of dominance by creating certain impenetrable systems. Those in elite ghettos continue to redeem upon the wretchedness of these who are methodically pushed out of the system. It is convenient to discuss the miseries of marginalized in their absence. There could be continued effort to create spaces which are inaccessible by the disadvantaged. If higher education is under transition at this moment, it is imperative that efforts to create any disconnect across diversity and promote assimilation is closely guarded against. The institutional ethos at places of higher education has to be redefined through the undisguised lens of acknowledging inherent discrimination. Let us acknowledge and confront those deep-rooted personal and organizational stereotypes which propagate the notion of incompetence among many of these populations. This would require two forked approaches one to create opportunities of ability nurturance across all students and two to recognize multiple forms of knowledge as being genuine. The process of democratizing teaching-learning spaces necessitates that the belief systems of all the participants are negotiated to create a culture of mutual respect and harmony.

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