

A liberal poetics of policy

The contemporary fortunes of Indian higher education

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In *The Evolution of Educational Thought* (1938), Emile Durkheim recounted the historical irony that undergirds the idea of institutionality – by pitting it against the birth of the university in medieval Europe. He noted how the coming into being of a corporative organisation – the *universitas* – was effectively an attempt at ‘unionising’ the body of teachers. It rose out of a conflict of jurisdictional authority between practicing teachers and the bishop, over the question of who had the *right* to teach. In that sense, the European university evolved from a discursive and executive dispute over the distribution of professional rights – insofar as the cathedral had until then empowered a Chancellor to arbitrarily decide on the conferment of the *licentia docendi* (the license to practice the teaching profession anywhere in Europe). Between 1210 and 1215, through a series of papal bulls, the teachers were recognised as an ‘organisation of greater solidarity and of greater strength’ capable of autonomously arbitrating on matters of academic practice.¹ The university was thus born into a structure of agonism, the ontological condition of a counter-institution. Interestingly, the weapon that the *universitas* used in this protracted litigious self-development was – as Durkheim succinctly maintains – ‘systematic and widespread refusals to teach’.² In other words, the battle for recognition was historically won through the moral-political force of what is popularly understood as the strike.

There are three significant structural components about the university character that emerge from this originary parable, and all of them go against a common-

sensical or current-day imagining of its role in society. First, the university cohered around a self-consciousness and not prior legislative sanction. To that extent, it was constituted by a political act of will and in direct opposition to the powers that be. Second, the corporative being of the *universitas* did not consist in a moral role or even a social calling; rather it was a definite coincidence of professional interests that brought it about. A practical bargain over teaching labour and its material corollary in an economy of minimum skills or vocational qualification (*sans* any transcendental aura of messianism, but with well-defined rights of access to the social surplus produced by such work) resulted in this transformation. Third and finally, the primary pedagogical legacy of this creature of medieval lore was informed by a rights-claim, and not a traditionally attributed ethic of duty. The modern Humboldtian instantiation of the university, in its co-optation of the incipient labour discourse within a fable of disinterested intellectuality as well as the relinquishment of all matters of appointment to the state,³ had in fact substantially reneged on all these political promises immanent within its earliest conception.

Colonial pasts, nationalist futures

When, in colonial India, the demand for a national university was articulated along the lineaments of its modern European predecessor,⁴ the fortunes of it were almost programmed into a self-fulfilling prophecy. To imagine an anti-colonial resistance taking root in a colonial im-

port was flawed to begin with, in that the institution carried with it the burden of building a 'nation' in the image of one's oppressors. That the structural relationship between the university and the nation-state – both of which were historically conjoined by the imaginative project of colonial modernity⁵ – will contort the possible futures of each was adequately warned against by none other than Rabindranath Tagore. In his efforts to experiment with a radically different idea of a 'world university',⁶ he sought to escape the narrow distinctions of national spirit and utilitarian self-sufficiency at once. In his elaborate manifesto for 'The Centre of Indian Culture', Tagore presciently writes as early as 1919:

Lately, most of our attempts to establish national schools and universities were made with the idea that it was external independence which was needed. We forget that the same weakness in our character, or in our circumstances, which inevitably draws us on to the slippery slope of imitation, will pursue us when our independence is merely of the outside. For then our freedom will become the freedom to imitate the foreign institutions, thus bringing our evil fortune under the influence of the conjunction of two malignant planets – those of imitation and the badness of imitation – producing a machine-made University, which is made with a bad machine ... [A]s soon as the idea of a University enters our mind, the idea of a Cambridge University, Oxford University, and a host of other European Universities, rushes in at the same time and fills the whole space. We then imagine that our salvation lies in a selection of the best points of each patched together in an eclectic perfection ...⁷

A hundred years on, the Tagorean caution seems to have achieved the force of a consummate truth – as public universities in India continue to be poised between an incomplete attempt at decolonisation and the compulsions of a global market. While a familiar lament about the absence of Indian higher education institutions in world ranking charts is regularly sounded,⁸ the past six years of a Hindutva disciplining of public-funded universities have accused the latter of betraying a nationalist consensus. Faced with criticism on policy measures, the Indian Prime Minister has even actively abetted a climate of anti-intellectualism by pitting the *Harvard* pedigree of prominent scholar-critics (for example, the Nobel-winning economist Amartya Sen) against his own 'hard work' of nation-building – and thus urging people to denounce such voices.⁹ Consequently, study circles have

been proscribed, ruling-party bigots nominated to positions of institutional leadership, research fellowships blocked, Dalit students ghettoised, leading to suicide, a Muslim researcher assaulted and forced to disappear from campus, student leaders arrested on charges of sedition, teachers suspended for staging 'anti-national' plays or organising 'anti-government' talks, public intellectuals harassed and incarcerated for doubling up as 'urban Naxals', a campus library raided by riot action forces and student hostels bombed with stun grenades.¹⁰ Alongside all this, student fees have been periodically hiked,¹¹ departments defunded and threatened with closure,¹² universities empowered to open self-financed courses¹³ and foreign institutions encouraged to set up shop in the name of internationalising higher education.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the very same universities and colleges that were subjected to regular governmental crackdowns came to be subsequently anointed as the 'best performing' institutions through annual surveys and audit-routines – only to then allow them to generate their own resources and work towards a cherished ideal of financial autonomy.¹⁵

Walking a neoliberal tightrope

Soon after the electoral ascendancy of the Hindu right in 2014, the Narendra Modi government promised a structural refashioning of the education sector through a new national policy. The first committee set up for the purpose, under the chairmanship of a now-deceased bureaucrat TSR Subramanian, spent more than a year drafting a neoliberal manual for successive privatisation. It was in following its recommendations that colleges began being ranked by a state agency, and those occupying either end of the grading spectrum were eventually delinked from state resources. Top-ranked colleges could find investors in the private equity market through appropriate branding measures, while the lowest in the range were to be considered a waste of public money and therefore earmarked for imminent closure.¹⁶ The same policy document, popularly referred to as the *Draft National Policy on Education 2016*, ominously noted in Section 5.4:

[O]ne finds unions or associations of subsets of students, or teachers, or other employees, who aggressively pursue their special political or other interests, within the arena of the campus, and the college/university ambit. It is

not infrequent that two or more of such groups of students or faculty members come into serious opposition with each other on this or [an]other issue, and have no hesitation in blocking the main-line work of the university; they may have real or imagined grievances, but the collateral damage to the serious students can be heavy indeed ... Universities and colleges are temples of learning. Some self-imposed restrictions surely should be in place to ensure that the primary work of the universities should be conducted without hindrance. Ideally the universities ought not to lend themselves as play grounds for the larger national rivalries, inequalities, inequities, and social/cultural fault-lines; these need to be tackled by society as a whole in other fora such as parliament, courts, elections, etc. The point in short is that it is now essential to review the current situation, and find the balance between free speech and freedom of association guaranteed by the Constitution, the needs of various sections of society, and balance them with the primary purpose for which the universities and institutions of higher learning have been established.¹⁷

Nothing about this recommendation sounds surprising though. In its debunking of the university's relationship with social/cultural fault-lines and an imaginary self-referentiality of assumptions about so-called primary work or primary purpose lies a vehement denial of histories of caste-apartheid underwritten into structures of

cognitive labour. This call for a de-politicisation of the university not only responds to the neoliberal pathology of self-aggrandising individualism, but also distorts the story of its medieval origins. By repeatedly emphasising that the 'main-line work of the university' is counter-posed to the task of social or political transformation, the Draft of 2016 lent credence to nearly three decades of policy orientation towards human resource development. One would have assumed that the government would lap up such a manifesto, given the latter's careful conjuring of an exit-route for state participation in higher education.

The sequence of events that followed however turned out to be quite contrary. The ruling-party dumped this proposal for following the financialisation plot too manifestly, and appointed a second committee to draw up a renewed roadmap for the nation's educational futures.

Falling into a liberal phantasm

Chaired by renowned space scientist K. Kasturirangan, the new policy-making body spent another one-and-a-half years to reconfigure a national vision in the field – and employed the services of a four-member Drafting Committee, three of whom represented interests of Amer-



ican and Indian private universities as well as corporate-funded think-tanks.¹⁸ The animating spirit of the exercise had evidently not changed, though the terms of public reference – one could guess – would have to be distinctly different this time around.

What emerged from these deliberations – which did not involve representations by any teachers' association or even student bodies (barring the ruling-party's offshoot)¹⁹ – advocated a wholesale reinvention of universities and colleges as sites of liberal education.²⁰ The government was initially unsure of the public traction of such a recommendation, and shelved the report until the political harvest of the next general elections was settled in May 2019. Within a week of the Modi government's re-installation at the Centre, the *Draft National Education Policy* was unveiled and placed in the public domain. A year of intense debates followed and several excisions were made in the original *Draft*, until the peak of the pandemic helped the government bypass the parliamentary route and approve the final *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* through Cabinet fiat. Notably, while the original framework submitted by the Committee had been slashed to one-eighth its size and all documentary attempts at a stock-taking of the existing systems had been edited out, the overwhelming 'liberal' thrust in the re-tooling of tertiary education was left untouched.

In the name of an intellectual holism, the *NEP 2020* stressed that the 'notion of a "knowledge of many arts" or what in modern times is often called the "liberal arts" (i.e., a liberal notion of the arts) must be brought back to Indian education, as it is exactly the kind of education that will be required for the 21st century'.²¹ To this effect, it suggested that compulsory training in the liberal arts, humanities and social sciences be introduced within routines of technical, professional and vocational education – such that all single-stream institutions of the latter kind may be integrated with multidisciplinary pedagogical practice.²² The ideal of democratic citizenship was harnessed to the policy *telos* of university education, and it was maintained – almost in stark contrast to the now-junked *Draft* of 2016 – that the purpose of higher studies is 'more than the creation of greater opportunities for individual employment'.²³ The litmus-test of employability that had – since the previous *National Policy on Education 1986* and its subsequent revisions in 1992 – steered the fortunes of higher learning

in intimate partnership with the global marketplace of auctionable labour suddenly became the 'by-product' of institutionalised college curricula.²⁴ Instead, it was mandated that 'Departments in Languages, Literature, Music, Philosophy, Indology, Art, Dance, Theatre, Education, Mathematics, Statistics, Pure and Applied Sciences, Sociology, Economics, Sports, Translation and Interpretation, and other such subjects needed for a multidisciplinary, stimulating Indian education and environment will be established and strengthened at all HEIs'.²⁵

Such a happy marriage of disciplinary *silos* was not only visibly ranged against recent archives of policy-planning in terms of university pedagogy, but it also went against the prerogatives sounded since the first *National Policy on Education (NPE)* of 1968. Hailing higher education as an instrument of economic growth and source of 'manpower' within a developmentalist imagination, the second *NPE* of 1986 was preceded by a re-christening of the education department as the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD).²⁶ This was to clearly enunciate the priorities of a developing economy in reaping the potential surplus of its labour-power – refashioned as human capital – and, in close alliance with such goals, there were special packages announced for the productivity-enhancing STEM disciplines.²⁷ In a classic tokenistic inversion of such a scheme of policy wisdom, the final version of *NEP 2020* declaimed:

To bring the focus back on education and learning, it is desirable that the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) be re-designated as the Ministry of Education (MoE).²⁸

The question that begs to be asked at this point is: what are those structures of desire that necessitate a semiotic shift from the *neoliberal* to the *liberal* within Indian policy-imagination, and especially in the face of continued fascist onslaughts on the university sector? Why must a government, which has faced the stiffest opposition from a secular liberal intelligentsia for its persistent illiberalism and has commandeered all repressive arms of the state to criminalise such opposition for more than six years now, suddenly sing reformist paeans to 'critical thinking and higher-order thinking capacities'?²⁹ To put it rather aphoristically, how does a training in liberal citizenship become the normative logic of authoritarian rule?

The great Indian educational marketplace

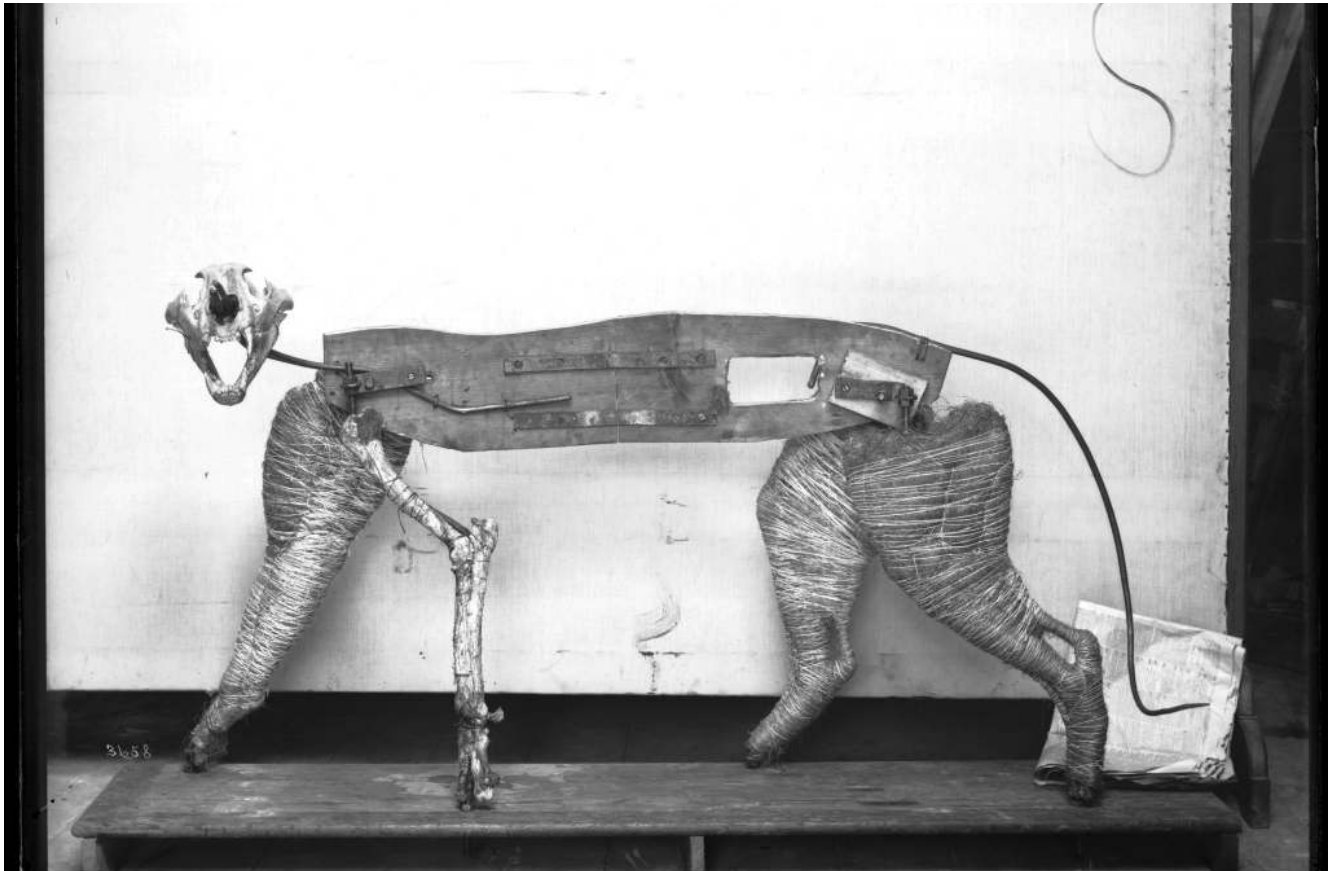
One might fathom a two-part answer to this – the parts interconnected by their simultaneity in historical and ideological terms. The first part calls for a detour into the trajectories of international finance, and a gradual unfolding of the concurrent but differentiated histories of globalisation in the North and South. Though the Indian economy officially opened itself up to transnational investments within key industrial sectors in 1991, it inspired relatively little confidence until about the turn of the century. The structural adjustment programmes demanded by the Washington consensus of 1989 saw a desperate reconfiguration of regulatory regimes through legislative incursions, but the Western markets were yet to shed their apprehensions about the adventure it promised. As a result, the influx of foreign capital was slow and largely conditioned by financial perceptions of risk. It was only with the stock-market upheavals portended by the ‘dotcom’ and Enron scandals between 2001 and 2004 that the recessionary wave hit the high havens of development. The aleatory *outsides* to the downturn were identified in the emerging market economies (EMEs) and the ‘third world’ nations – now fancifully picking up in crisis-management discourse as the ‘global South’. Insofar as these new investment-destinations had hardly resisted the dominant model of globalisation and had instead become its bailout zone, the neoliberal experiment finally found an opportune reincarnation in countries like India. Given its population statistics and a ready market of cheap but over-available labour-power, all that India needed in order to translate its super-power fantasies was a reaping of the demographic dividend through mass-skilling exercises.

While the leash of austerity cuts plagued resource allocations for education in the West, Indian policy-makers spelt out a rare variety of enthusiasm for democratising educational outreach and delivery through the first decade of the millennium. Universities and colleges were marked out as factories for producing flexible but specialised labour for the low-wage service-industries, which had – since the aftermath of the oil/energy crisis in late-1970s USA – been outsourced by international markets in order to reduce cost liabilities. India’s offer of higher education under the World Trade Organisation’s Gen-

eral Agreement on Trade in Services (WTO-GATS), in the 2001 Doha Round of negotiations invited multilateral trade in the sector and pledged a curtailment of national subsidies in order to ease the move.³⁰ This was followed by a *Model Universities Act 2004* that urged institutions towards competitive regimes of resource-generation through diversification of curricula.³¹ The push for vocational and basic skilling courses – within the precincts of the traditional university – saw a strategic neglect for the liberal disciplines.³² And yet, more and more universities were established in relatively remote locations in the name of democratising higher education. The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012), the National Knowledge Commission Reports (2006-2009) and the Yash Pal Committee Report (2009) culminated in the setting up of 15 new central universities across the country through a single piece of legislation in 2009.³³ Ironically, the Euro-American academy was in the vortex of a large-scale delegitimisation at exactly the same moment in history. In terms of pedagogical reform however, the forceful and mindless mimesis of American paradigms – like the semester system, the four-year undergraduate programme and a cafeteria model of choice-based credit transfer – continued without respite.³⁴ By peddling employability and global relevance as the only governing shibboleths of educational planning, there were even attempts at passing a Foreign Education Providers Bill in parliament on two successive occasions in 2010 and 2013.³⁵

Post-productionist paranoias

The forced expansion of the higher education market, coupled with ill-suited structural changes within pedagogy – such as a wholesale import of the semester system and reduced teaching time for masses of systemically deprived students, or adding an extra year of college in order to impart low-level cognitive skills across motley subjects – soon started showing its effects. An economy of mass-producing specialised labour from within the college sector had its direct impact on the conditions of employment and dignity of work: rates of wage-compensation were depressed, whole-scale informalisation of job contracts followed, social security measures were withdrawn and there was a growing loss of jobs proportionate to one’s skills/qualifications. Understandably,



domestic consumption contracted and global investors started seeking an exit in the fear of potential losses. The plummeting indices of economic growth, coupled with the optics of major financial scams involving an erstwhile ruling-party leadership between 2010 and 2013, became the cause for a cultural triumphalism on the part of the Hindu right. A widespread climate of economic disaffection within the country was not only converted into a spectacular failure of the developmentalist state, but was more accurately channeled into cultural anxieties about how jobs and lands of the 'sons of the soil' were under threat from foreign 'infiltrators' from the neighbouring Muslim nations. The general elections of 2014, which saw rioting communal forces thump their way into power, became in effect the demand for a grand plebiscite on the Hindu nation. Predictably, as the economic emergency deepened, the political narrative was engineered to seek an identification of the 'illegal migrant' and a securitisation of national interest by re-codifying the imaginative limits of being-citizen. State-supported instances of local vigilantism, aided by a series of mob lynchings and extra-judicial action, turned the most vulnerable (and hence, incessantly mobile) forms of labour

into spectres of civilisational terror and scavengers on national wealth.

On the other hand, a continued spate of ill-thought economic reforms – like demonetisation of high-value legal tender in 2016 and the 2017 imposition of a centralised tax regime in violation of the distributive federal powers of local state governments – ushered the economy into an irrecoverable crisis and forced millions of jobless workers into chronic precarity.⁵⁶ That the Subramanian Committee's 2016 recommendations for market-oriented reforms in education found no takers in the government at the time assumes its true import in the context of this history – insofar as the economic mobility rationale of higher learning was already busted. A narrative nauseatingly recycled since the Ambani-Birla Report of April 2000 – that a college degree leads to higher private lifetime incomes or greater creditworthiness in the debt market⁵⁷ – was apodictically exposed as a hoax. Education now had to be an end in itself and not a means to employment. In other words, the distribution of its surplus had to be limited to the use value of the commodity purchased, while imploding the potential for any productive exchange in the future.

With Indian universities belching out a surplus population of exploitable labour, rates of unemployment in 2017-18 touched a 45-year peak according to initially-censured government data.³⁸ Labour Bureau Surveys from consecutive years (2014 to 2016) proved that there were three times the quantum of formally-trained skills available in the market than there were jobs.³⁹ The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report 2017-18, when read in conjunction with the Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) from the same period, betrayed similar statistical shockers – for example, 18 out of 26 college-educated men in India were not even informally employed while for women the corresponding rate was 20 out of every 25.⁴⁰ Under such circumstances, what could a promised National Education Policy pronounce as immediate panacea? The *NEP 2020* is meticulously calculated to re-enchant the loss of a ‘normative justification’ for higher education. How it performs this function comprises the second part of my promised explanation here.

Reimagining citizenship

The policy document’s inspired prose around a newfound liberal agenda is shaped into this much-needed epistemological therapy for the ailing public university in India. It involves a training in civic behaviours that can seek legislative articulation in the parliament and courts, but must garner the ideological force of hegemony through institutionalised higher education. The new citizenship laws of the country set the limits of the epistemic forecast for the public university through its definition of the ‘national public’. That an amendment to India’s citizenship routines preceded the publication of a liberal education policy is, therefore, far from fortuitous.

In early December 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed by brute numerical force in the Indian parliament and mandated the conferral of citizenship to ‘illegal migrants’ of all religious faiths barring Muslims.⁴¹ Repeatedly publicised as part of an accompanying chronology of bureaucratic tests of citizenship – through integration with population census and compulsory registration of lineage – the said Act specifically threatened the Muslim poor with judicial and administrative harassment, detention and deportation.⁴² Students of public universities from across the country

joined in with mass uprisings against this slew of discriminatory civic rights-reforms, to which the state responded with terror and a communal massacre in the month of February 2020.⁴³ While the pandemic foreclosed the possibility for physical demonstrations for months thereafter, it also provided the government an opportunity to re-instrumentalise its biggest detractors within intellectual professions with the civic malcontents of its political ideology. Since the process of accruing legitimacy for laws – through the production of citizen-subjects – is the stated vocation of the liberal university, the *NEP* proposes a nationalist fantasy as the democratic consensus.⁴⁴

In this, it is neither paradoxical nor accidental that the interpellative terms of Indian higher education discourse that have gone completely missing between *NPE 1986/92* and *NEP 2020* include both ‘human resource’ as well as ‘secularism’ or ‘reservation policy’.⁴⁵ Placed against the present context, the university is not obligated to provide social mobility or social justice – and yet garbs itself in the literal mystification of liberalism.

This exhibitionism of liberalism – as either a guarantor of citizenly sentiment or the preserve of the class/caste-elite in expensive private universities – does not require us to go very far to understand its eventual destiny. In mid-March 2021, there was much media uproar over the purportedly forced resignations of key intellectual voices from a certain private university that has not only been touted as the leading liberal arts institution in the country, but had also generated effusive enthusiasm for the *NEP*’s advocacy of liberal training.⁴⁶ In fact, one of these intellectuals – a leading political commentator and an erstwhile Vice Chancellor of the same university – had even been part of the consultative process that gave shape to the Draft *NEP 2019*. On his exit from the university, much was written in the popular press about the survival struggles of a dissensual consciousness in these lone private universities and how that too is under siege from the current ruling dispensation. The founders of the university perceived a political liability in associating with overly outspoken professors, and have been severally and deservedly charged with violation of due process as well as the institution’s haloed founding-principle. But there is an evil irony here. The working committee of the Draft *NEP 2019* – as I have already shown – included an overwhelming majority rep-

resentation from national/global private institutions and entities. If a privatised order of institutional liberalism can be the legitimate ground for manufacturing nationalist consent (in the exact terms of a Vedic 'golden age' theory, found in the *NEP*), why must it be expected to curate dissent beyond digitally-administered doses of vision-and-mission statements?

Reproducing surplus labour

By way of concluding, it is perhaps important to query whether the *NEP*'s acknowledgment of the redundancy of employment-concerns within higher education is really antithetical to the neoliberal character of development. Put differently, does the reinstatement of a liberal penchant at the heart of the university's self-imagining mark a definite departure from neoliberal fortunes? It would seem to confirm quite the opposite, in fact. And the key to this rhetorical paradox lies in the policy-muddle of what has been called multidisciplinary. A liberal education, the *NEP* framework contends, may only be possible through a default 'multidisciplinary' focus that 'would aim to develop all capacities of human beings – intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral in an integrated manner'.⁴⁷ To achieve this goal, not only must smaller institutions be merged and swallowed within college complexes, but

[ev]en engineering institutions, such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), will move towards more holistic and multidisciplinary education with more arts and humanities. Students of arts and humanities will aim to learn more science and all will make an effort to incorporate more vocational subjects and soft skills.⁴⁸

Borrowing explanatory registers from the policy document, a multidisciplinary undergraduate programme requires a student to study different subjects at distinct points of time – for example, a physics major opting for a paper in Sanskrit poetry or an enrolment in sociology being offered a semester's worth of management studies. On the face of it, this might sound invigoratingly close to what we identify as interdisciplinary intellectual practice.

But I would insist that the politics of radical interdisciplinarity is as far removed from a liberal multidisciplinary curriculum as possible – inasmuch as the former probes the limits of a discipline through counterfactual

intersections, while the latter dabbles in a cognitive skilling across multiple disciplines without necessarily questioning the self-composition of either. In the process, what it prepares for is a multi-tasking workforce with minimal cognitive competence in varied disciplines of dubious (and understandably diluted) quality.⁴⁹ Universities and colleges are effectively (re)turned to their fate as factory-units for mass-producing semi-skilled, cheap, informal labour – lacking substantive depth in any subject while potentially manoeuvring the know-how demanded by low-paying jobs in multiple sectors. This was explicitly spelt out in the original report of the Kasturirangan Committee thus:

Simply tailoring people into jobs that exist today, but that are likely to change or disappear after some years, is suboptimal and even counterproductive.... Single-skill and single-discipline jobs are likely to become automated over time. Therefore, there will be a great need to focus on multidisciplinary and 21st century competencies for future work roles.... By focusing on such broad based, flexible, individualised, innovative, and multidisciplinary learning, higher education must aim to prepare its students not just for their first jobs – but also for their second, third, and all future jobs over their lifetimes.⁵⁰

By admitting to a permanent informalisation of employment opportunities, the expansive vision behind *NEP 2020* stitches up the logic of multidisciplinary as an emergency-antidote to economic precarity. It confirms the recessionary demands of the present, and proposes a model of cognitive citizenship as perfect condition for maximal human resource exploitability.

Why else, one must posit, would a policy-template that waxes eloquent about the need for breaching disciplinary *silos* not name for once those sites of interdisciplinary intellectual practice that currently exist across Indian universities – such as women's studies, studies in social exclusion, human rights studies, economic and social planning, comparative literature, etc.? More urgently, why does the *NEP* not say a word about the systematic threats of closure to more than 167 Centres for Women's Studies and 35 Centres for Studies in Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy since 2017?⁵¹ These interdisciplinary programmes of social scientific study, instituted for the most part as schemes incorporated between the Eighth (1992-1997) and Tenth Five Year Plans (2002-2007), have functioned effectively for decades before being hounded

by annual reviews and pleas for extension since the abolition of the Planning Commission.⁵² The latest in the chronicle of such attacks saw the Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies in Jamia Millia Islamia University – a public institution now identified as having spearheaded the movement against *CAA 2019* – issued cursory notices for dissolution in the middle of the pandemic, which were then later withdrawn in the face of a public outcry.⁵³

The reason for a policy bulletin's studied silence on the place of these long-repressed undersides to secular-liberal social sciences within the university is due to a fundamental distinction between the scourge of the multidisciplinary vis-à-vis the scope of the interdisciplinary. True interdisciplinarity is about honing a condition of epistemic immigrancy. It interrogates the methodological violence(s) of *borders* on/against disciplines, instead of reveling in a touristic uncriticality of wonder and museumised charades of difference. Studying literature and sociology and politics as separate curricular components does not on its own produce the alchemical charge of gender studies, and can therefore be easily made to replace existing departments of women's studies. The corollary benefits of such a substitution would include a complete exorcism of the understanding of sexual harassment from within the feudality of academic practice, and in the process forestall the possible futures of #MeToo movements across our universities. It appears that India's official vision for national education – in completing Tagore's century-old angst – echoes the *double dangers* of a nation of 'mimic men' and of the machines with which they are mimed.

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Notes

1. Emile Durkheim, 'The Birth of the University: The *inceptio* and the *licentia docendi*', in *The Evolution of Educational Thought: Lectures on the formation and development of secondary education in France*, trans. Peter Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977 [1938]), 75–87.
2. Durkheim, 'The Birth of the University', 83.

3. Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'On the Internal and External Organisation of the Higher Scientific Institutions in Berlin', in *Works in German, Volume 4: Writings on Politics and Education*, eds. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982 [1810]). Humboldt maintains: 'Since these institutions can thus achieve their purpose only if each one, as much as possible, faces the pure idea of science, solitariness and freedom are the predominant principles in their circle ... [A]s far as the externality of the relationship to the state and its activity in all of this is concerned, it must only ensure the wealth (strength and variety) of mental power through the choice of the men that should be assembled ... The appointment of university teachers must be reserved exclusively to the state, and it is surely not a good practice to allow the faculties more influence on it than a perspicacious and reasonable committee would exercise on its own ... Moreover, the make-up of the universities is too closely tied to the immediate interests of the state' (3–5).

4. For an understanding of the context, see Aurobindo Ghose, 'A National University', in *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, Volume 1: Early Political Writings 1890 – May 1908* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1973 [1908]). Ghose articulates his demand in contradistinction to Annie Besant's, and sees the early lineaments of a 'national institution' in the National Council of Education in Bengal: 'National education cannot be defined briefly in one or two sentences, but we may describe it tentatively as the education which starting with the past and making full use of the present builds up a great nation ... So shall the Indian people cease to sleep and become once more a people of heroes, patriots, originators, so shall it become a nation and no longer a disorganised mass of men' (895).

5. Bjorn Wittrock, 'The Modern University: The Three Transformations', in *The European and American University since 1800: Historical and Sociological Essays*, eds. Sheldon Rothblatt and Wittrock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 303–362.

6. For more on Tagore's pedagogical experiments at Visvabharati in a provincial *ashram*-location of Shantiniketan, see Himangshu B. Mukherjee, *Education for Fullness: A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013 [1962]); see also Kumkum Bhattacharya, *Rabindranath Tagore: Adventure of Ideas and Innovative Practices in Education* (Heidelberg and New York: Springer, 2014).

7. Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Centre of Indian Culture', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume Two: Plays, Stories, Essays*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996 [1919]), 470–71.

8. Jayanta Gupta, 'President Pranab Mukherjee Rues No Indian University in World's Top 200', *The Times of India*, 16 September 2012.

9. Lalmani Verma, 'Harvard vs Hard Work: With GDP Data, PM Narendra Modi Snubs Note Ban Critics', *The Indian Express*, 2 March 2017.

10. For a ready reckoner on how Indian universities have become the battleground for a muscular right-wing fanaticism over the past six years, see Sruthisagar Yamunan, 'IIT-Madras derecognises student group', *The Hindu*, 28 May 2015; 'Rohith

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 14. Government of India, *The Foreign Educational Institutions (Regulation of Entry and Operations) Bill* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2010); S. Vaidhyasubramaniam, 'Foreign Universities Bill, an Unprescribed Pill', *The Hindu*, 1 August 2010; Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), 'FDI in Indian Higher Education', in *Annual Status of Higher Education in States and Union Territories in India* (New Delhi: CII, 2014), 15–20.
 15. Debaditya Bhattacharya, 'What Makes the Public University Anti-National?', *The Wire*, 18 December 2018.
 16. *Draft National Policy on Education 2016: Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016), Section 7.5.19, 143.
 17. *Draft NPE 2016*, 51–52.
 18. See 'Appendix I' of the *Draft National Education Policy 2019* (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2019), 439, which states the composition of the Drafting Committee as including a professor of mathematics at Princeton University, an employee of Wipro Industries Limited and a functionary of a think-tank funded by Reliance Industries. The Indian government was represented by a lone Advisor to the National Institute Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) on that body. See also 'The curious case of Azim Premji Foundation and the new NEP 2020: How and why big business takes over education policy during post-Fordism', *On Human Condition* Blog, accessed 31 July 2020.
 19. 'Appendix VII' of the *Draft NEP 2019*, 453 – which furnishes 'Details of Consultations by the Committee for Draft National Education Policy (July 2017 onwards)' – does not name any teachers' or students' union barring the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). The ABVP is a Hindu nationalist organisation affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and responsible for much of the recent lumpen violence on public university campuses referenced elsewhere in the essay.
 20. Part II, Chapter 11 ('Towards a More Liberal Education') of the *Draft NEP 2019* notes: 'The purpose and importance of a liberal arts education today – i.e. an education across the *kalas* – is to enable students to explore the numerous remarkable relationships that exist among the sciences and the humanities, mathematics and art, medicine and physics, etc. – and more generally, to explore the surprising unity of all fields of human endeavour. A comprehensive liberal arts education develops all capacities of human beings – intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional and moral – in an integrated manner. Such education, which develops the fundamental capacities of individuals on all aspects of being human, is by its very nature liberal education, and is aimed at developing good and complete human beings' (224).
 21. *NEP 2020*, 36.
 22. *NEP 2020*, Section 10.11, 35.
 23. *NEP 2020*, 33.
 24. *NEP 2020*, Section 11.8, 37.
 25. *NEP 2020*, 37.
 26. Shyamlal Yadav, 'Explained: How India's Education Ministry became "HRD Ministry", and then returned to embrace Education', *The Indian Express*, 1 August 2020.
 27. Section 7 of the first *National Policy on Education 1968* (Government of India: Ministry of Education, 1968) holds that '[w]ith a view to accelerating the growth of the national economy, science education and research should receive high priority.' Section 6.13 of the second *National Policy on Education 1986* (Gol: Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986) continues this strain of policy wisdom by enlisting research as a prerogative of 'higher technical institutions' alone, in the cause of 'producing quality manpower' (22).
 28. *NEP 2020*, 60.
 29. *NEP 2020*, 36.
 30. All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE), 'Fight against inclusion of higher education in WTO', *The Companion*, 5 April 2015.
 31. 'Commercialisation of Education – Teachers Protest Against UGC Model Act', *Labour File 2:1* (January-February 2004); 'Protest against UGC Act continues', *The Times of India*, 22 January 2004.
 32. *National Knowledge Commission: Report to the Nation 2006-2009* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2009) dedicated elaborate chapters to discussing 'Vocational Education and Training', 'Management Education', 'Engineering Education' – and even two separate sections on attracting 'More Talented Students in Maths and Science' (96-110) – but spared not a word on the fate of liberal arts disciplines.

33. See Central Universities Act 2009, *The Gazette of India Part II, Section I* (New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009).
34. For a chronology of how half-baked curricular imports have been imposed in the most unilateral fashion across Indian higher education – often using the 82 colleges of Delhi University as the testing ground for infamous ‘reform-agendas’ – see Mukul Mangalik, “‘Up Against the Wall’5’ but Not “Down and Out” at Delhi University’, *The Wire*, 26 June 2018; Pratik Kumar, ‘FYUP to CBCS, game of choices’, *Deccan Herald*, 9 August 2015.
35. Gol, *Foreign Educational Institutions Bill*. See Nandini Chandra, ‘Private Nation, Public Funds: The Case of the Foreign Education Providers (Regulation of Entry and Operation) 2010 Bill’, *Sanhati* (2011)– for a deeper analysis of the Bill, reintroduced in the Indian parliament in 2013.
36. For analyses of the economic impact of these hastily-implemented authoritarian moves, see Arun Kumar, ‘Economic Consequences of Demonetisation’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 52:1 (January 2017) and ‘The Structurally Flawed GST’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 54:9 (March 2019).
37. Mukesh Ambani and Kumarmangalam Birla, ‘Report on a Policy Framework for Reforms in Education’, *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy* 15:4 (2003), 840–45.
38. ‘Unemployment rate at 45-year high, confirms Labour Ministry data’, *The Hindu*, 31 May 2019; for factors leading to such ‘jobless growth’, see also Jayan Jose Thomas, ‘Missing the Demographic Window of Opportunity? Labour Market Changes in India, 2005-2018’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 55:34 (22 August 2020); Indrajit Bairagya, ‘Why is Unemployment Higher among the Educated?’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 53:7 (17 February 2018); Rahul Menon, ‘Never Done, Poorly Paid, and Vanishing: Female Employment and Labour Force Participation in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 54:19 (11 May 2019); ‘Editorial – The Unemployment Paradox: Looking at Growth Without Jobs’, *EPW Engage*, accessed 30 October 2020.
39. For details, see *Report on Education, Skill Development and Labour Force, Volume III, 2013-14* (Chandigarh: Labour Bureau, Government of India, 2014); *Economic Survey 2014-15* (New Delhi: Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 2015); *Report on Education, Skill Development and Labour Force, Volume III, 2015-16* (Chandigarh: Labour Bureau, Government of India, 2016); see also Subodh Varma, ‘Survey: Even Among Skilled Workers Joblessness Is High’, *The Times of India*, 20 July 2015.
40. Compare Section 2.3, *All India Survey on Higher Education 2017-18* (Government of India: Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2018) with Section E, *Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18* (Government of India: National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019).
41. For an understanding of the fuller implications of the Amendment, see Soumya Shankar, ‘India’s Citizenship Law, in Tandem with National Registry, Could Make BJP’s Discriminatory Targeting of Muslims Easier’, *The Intercept*, 30 January 2020; Saba Naqvi, ‘Citizenship Amendment Bill: A Noose Around Necks of Muslims’, *Outlook*, 11 December 2019; Rohit De and Surabhi Ranganathan, ‘We Are Witnessing a Rediscovery of India’s Republic’, *The New York Times*, 27 December 2019.
42. “‘Aap chronology samajh lijiye”: Amit Shah’s phrase on NRC-CAA is the internet’s favourite meme’, *The Free Press Journal*, 30 December 2019; Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, ‘What is the BJP up to?’, *Frontline*, 17 January 2020.
43. Ankita Dwivedi Johri, ‘From anti-CAA protests, to JNU and Jamia, why women are leading the fight’, *The Indian Express*, 19 January 2020; ‘Resistance, revolution and resolve: How Indian students led the anti-CAA protests’, *Sabrang*, 23 December 2019. For a detailed report on the role of the state machinery and police authorities in the planning and abetting of the ‘pogrom’, see *Report of the DMC Fact-Finding Committee on North-East Delhi Riots of February 2020* (New Delhi: Delhi Minorities Commission, Government of NCT of Delhi, 2020). A complete catalogue of events and the deliberate provocations that engineered the murderous communal violence may be found in ‘Investigative Briefing: Six Months since Delhi Riots, Delhi Police Continue to Enjoy Impunity despite Evidence of Human Rights Violations’, Amnesty International India (28 August 2020), accessed 4 April 2021.
44. The *NEP 2020* articulates its ‘Vision’ in the introductory section of the final document thus: ‘This National Education Policy envisions an education system rooted in Indian ethos that contributes directly to transforming India, that is Bharat, sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, by providing high-quality education to all, and thereby making India a global knowledge superpower.’ Continuing in the same breath, it then enjoins this ‘superpower’-fantasy and desire for ‘globality’ to the task of ‘instill[ing] among the learners a deep-rooted pride in being Indian, not only in thought, but also in spirit, intellect, and deeds, as well as to develop knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that support responsible commitment to human rights, sustainable development and living, and global well-being, thereby reflecting a truly global citizen.’ (6)
45. See Basant Kumar Mohanty, ‘Out: Secularism In: Gita ideal’, *The Telegraph*, 2 August 2020; Kumkum Roy, ‘National Education Policy needs close scrutiny for what it says, what it doesn’t’, *The Indian Express*, 31 July 2020; Prem Singh, ‘National Education Policy for the elites’, *The Indian Express*, 22 October 2020.
46. See ‘Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Critic of Government Policies, Resigns as Professor at Ashoka University’, *The Wire*, 17 March 2021; Shradha Chettri, ‘After Pratap Bhanu Mehta, ex-CEA also resigns from Ashoka University’, *The Times of India*, 19 March 2021.
47. *NEP 2020*, 36.
48. *NEP 2020*, 37.
49. See Akshita Jain, ‘How NEP Will Increase Cost Of Good Education And Produce A Semi-Skilled Workforce’, *Huffpost*, 7 August 2020.
50. *Draft NEP 2019*, 202-203.
51. See Pranita Kulkarni, ‘Centres for social exclusion and women’s studies face uncertain future’, *Governance Now*, 29 September 2017.
52. For the history behind this onslaught and the immediate policy-precedents that underpin it, see Debaditya Bhattacharya, ‘Between disciplines and interdisciplines: the university of indiscipline’, in *The University Unthought: Notes for a Future*, ed. Debaditya Bhattacharya (London: Routledge, 2019), 183–208.
53. See Ismat Ara, ‘As Students and Teachers Panic, Jamia Withdraws Notice Disbanding Two Departments’, *The Wire*, 7 April 2020.