

# **XV National Conference on Women's Studies**

**Pre-conference Colloquium**

## **The Flux in India's Higher Education System**

21<sup>st</sup> January,

SBOA School and Junior College, Chennai

### *Concept Note*

A neoliberal techno-managerial approach to the question of what constitutes 'quality education' had started chipping away at the social democratic conceptualization of public education since the Reagan-Thatcher years in the metropolitan centres of advanced capital accumulation. The German state concentrated on developing universities of 'excellence', the French state negotiated the tiering of higher education institutions, the UK and USA moved towards restructuring the entire system of education as 'market enterprises' evaluated in terms of competitiveness, investment, profits and costs. Each of these features coalesced into the claims of a new paradigm of 'stake-holder driven quality education' which formed the rubric of 'education reforms' advocated by the Bretton Woods institutions.

The process of 'integration' into the new world order of the erstwhile Third World since the installation of the dictatorship in Chile in 1973 entailed a new universalisation of paradigmatic change in the ensuing decades in the very design of the WTO where education became a tradeable service (a site of targeted private (foreign and domestic) investment) along with the changes to intellectual property rights which reshaped the nature of hegemony in the contemporary phase of neoliberal integration. This was in the social historical context of non-universal access to school education in most parts of the world except a small metropolitan core. The political economy of this restructuring through the aegis of 'reforms' has played out in very particular social contexts

The last thirty years since the Second New Education Policy<sup>1</sup> or the National Policy on Education has seen a state of continuous flux in India's higher education system. The world of higher education in India has seen both continuities and changes since the 1980s. On one hand, affirmative action of the most limited kind over a period of three decades has led to a reconstitution of the intersectional social space of the public university; on the other of all students who enroll at the primary level, less than 4% make it to the public

<sup>1</sup> The first 'New Education Policy' was introduced in 1968

system of higher education in India. It is in this highly exclusive context that both the past and present debates on caste, patriarchy, and religious and other forms of social discrimination and oppression have been playing out.

Neoliberalism in India has operated in a society already heavily weighed against women. Gender disparity was already encoded in family and social institutions which colonial capitalism strengthened and used for the purposes of labour deployment and control. A complex process of myth formation has constructed gender in Indian society in the last two hundred and fifty years that was crucial to the social reproduction of class in India. Five decades of state-led capitalism preserved patriarchy in every sphere. The process of liberalisation has brought in its wake newer forms of gender exploitation and gender disempowerment, in both the economic and social spheres, leading to increased violence against women. Market fundamentalism has bred religious and social fundamentalism as well, with disastrous consequences for many sections in society and especially women. The general conclusion from the literature that has evaluated the impact of liberalization on women has established quite forcefully how large sections of women have been significantly disempowered by neoliberal economic reforms. The sectoral shifts in the economy after 1991 have been on clear gender lines. Women were losing many of their earlier occupations, being crowded into less stable employment and being pushed to the margins of the economy. This is in spite of the lofty ideas of the Policy for Women announced in 1994 and the multiplicity of schemes for women's development that the state has ritualistically adopted in the last twenty years. The diversification in employment for urban women is concentrated among women from higher labour status, the section of people who have greater access to jobs. A socially advantaged family background and family education status have been much more important determinants of job access and mobility than skill levels.

Patriarchy has been at the heart of the debate on the role of higher education in India. The continuities and changes in patterns of enrolment in different disciplines, the evidence of setting in of gender gaps at the level of primary education, perceptions of 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines, the inadequacy of analysis that have tried to portray enrolment in higher education as the causal explanation for low rates of women's work participation, the struggle of women against discriminating family structures on the question of accessing higher education, the movements and resistance against discriminatory structures and practices inside the higher education institutions raise the question as to in what ways and to what extent does higher education function as a means of liberation?

Notwithstanding the diverse range of institutions, social space and disciplines/areas that constitute the material space of 'higher education', the flux has cut across the variations – on a range of inter-related questions such as the institutional structure of the public university and spaces of higher learning; quality (reduced to a quantified measures of commoditized output), affordability and access of higher education; tiering through the 'regionalization' of higher education in addition to the knowledge hierarchy of 'streams' and disciplines; layers of social discrimination; the contractualisation of labour and the aggressive attempts and outcomes of privatization. The experience and impact of privatization of higher education in India has been complex and distinct from the experiences of countries in which higher education was universally public. Given that private colleges and private run colleges aided by state funding have existed in India since the late colonial period, the reach of the 'public' system in itself is distinct and limited. Moreover, the aggressive promotion of private universities in the post-liberalization era is also distinct in its ownership mix of family-owned small, medium and big capitalist entities and varies across regions.

While these questions have been central to students', teachers' and education workers' struggles in India, the intensification of both attacks on the higher education system from multiple quarters and resistance to it has intensified in the last few years. The question of cuts in public funding, authoritarian attacks on campus democracy and the right to dissent, intensification of discrimination and oppression on the basis of identity and ideological attacks by the extreme Right have seen valiant resistance by students and sections of teachers both inside and outside the campuses. It is in this phase of intensification that the third New Education Policy 2016 (National Education Policy) is being proposed.

To what extent are these rallying points of an intensified and significant fight-back related to the paradigmatic changes in education policy and larger political economy of the neoliberal global order? How have these movements looked at the different waves of education 'reforms' in India from the Kothari Commission to the Birla-Ambani Report? What implication does this have on spatial hierarchies of school, technical and higher education constituted within the tiering of the regional and the social? What are the experiences and lessons drawn on the struggles against structures of discrimination and oppression and for substantive affirmative action? What drives the present attempts at saffronization of education? What significance does this have in the delineation of structural features of an intersectional social hierarchy in India that facilitates a

continuous process of labour cheapening as the sole basis of integration into the neoliberal global order?

And lastly, are there possibilities of new solidarities across the boundaries of nation states for example with the Chilean student movement which has brought to the fore similar questions in a different social historical context?

The IAWS pre-conference one-day colloquium on 'The Flux in India's Higher Education System' aims at a comprehensive analysis to look beyond immediacies into the developments of the last thirty years in this regard. The colloquium is planned as a series of three sessions with a combination of students, teachers, education workers and researchers as participants. The colloquium organizers will attempt to go beyond metropolitan locations in ensuring a representation of the unevenness in higher education in the public distribution of resources for higher education and the variations in social context over which the 'flux' of the last thirty years have been playing out.

\*\*\*

Session I: The World of Education: Continuities and Changes

Session II: The Social Structure of Higher Education in India

Session III: Education 'Reforms': Intent and Implications

Session III: The Struggles in Institutions of Higher Education (Panel Discussion)

#### **Coordinators**

**Chirashree Das Gupta,**  
Centre for the Study of Law and  
Governance,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)  
Email: chirashree@gmail.com

**Malini Chakravarty,**  
Centre for Budget and Governance  
Accountability (CBGA)  
Email: malini.chakrav@gmail.com

#### **Hosted by**

**The SBOA Educational Trust at the SBOA School and Junior College,  
18, School Road, Anna Nagar West Extension, Chennai**