



# Changing Class Character of the Campus: New Challenges of the Student-Youth Movement

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Over the last two decades, there has been a lull on the campuses. There has been no major student movement on “real” issues concerning the middle and lower middle class students and what we witness is a dead silence. It does not mean that there is a dearth of issues. On the contrary, the number of issues worth struggling for has only increased, especially during the last decade. In accordance with the general policy of the HRD ministry, the ratio of number of seats available in higher education to the (increasing) number of aspirants has been declining continuously and the fees has been increasing. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative to probe the reason behind the

deadly silence on campus. Our approach will involve a critical examination of hard facts and so it will be necessary to cast a glance over some statistics related with higher education.

India is known to have a large number of students in higher education. In fact dur-

ing the last two decades it has often been said that the number of higher education students in India is too much. But this claim does not hold much water. Whether the number of students in higher education is high or low, should be determined by the ratio of total number of students in higher education to the total number of aspirants for higher education. On the one hand, the government admits that the “signaling effect” of conventional education is fading away and on the other, newer forms of higher education, for instance, vocational and professional education which does have some “signaling effect”, cannot be afforded by the common youth. Except for a few central universities and big universities, the standard of conventional higher education has sunk to such a level, that it has lost whatever remained of its remaining “signaling effect”. We all know that barring a few exceptions, only upper and upper middle class students can reach IITs or medical colleges. Institutions like IIMs have been monopolized by the rich and management students generally dream of making it big abroad. They do not intend to stay in India and their entire edu-

cation is geared towards bettering their prospects of going abroad. At the same time, we are witnessing a rapid “elitisation” of the university campuses. Especially after the New Education Policy of 1986, even conventional higher education is being brought to a stage where it increasingly becomes a prerogative of the richer classes. This process acquired even greater momentum after the implementation of new economic policies of liberalization in the decade of the 1990s, as the statistics related to higher education shows.

By the middle of 2005, there were 342 universities in India including 18 central universities, 211 state universities, 95 deemed universities, 5 institutions founded as per the state laws, and 13 institutions of national importance. The number of colleges was 17625, among which 5386 were recognized by the UGC. The number of students studying in these institutions was 10.48 million; this number is greater than the corresponding number for the previous year. However, the number of those eligible for higher education has increased at a much higher rate. In any case one cannot forget that only 7 percent of the



total number of those eligible reaches campuses of higher education. It is way below the share of students in higher education in developed countries which is almost always higher than 25 percent. The government expenditure on higher education has decreased considerably during last three decades. In the 1970s the government spent 1 percent of the GNP on education which fell to 0.35 percent in the 1990s. The larger share of the expenditure on higher education is now being extracted from the students themselves. In 1983, that is, before the introduction of Rajeev Gandhi's New Education Policy, the government provided 80 percent of the expenditure on higher education. In 1999, the government's share was brought down to 67 percent. The amount paid by students in 2004 was eleven times of what they paid in 1988. The government's determination to commodify higher education is made clear by the objective of the HRD ministry to make higher-education completely self-financed by 2010. The process has already been started, resulting in a rapid decrease in the demographic area covered by various forms of higher education. Only the rich will be able to afford higher education.

A similar story can be perceived in the statistics pertaining to professional courses. Private institutes made up for 15 percent of the total seats in engineering education in 1960. In 2004, this figure shot up to 86.4 percent. In the 1960 the corresponding figure for medical education was 6.8 percent. This figure increased to 40.9 percent in 2004. In management related course 90 percent seats are accounted for by private institutions.

It is not hard to draw conclusions from these facts. These statistics demonstrate that the government is commercializing and privatizing both kinds of higher education--the conventional higher education of the conventional university campus as well as professional education (en-

gineering, medicine, management). Higher education is being changed into a commodity and as a result, students from humble backgrounds are finding increasingly difficult to reach the university.

The motive behind this is pretty clear. The government openly admits that the country will now witness "jobless growth"—in the era of globalization, one cannot expect the government to provide education, jobs and health facilities; even the so-called "left" government of West Bengal echoes these proclamations, though it hums a different tune in national politics, as if it were continuing with its sham opposition to inflation, unemployment, etc. One concedes that it is structurally impossible for a national government to provide full education and employment in a global capitalist framework. The deficits caused due to the government's concentration on job-creation and provision of education, instead

of maintenance of a high growth rate, would be large and this in turn would lead to a slump. The point however is that a large number of graduates and post-graduates unable to find jobs or jobs they think fit for themselves, will probably be more enraged than those who fail to make it to the university altogether. After spending years in the campus, spending thousands of rupees to acquire degrees so that s/he can get a job, if a youth is left to wander jobless on the streets s/he will no doubt be full of rage against the system. The policy-makers are well-aware of this. The Birla-Ambani report on education even alludes to this factor and recommends greater investment in primary and secondary education and in ITIs and polytechnics so as to create a large skilled

labor force, abundant and cheap. Commercializing conventional higher education proves a double-edged weapon as it reduces the rate of generation of graduates and post-graduates and enables the government to create a large and cheap skilled labor force by greater investment in technical and school education. With the help of the media and various agencies the government has been able to manufacture the consensus that higher education is provided at the expense of school education. The government till the last year spent less than 3 percent of the GDP on

education, though the promise made spoke of 6 percent. In the 1980s, the share of higher education in the total expenditure on education was 15 percent; now it has fallen to 10 percent.

Another phenomenon worthy of note is informalization of education. Facts demonstrate that students are en-

couraged to enroll in "correspondence education" rather than regular courses. Correspondence courses are being advertised more in the media and universities too are promoting this trend. The typical argument used to convince students is that regular college has no advantage over correspondence education as far as getting a job is concerned whereas the latter has the benefit of allowing a student to work while studying. Large numbers of lower-middle class students fall prey to this propaganda. Statistics tell us that ill-equipped correspondence departments of universities fail to give a success percentage of even 40 percent. The pass percentage in IGNOU, which is the largest correspondence university in Asia, was 5 percent in 2006! The number of

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students enrolled in IGNOU in 2006 (1,311,145) was 9 times more than the total number of regular students in Delhi University. The whole system of correspondence education is designed it seems, to force into depression those poor students who are lured into it by the idea of being able to study and work simultaneously.

Another benefit (for the administration) of this “informalization” of education is that students are prevented from gathering in large numbers at one place. While legally and academically they become students, they fail to develop a sense of belonging with the entire student community and are denied an important way of developing radical class consciousness. An analogy can be drawn with the process of informalization of industries and the working class. The big industrial units are broken into a number of small industrial units which are scattered not only across the country, but across the world. Termed the construction of a “global assembly line” by social scientists this process works to decentralize and geographically scatter the working class.

As a result of these steps thought out by the policy makers, the campuses are becoming hubs of the neo-rich class and the entire class character of campuses is undergoing a profound metamorphosis. It is not that poorer students are not reaching the campus at all, but their ratio in the student population is decreasing rapidly. They still form the bulk of the student population, but if the present trend continues the lower middle and poor classes will surely become a minority in campuses (while becoming a greater majority in the national population). This is especially true for elite campuses like Delhi University, J.N.U. and the lot (in spite of all their island and picnic activism).

These developments have transformed the face of student politics in the last two decades. Student

politics has become a stronghold of name-sake student organizations that are dominated by lackeys of bourgeois parties. It serves as a training and recruitment centre for national electoral parties. Their newer generations come from the neo-rich—lumpen elements that have the money and muscle that makes them well-suited for the representation of the richer classes in national politics. The class which can give a revolutionary turn to student politics is stopped at the gates of the campuses or is asked to go to ITIs and polytechnics. Democracy in the campus emanates from class contradictions present inside it. The struggle for hegemony amongst various political organizations representing different classes creates this democratic space. If students from humble backgrounds do not reach the campus, there will be no force to challenge the money and muscle-power politics of the neo-rich classes. That is why the democratic traditions of university campuses have declined in the last two decades.

Another section of neo-rich students, especially those who belong to the urban educated middle class, becomes associated with sham “left” student politics or the dangerous NGO politics, attracted by their reformist nature which still seems to have a material basis. This reformist politics effectively co-opts the radical potential of students by offering them a comfortable way of becoming paid revolutionaries. It very effectively prevents a large number of sensitive and progressive students from turning towards revolutionary politics. A revolutionary student organization will need to propagandize against lumpen bourgeois politics, the sham “left” politics as well as the reformist NGO politics. A revolutionary model in the campus can only develop as an anti-thesis to these reactionary trends.

The ground for a campus-based student movement is shrinking rapidly. We need to think beyond the

boundary walls of the campus. While we need campaigns and movements of students against the increasing commercialization of education and campus-based issues like hostels, bus passes, etc, we also need to establish contact with the youth movement at large. The progressive and sensitive student must develop links with the massive youth population which is wandering on the streets for jobs, which deserves to be in the campus but cannot afford higher education. The majority of this youth population is a part of the unemployed labor force of the country. Another big chunk of this population has been proletarianized and has joined the ranks of the working class. Progressive students need to organize this population and channel its anger and discontent by propagandizing and agitating among these people. Movements for the right to education and employment as well as various cultural activities should be organized involving this population.

The possibility of a campus-based student movement has shrunk considerably and is still shrinking with the changing class character of the campus. We need to think about a unified student-youth movement which will have equal and free education for all and employment for all as its central demands. Only such a movement will have the strength and potency to achieve such aims. It is true that while remaining within the ambit of the present socio-economic system, education and employment for all is virtually impossible. But the vast majority of the youth population will understand this only through practice, i.e. through various movements concerning education and employment for all. In this process we have to keep exposing the bourgeois electoral politics, pseudo “left” politics and the reformist NGO politics, apart from doing a positive politicization of the student community through propaganda and agitation. Only then we can face the new challenges arising due to the change in the class character of the campus.