

Reforming the 'Right' Way: Market, Hypernationalism, and Curriculum Vigilantism in Indian Higher Education

Manasi Thapliyal Navani
Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi
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HE in India: Institutional Landscape

Total Number of Universities: 1168

Private Universities: 685 (public) and 473 (private unaided)

Colleges: 45473 [21.5% colleges are public funded; 13.2% private aided and 65.3% private unaided]

Government Universities constitute 58.6% of total Universities contribute 73.7% of total enrolment

Private Universities account for 26.3% of total enrolment

Government Colleges constitute 21.5% of total colleges contribute 34.8% of total enrolment.

Private (Aided) colleges constituting 13.3% of total colleges account for 20.6% enrolment

65.2% Private (Un-aided) Colleges account for only 44.6% of total enrolment

HE in India: Institutional Landscape

	2012-13	2021-22
Total Universities	667	1168
Private Universities	209 (31.33%)	473 (40.5%)
Colleges	35525	45473
Private Management Colleges	75% (60% Private unaided and 15% Private Aided)	78.5% (65.3% Private unaided and 13.2 Private Aided)
Enrolment Share of Private Colleges	63%	64.6%

Identified problems

Despite being a growing economy and comparable in terms of the scale of the HE system with China, India, unlike China, it has been argued that India does not have a grip on the evolution of higher education and research:

- problems of national coordination
- under-investment
- over politicized, under-managed and under- modernized public-research universities
- struggle with standards (expansion of small, private-sector institutions)

Policy Context

The National Education Policy 2020- Critical elements

- Restructuring Undergraduate Education and Curriculum; Introduction of Multiple Exit option
- New mechanisms and philosophy of accreditation
- Introduction of Digital University, Academic Credit Bank, Proposing MOOCs ecosystem as viable alternative to conventional brick and mortar higher education
- Exploring new forms of Public Private Partnerships

Politicisation of Everyday Routines

Public Universities particularly Institutions responsible for Liberal Arts Education have come under intense scrutiny and intense policy action in the last decade.

The curricular and pedagogic discourse has been entangled in a deeply conservative political and cultural imaginary of the nation as well as university as an institution.

Expansion of Private HE segment accompanied by an undermining of the Public HE institution

How does the academic community negotiate the democratic educational ideals in this context?

How does academic freedom interplay with accountability within a hyper nationalist, neoliberal context of academic governance ?

Case

- Introduction of new curriculum regimes
- Academic Freedom and New Governance Regimes

Curricular Regimes and Academic Freedom

- Academic Freedom Index (2023): India is among 22 countries and territories out of 179 in the world where institutions and scholars have “significantly less freedom today than 10 years ago”
- Over the last decade the more prominent of public HE institutions have been subject to media scrutiny with an active shaping of public imagination through print/social media around absence of ‘quality’ and serious education culture
- Media attacks on public funded HE institutions have focused on precisely the culture of dissent and critical reflection as well as institutional capacity for decision making
- The critical element of the new political regime in the policy and institutional discourse, it can be argued, has created an institutional paralysis in a short span of time.
- This attack on public HE has seen the private gain default legitimacy in public perception

Excerpts from Media reporting

"BZ University in Delhi has showcased a research scholar and set up a disciplinary inquiry committee against his supervisor after the former cited famed professor and public intellectual Noam Chomsky's criticism of the ... government..." (2024)

"The University has announced revisions to its history syllabus, sparking discussions on social media and within academic circles. The term '*Brahmanisation*' has been dropped from the curriculum, and a paper addressing inequality has been withdrawn. The decision to remove the term '*Brahmanisation*' has been met with mixed reactions. Advocates argue that it helps promote a more inclusive and balanced historical perspective, while critics express concerns over potential erasure of historical context. The university maintains that the change aims to ensure a well-rounded representation of India's complex history." (2023)

Excerpts from Media reporting

“The UGCRC suggested that poet Meena Kandasamy should be replaced by Premchand, Amitav Ghosh by R K Narayan, and any reference to the Indian People’s Theatre Association or Jan Natya Manch should be removed.” (2019)

More than 80 English teachers across University (ABC) colleges issued a statement, expressing displeasure at the controversy involving the revised English syllabus, calling it a “politically motivated attack” against a “democratically drafted syllabus”. (2019)

“In 2021 again, writings of two dalit authors and short story by Mahashweta Devi were removed from the University syllabus. The short story addressed the theme of sexual violence against women and was excluded to ‘not hurt the sentiments of any individual’.

Excluding the “Contested” and Controversial

The material questioned depicted the story of a tribal woman who along with her husband murders rich landlords, grabs their wells, the main source of water in their village—she is captured by police officers who orders his men to rape her. The story has been seminal to culture of public protest for upholding the voices of the marginalised.

The State/political approach has been to include within the curriculum only that which is “non-controversial”

Earlier in 2008, in the same public university, the right wing student body... had protested to remove AK Ramanujan’s seminal essay, “The three hundred Ramayanas” from the undergraduate syllabus, arguing that it was offensive to the religious beliefs of millions of Hindus. (Roy, 2017)

Academic Council of the University faced with the protest decided to drop it from curriculum despite the advise of Supreme Court panel of expert who spoke in favour of it.

Perspectives that bring the indigenous, the women, the non-literate, non Sanskrit folklore traditions into public engagement find themselves increasingly brought into realm of questioning within public academic institutions

National Credit Framework: A Report of the High Level Committee (UGC, 2023)

The NEP 2020 proposes reduction in curriculum/content in all subjects to its core essentials, to make space for critical thinking and more holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion based, and analysis based learning.

The mandated content will focus on key concepts, ideas, applications, and problem solving.

... To close the gap in achievement of learning outcomes, classroom transactions will shift, towards competency-based learning and education.
(p.24)

The standardisation and control of curriculum

Within public universities with a mixed history of pursuing reforms, particularly academic reforms, of their own import, political regimes have found a ready space for capturing and controlling the academic discourse and imagination.

In an interview with a faculty member of the Teacher Association

"Controlling the narrative is not a task left to Universities but being intensely pursued on Whatsapp, social media, and the mainstream media. It is the stifling of the voice of the intellectuals that is of primary concern for the State" (ABH)

"What was called as the 'victory of the right wing' in 2012 when the essay was removed from the History syllabus, has been mainstreamed now with NEP 2020 and UGC policies" (SC)

"Curriculum has been thinned out...they [State] removed Darwin from compulsory school science in the name of study load of students and now with the new credit framework following NEP 2020, the buzz word is competency and skills in HE" (GR)

"Can the skills be divorced from content–can you build critical thinking with sanitised commentaries? Is it critical thinking if conflicting /plural perspectives are eliminated?They are actively discussing ways of removing radical Ambedkar from syllabus" (GR)

Concluding thoughts

The political discourse around public universities has engendered a discontinuity in the very ethos of universities, with stigmatisation of critical scholarship and scepticism around universities' role in initiation of young people into cultures of critical thinking (Jayal 2019).

Academic community finds itself responding to a systematic de-intellectualization of the public discourses (political and social), where the democratic ideals infused common sense is being actively reshaped, and abandoned in favour of a sustained propaganda serving the project of neoliberal hyper-nationalism.

In a new social media culture, critical voices and non-majoritarian views are subject to vicious “trolling”, deeper cultures of silence and censorship are engendered in the education system,

Implications for the shrinking space of civil society and restrictions of the means of a critique, as scientific rationality and reason are abandoned in favour of rigid assertions and ‘truth’ charged with political affect.

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Thank You

manasi.thapliyal@gmail.com