



Imagining alternative futures

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Why the Young India Adhikar March calls for greater civic solidarity

- The caricaturing of scientific inquiry at the recent Indian Science Congress (ISC) is only symptomatic of the larger ideological thrust through which institutions of higher education in India are now sought to be governed.
- Further, the choice of venue for the ISC this year — a private university in Punjab — highlights the boost that investors of private capital in higher education receive even as funding cutbacks at public universities have threatened the closure of 167 centres for women's studies and 35 centres for studies in social exclusion.
- It is the same political imperative that is directing public-funded institutions towards 'graded autonomy' — duly recognised as a covert entry point for privatisation.
- The threat to autonomy is writ large in the recent moves to scrap the University Grants Commission (UGC) as a funding body for higher education, in keeping with the World Trade Organisation's mandate that views education as a tradable commodity, not as a right that every citizen can demand of the state.

Right versus privilege

- In 2015, the UGC, citing a fund crunch, resolved to scrap the non-NET fellowship altogether.
- But soon after, the release of similar non-NET fellowships for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and minority students — namely, the Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship and Maulana Azad National Fellowship — came to be stalled, pending a new set of guidelines that severely curtailed eligibility.
- The Ministry of Human Resource Development's All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report 2017-18 notes that the Gross Enrolment Ratio across institutions of higher education has risen to 25.8% from 19.4% in 2010-11.

- The GER is an index of the proportion of citizens between 18 and 23 years — in every sample size of 100 — who have structurally secured entry into tertiary education, while exit figures (drop-outs) are left unaccounted for.
- The inflationary tendencies of AISHE figures notwithstanding, the report points out that the GER is 21.8% for SCs and 15.9% for STs “as compared to the national GER”.
- However, deeper scrutiny shows that though the standard formula for calculating GER must take the population census in the relevant age group as the base sample size, the GER for Dalit-Adivasis is produced by altering the methodology.
- Ironically, the enrolment ratio for Hindu upper castes is 8.47%, implying that more than eight out of every 10 caste Hindus access higher education.
- The government’s recent electoral gimmick of enabling 10% reservation in educational institutions for “economically weaker” upper-caste sections only performs a complete inversion of affirmative action policies, especially when documented data point to an entrenched legacy of caste-based discrimination.
- The withdrawal of non-NET fellowships for the socially marginalised (accompanied by reservations for dominant caste groups) is informed by a policy transition from a public-funded model of inclusive economic planning to a private user-pay principle.
- It follows from the reform measures proposed by the Ambani-Birla Report on higher education (2000), and subsequently vindicated by the National Knowledge Commission’s emphasis on “need-blind admissions” in higher education.
- The AISHE report contains traces of more statistical falsification — adjusting “growth” in the number of teaching positions by changing the base year for comparison (to 2010-11 from 2013-14).
- It is no surprise that many of the brightest minds from the best public institutions are now lapped up by elite private universities “equipped with world-class infrastructure”.

A pushback

- It is clear that a nationalist crusade is only mortgaging public education systems to transnational capital.
- The ‘Young India Adhikar March’ (to be held on February 7 2019) is a representation of over 40 youth organisations demanding, among other things, an end to fee hikes, gender discriminatory laws, a syllabus free

of “saffron” taints, alongside the guarantee of employment and academic, intellectual freedoms of teaching and learning.

- If the ‘publicness’ of public education must come to occupy our idea of the ‘nation’, it is time we march with our youth and demand the right to imagine alternative futures.

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