
Neoliberalism, Critical Pedagogy and Education

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Chapter 15

Resisting neoliberal restructuring of education and reclaiming critical educational space

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Neoliberalism is the dominant paradigm of the present-day global capitalist system. It is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (Harvey, 2005: 2). Neoliberalism demands that governments should dismantle the political and economic constraints on capital constructed through decades of struggle and compromise (Panitch *et al.*, 2006: 2). Further, it holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market (Harvey, 2005: 3).

This era of neoliberal globalization is being promulgated as a new era qualitatively different from the earlier stages of capitalist development, a post-capitalist era, as a result of which the very logic of capitalism stands superseded. Therefore, the argument being forwarded is that in the globalized world of today, there is no capitalism with its exploitation and oppressions, its classes and class struggles, its structural defects and explosive antagonisms, its chronic problems or crises (Singh, 2006: 684–685). Further, by postulating an utterly fictitious world of superseded capitalism, it (globalization) makes capitalism safe against criticism and opposition, and using the argument of ‘inevitability’, it wants to believe that in this globalized world, there is no alternative to the meek acceptance of the conditions necessary for its trouble-free functioning (*ibid.*: 686).

In this regard, Mészáros also argues that capital is ‘the enemy of history’ (Mészáros, 2009: 25). Capital must negate history in its vision of the world, so that the question of any historical alternative to its own rule should not conceivably arise, no matter how anachronistic and

dangerous its – despite all self-mythology very far from economically efficient – labour-exploitative control of social reproduction (*ibid.*). Thus, the neoliberalism builds an ideological façade by propagating its inevitability and pronouncing an ‘end of history’.

Restructuring education and closing down critical educational spaces

Educational system has been viewed as a site of struggle, exemplifying the tension between those who wish to transform it as part of a revolutionary process and those for whom the school is largely an agency of social reproduction and control (Sarup, 1982: 74). But the consolidation of neoliberalism as a dominant discourse has consciously tried to contain the transformative role of education. There have been conscious attempts of closing down the spaces for the critique of the ongoing socio-economic model and envisioning of any possible alternative to it. Education being one such critical space is being consciously reshaped by the neoliberal dispensation.

The educational agenda of neoliberalism has been on the one hand the commodification of education for subsequent profit generation and on the other hand reducing education to mere skill development for developing docile and useful workers and consumers for the smooth functioning of the market economy. As a result, there has been an unprecedented expansion of private educational institutions in the country in recent years. The educational institutions are being modelled as commercial ventures. Universities are being transformed into mere centres of skill development, and their role in providing democratic space for debating societal issues from diverse ideological perspectives and developing varied knowledge and ideas is being contained. The research work in the universities instead of being socially relevant is being oriented to serve the interests of private capital through collaborations with industry and corporate sector. In this regard, Dave Hill remarks:

In the current and recent periods, education has been increasingly – and increasingly nakedly – subordinated, not just to the general requirements of capital, but also to the specific demands made of governments by the capitalist class. The relative autonomy of education from the requirements of capital, from the government, and within education at various levels, has been blowtorched – the rhetorical and policy accretions of ‘professionalism’ and of relative

autonomy have been burned away, leaving the skeletal structure of command in its unadorned nakedness.

(Hill, 2004a: 506)

Neoliberalism not only does affect the institutions, moulding them to its own end, but also radically alters the way even welfarist, social-democratic forces understand education (Kumar, 2010). There has been a redefining of the purpose of education and what it means to teach, learn and participate in schooling (Lipman, 2011).

Neoliberalism seeks to destroy any forms of pedagogy that attempt to educate students regarding their real predicament – to create an awareness of themselves as future labour powers and to underpin this awareness with critical insight that seeks to undermine the smooth running of the social production of labour power (Hill, 2004b). Similarly, Rikowski suggests that the neoliberal state tries to ensure that modes of pedagogy that are antithetical to labour power production do not and cannot exist (as quoted in *ibid.*).

Under the neoliberal order, as the society allows the corporate cultures to reduce the priorities of education to the pragmatic requirements of the market, whereby students are trained to become ‘compliant workers, spectator consumers, and passive citizens’, it necessarily has to create educational structures that anaesthetize students’ critical abilities, in order to domesticate social order for its self-preservation (Macedo, 2000: 4).

Therefore, there have been conscious efforts to evolve a pedagogy which focuses on rote learning, memorization and standardized testing and oriented towards imparting skills considered necessary for the smooth functioning of market-based economy. This pedagogy is tied to models of accountability driven by the need to ‘teach to the test’. In this paradigm, students are educated primarily to acquire market-oriented skills in order to compete favourably in the global economy. This type of pedagogy ‘produces an atmosphere of student passivity and teacher routinization’ (Giroux, 2011: 9). In such pedagogy, the pupils do not participate actively in the process of learning for the construction of knowledge and giving meaning to reality. Rather, they are taught simply to achieve the already set performance targets.

The point here is that capital seeks to repress critical thought and to develop docile and conformist citizens. Development of such citizens is quite in consonance with the emergence of a shallow form of democracy in the neoliberal era to which Noam Chomsky has termed as ‘spectator democracy’, wherein instead of enabling people to participate in the

process of democratic decision making, only few people belonging to a 'specialized class' are involved in the process of taking all significant decisions, whereas the common people, a 'bewildered herd', only act as if they are mere spectators to the emerging social reality.

Another important dimension of the ongoing policy discourse is to redefine the role of teacher and controlling the influence of the teacher in the educational process. Teachers are dangerous because they are intimately connected with the social production of labour power, equipping students with skills, competences, abilities, knowledge and the attitudes and personal qualities that can be expressed and expanded in the capitalist labour process (Rikowski, as cited in Hill, 2004b). The realization of such a significant role of teacher in shaping the nature of future manpower has resulted in the redefinition of his/her role. Their role is being redefined as that of a service provider, who is either teaching for predetermined learning outcomes or engaged in transferring marketable skills. Teachers are also being demoralized through their widespread casualization and withdrawal of their autonomy. A focus on standardized testing limits teachers' ability to creatively employ their professionalism and potential counter-hegemony . . . as they are forced to 'teach to the tests' (Malott and Pruyn, 2008: 471).

Moreover, the campuses of universities and other higher educational institutions are being depoliticized, and a 'culture of silence' is being pushed in. Such developments are orienting education to be subservient only to the needs of the capital and are striving to close down the critical space of education, where critical consciousness could be developed.

Reclaiming education as a critical space: critiquing the present and envisioning the future

As an ideology, neoliberalism proclaims its inevitability by itself ruling out the possibility of any alternative to it and also by closing down the critical spaces in education. However, the dictum that all successful ideologies obscure the true economic and social impacts of their implementation (Eagleton, as quoted in Saunders, 2010: 50) also applies to neoliberalism. A perusal of some current statistics given later would clearly reflect on the socio-economic implications of the neoliberal model at global and national levels:

Oxfam (2014) in its recent report entitled 'Working for the Few' has highlighted that

- Almost half of the world's wealth is now owned by just 1 per cent of the population.

- The wealth of the 1 per cent richest people in the world amounts to \$110 trillion. That is 65 times the total wealth of the bottom half of the world's population.
- The bottom half of the world's population owns the same as the richest 85 people in the world.
- Seven out of ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last 30 years.

While looking at the India-specific statistics, we find that

- The number of dollar billionaires has been growing at the fastest rate in India. It jumped from 27 in 2008, to 52 in 2009 and to 122 in 2012. In India, the top 10 billionaires control 12 per cent of GDP.
- According to the latest Knight Frank Research (2013), India has a total of 8481 high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs; someone with US\$30 million or more in net assets). The number of HNWIs in India is expected to more than double over the next 10 years (Knight Frank Research, 2013: 10).
- On the other hand, the Report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (Arjun Sen Gupta Report) states that 77 per cent of India's population (or 83.6 crores of people) lives on Rs. 20 or less per day. This is further corroborated by NSSO data, which showed that 77 per cent of the rural population consumed less than the minimum daily calorie intake of 2400. In fact, the percentage has gone up from 69 per cent in 1993.
- The UNDP Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) shows that India has 65 crores of people who are MPI poor, which amounts to 53.7 per cent of the population.

The earlier statistics clearly reflects how the neoliberal model is exacerbating already existing inequalities at global and national levels. It is creating plenty and prosperity at one end and poverty and misery on the other. In fact, the reduction in welfare expenditures and the intrusion of market in every socio-economic domain, even in the provision of food, water, health, education, transport, energy and so on have further worsened the living conditions of teeming millions. The contemporary governments and society serve to perpetuate the interests of capital at the expense of workers and to reproduce the existing economic system and power relations. At different historical periods, it does this in more, or less, hidden ways, with greater or lesser use of the repressive and controlling functions of the state (Hill, 2004a: 506). However, in

the present times, it has become deliberate and blatant. Redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project (Harvey, 2005: 16). Neoliberalism, therefore, emerges as a class project which is masked by a lot of rhetoric about individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatization; free market and free trade; and legitimized draconian policies designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power (Harvey, 2011: 10).

The neoliberal global capitalism not only escalates class warfare, inequality and victimization, but also registers a process of human suffering that goes beyond the act of exploitation, and this shift can be seen in the growing process of exclusion (Giroux, 2009: 30). It is exclusion that today underlies the most conspicuous cases of social polarization, of deepening inequality and of rising volumes of human poverty, misery and humiliation (Zygmunt Bauman, as quoted in *ibid.*). Acquisition of large tracts of fertile land for developing special economic zones, for providing land to multinational and local corporations, and for construction of dams and expressways results in exclusion of a large number of people who are dependent on land for their livelihood. Besides, in recent years, there have been displacements of tribal people from forested and mineral-rich areas and poor people from slum areas in the name of development. Exclusion is thus inherent in the working of this neoliberal developmental model. In this regard, Prabhat Patnaik asserts:

The present era of relative weight of 'accumulation through encroachment' increases greatly. Privatization of state-sector assets which are acquired 'for a song', expropriation of the peasantry and the taking over of their land, displacement of petty producers and appropriating the space hitherto occupied by them, and the displacement of smaller capitals by larger ones, are all phenomena whose incidence increases greatly in this era.

(Patnaik, 2011: 175)

In the face of intrusion of neoliberal agendas in our socio-economic domain and its ruthless onslaught on human conditions, a number of pertinent questions in a democratic society arise. Whether the process of perpetuation of inequalities in social and economic life would go unquestioned? Whether education would add to the conditioning that only allows us to tolerate and accept such immoral and illogical contrasts and absorb them unconsciously into our notions of normality and inevitability? How do we accept and live with such absurdity, with the

devastation and destruction that capitalism brings with increasing regularity to both humanity and planet? (Allman, 2010: 1).

Further, in the face of conscious attempts by neoliberalism to obfuscate the true depiction of the devastating impact of neoliberal policies on the living conditions of people and to close down the spaces for its critique, what are the possibilities of using education as a critical space in this scenario? What should be the role of the educators in this scenario?

As asserted by Dave Hill, we have a three-way choice – to explicitly support the neoliberalization and commodification and capitalization of society; to be complicit, through our silence and inaction, in its rapacious and anti-human/antisocial development; or to explicitly oppose it (Hill, 2006).

If we choose to oppose the neoliberal onslaught in educational sphere, what would be the nature of our role? In the times when the educational space is being restructured to create an educational environment more in tune with the economic and ideological needs of the market economy, how education could be used as an instrument of social transformation? In this context, it is relevant to quote Mészáros, who has been of the view that without social transformation, it would not be possible to use education as a transformative agent. While outlining the project of education beyond capital, he argues:

Our educational task is therefore simultaneously also the task of a comprehensive social emancipatory transformation. Neither of the two can be put in front of the other. They are inseparable. The required radical social emancipatory transformation is inconceivable without the most active positive contribution of education in its all-embracing sense . . . And vice versa: education cannot work suspended in the air. It can and must be properly articulated and constantly reshaped in its dialectical interrelationship with the changing conditions and needs of the ongoing social emancipatory transformation. The two succeed or fail, stand or fall together.

(Mészáros, 2009: 248)

In order to contribute in social transformation beyond capital, spaces in educational domain are to be utilized. The role of education is paramount both for elaborating appropriate strategies to change the objective conditions of reproduction and for the *conscious self-change* of the individuals called upon to realize the creation of a radically different social metabolic order (*ibid.*: 241). Further, no hegemonic action can block all spaces simultaneously, and even its own discourse can be rearticulated to

favour counter-hegemonic purposes (Gandin, 2009: 162). Such spaces ought to be explored and used by progressive educators and intellectuals for a counter-hegemonic role. At this juncture, a three-dimensional role can be envisaged for progressive educators and intellectuals. This role comprises critiquing the neoliberal model, resisting its onslaught on different social domains and building an alternative to it.

In this context, the first and foremost task of progressive educators and intellectuals is to provide an emancipatory critique of the neoliberal ideology, to develop critical consciousness and to disrupt the common sense. A critical thinking about the working of neoliberal global capitalistic system and its adverse impact on social, economic, political and cultural aspects of our society ought to be developed. There is a need to highlight the impossibility of capitalism and also liberal democracy delivering any semblance of authentic social justice (Allman, 2010: 205). If something is education, it must enable the learner to arrive at how cultural and economic forces and schools perpetuate the operation of 'people and create, recreate, and legitimate an unequal, unjust and undemocratic society' (Heilman, as quoted in Hussein, 2006). Further, a critique of the ongoing educational policy discourse should highlight the pro-market agenda of the state in the field of education. Such a critique should entail the process of knowledge production, the emerging concept of education as a commodity, defining education in instrumental terms of skill development, privatization and commodification of education and education being devoid of any democratic character. Thus, whatever is happening to education in the era of neoliberalism must be critically analysed and articulated at different forums along with highlighting its implications for education and the society as a whole. Glenn Rikowski views such a critique as the first moment of anti-capitalist education that entails a 'critique of capitalist society, its forms of schooling and training, its markets, and so on'. Basically, what is required is a *critique of all known capitalist social life* (Rikowski, 2004: 567–568).

In this context of need of practising critical education, a significant role of teachers comes to fore. Our next generation must be able to detect what forces fuel social, economic and environmental injustices, such as those currently associated with corporate giants drawing the world into a system bent more on profit than on making the world a better place for all citizens (Porfilio and McClary, 2004). Therefore, teachers have a crucial role to play in developing critical consciousness among students and to enable them to read the 'globalized world'. Teachers have to perform such a role even against all odds in order to

promulgate an alternative stream of thought on the issues of human, social and economic development well in consonance with the democratic and humanistic ideals. In this backdrop, teachers are to be viewed as change agents engaged in the task of cultural and social transformation for building an oppression-free world. Glenn Rikowski termed such teachers as radical educators who by employing radical pedagogy generate 'a critical, a dialectical, understanding of our present conditions' (Rikowski, 2005: 8). Thus, educators and other cultural workers bear an enormous responsibility in opposing neoliberalism by bringing democratic political culture back to life (Giroux, 2004: 35). Further, Henry Giroux with a view to counter the neoliberal attack on teachers argues that teachers are to be viewed as public intellectuals in order to rethink and restructure the nature of teacher work. He asserts:

Central to the category of public intellectual is the necessity of making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical. Making the pedagogical more political means inserting schooling directly into the political sphere by arguing that schooling represents both a struggle to define meaning and a struggle over agency and power relations. Within this perspective, critical reflection and action become part of a fundamental social project to help students develop a deep and abiding faith in the struggle to overcome economic, political and social injustices, and to further humanize themselves as part of this struggle.

(Giroux, 2012)

Therefore, the task before education and educators is to contribute in 'critically reading' the world of global capitalism – to fully grasp the absurdity of capitalism and the impossibility of humanity's survival if it remains shackled to this inherently crisis-prone and totalizing system of social and economic injustice and domination (Allman, 2010: 3). Such an emancipatory critique of the neoliberalism would lead to *breaking capital's logic in the interest of human survival* (Mészáros, 2009: 229).

Along with providing a critique of the neoliberal order, there is a need to envision and build viable alternatives beyond the logic of capital. In fact, without an alternative in sight, the critique of the ongoing order would be looked upon as an act of cynicism. It is therefore imperative that progressive educators and intellectuals must envision viable alternative socio-economic models to the neoliberal model and an alternative vision for education along with devising creative paths for building those alternatives. These alternative visions would become the rallying points

for struggles for a society based on equality, social justice and equitable development.

While highlighting the urgency of envisioning and building an alternative to present neoliberal regime, Paula Allman emphasizes on developing the type of understanding that can enable us to see beyond the capitalist horizon:

Not only to imagine and hope that an alternative is possible, but also to know that it is possible, and, equally, to know that it is up to us to create this alternative. Moreover, this understanding should enable us to realize that if we fail to act, then humanity and the human project will be permanently propelled into the globalization of misery and the total demise of human dignity. For those who believe in humanity, the project for humanity – the possibility and necessity of humanizing the world and thus the abolition of dehumanization – the only option is the struggle to create socially and economically just alternative to capitalism.

(Allman, 2010: 202)

However, these alternatives are to be envisioned and built when neoliberalism has become dominant and hegemonic amid weakening of working class and declining political activism. For with the disappearance of socialism from the contemporary historical agenda, capital meets little resistance; its rule goes almost unchallenged. Nonetheless, it is capitalism itself that puts all the themes of anti-capitalist struggle – and therefore of socialism – back on the agenda. It seems that as long as capitalism exists, socialism too must hover on the horizon as an alternative, potential or real; because, in the last analysis, it is just this, anti-capitalism, its dialectical negation (Sader, 2012: xvi). However, in the recent years, the economic crisis of 2007–2008, the emergence of anti-neoliberal movements in different parts of the globe and establishment of governments with an anti-neoliberal agenda in Latin America have underlined the need and possibility of alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

Keeping in view the neoliberal onslaught on education, the space for practicing education as a critical process and possible working of educators as public intellectuals is also continuously shrinking. The public educational institutions, where still teachers have some autonomy, provide the space for practising critical education and undertaking critical intellectual work. However, with the redefining of the role of education and also that of the teacher on neoliberal lines, this public space is also being continuously restructured in consonance with the needs of the

capital. The ongoing attack on public education is an attack not only on the educational opportunities earlier available to not so well-off sections of society but also on the public space where critical intellectual work could be possible. Therefore, in order to ensure that public educational spaces could be used for critical intellectual work, there is a need to collectively resist the neoliberal restructuring of public education system. Such resistance is prerequisite for reclaiming the critical space of education, where educational process could be used for critiquing the present order, envisioning alternatives to it and contributing to build those alternatives. In this context, it would be relevant to quote Ellen Meiksins Wood, who says:

The best that socialists can do is to aim at as much as possible to detach social life from market-dependence. That means striving for the decommodification of as many spheres of life as possible and their democratization – not just their subjection to the political rule of ‘formal’ democracy but their removal from the ‘impersonal’ control of market imperatives, which subordinate every human need and practice to the requirements of accumulation and profit-maximization.

(as cited in Allman, 2010: 202–203)

The struggle for decommodifying education and resisting the attempts of its restructuring according to the needs of the neoliberal economy could be an agenda for unions and associations of teachers and students and of other people's organizations. A number of instances of such resistance in recent years may show the path. In Punjab, the school teachers successfully resisted the move of the Amrinder Singh-led Congress government to hand over the urban government schools to private companies. Similarly, a recent attempt of the present government to hand over a number of elementary schools from different districts of the state to Bharti Airtel has been collectively resisted by teacher unions, student unions, Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Khet Majdoor Union and a faction of Bharti Kisan Union. Further, in Punjab, there are different cadres of teachers, namely regular PGT, TGT and ETT teachers working under education department, regular ETT teachers working under Panchayati Raj and Rural Development, contractual teachers under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, contractual teachers appointed under the education department, EGS teachers, TET-passed teachers, education service providers, teaching fellows, alternative education instructors and so on. Such a division

of teachers has without doubt weakened the teachers' unity and the strength of teachers' movements. But at the same time, the time and again struggles and agitations by different categories of teachers mostly for the regularization of their services, shifting under education department, creating promotion channels have kept the spirit of struggle alive. Most of these struggles in the recent past have resulted in government conceding to the demands of the teachers. Furthermore, the Government of Punjab had to withdraw The *Punjab Special Security Group Act 2010* and the *Punjab Prevention of Damage to Public and Private Property Act 2010* meant for encroaching the people's right to protest and peaceful demonstrations, in the face of massive resistance built by people's organizations.

However, the instances of successful collective resistance to neoliberal onslaught in the domain of education are juxtaposed with several setbacks to the struggle of teachers and students on educational issues in the recent past. Besides, the unprecedented growth of private institutions, crass commercialization of higher education and structural changes in universities in the state in recent years are also the reflections of weakness on the part of teachers' bodies, students' organizations and social movements. Nonetheless, in the past, students' agitations against fee hikes in the public universities and government colleges of the state have checked any steep hike in the fee levels in these institutions; yet, the neoliberal agenda has become rampant in the arena of higher education in these years. Therefore, new challenges are emerging in the field of higher education. The various provisions and conditionalities of recently launched of *Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan* exhibit an organized attempt to restructure Indian higher education in neoliberal terms. Besides, the practice of bypassing the legislative bodies and democratic forums while formulating education policies is posing another challenge. The Delhi University provides the most pertinent example of such a trend, where despite stiff resistance posed by teachers and students, earlier the semesterisation, and then the 4-year undergraduate programme, was imposed without adhering to the established democratic procedures. In the latter case, even the National Policy on Education was violated. In this regard, Prof. Anil Sadgopal comments that the fine but distinguishing democratic line separating informal from formal, lobbying from legislative process and market from the constitution, stands almost eroded (Sadgopal, 2013: 8).

In this backdrop, the only way out is to build collective resistance to the neoliberal restructuring of education. Teachers from school level to university level, students from higher educational institutions,

intellectuals, social groups and social movements may constitute such a collective. Thus, as a counter-praxis to capital, we must envision a type of social movement unionism (McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2002: 265). This collective would have to struggle for keeping the public space of educational institutions intact for critical education and for envisioning and building an alternative vision for a society based on equality, social justice and sustainable and equitable development.

However, the success of such resistance efforts is organically linked to the fact that how far this collective would become a part of struggle for larger agenda of social transformation beyond capital. In order to conclude, it would be relevant to quote Prabhat Patnaik, who states that 'we must never lose sight of the fact that this struggle in the realm of education against commoditization, against privatization and against the perpetuation of social inequalities is part of the wider struggle against the economy's integration into the spontaneous process of globalization' (Patnaik, 2011: 147).

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