

# The Neoliberalisation of Education and its Alternatives

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Development actors worldwide continue to hail 'Education' as the silver bullet to bring about Development across the globe. India is a country where the mantra of Education for Development has been held up high ever since the nation's independence.

If Education is aimed to serve as the ultimate tool to bring about Development, we first and foremost need to question what kind of Development the mainstream Development actors, from the Indian state, World Bank and bilateral agencies to international, national and local NGOs, are talking about, and what track record Development is showing thus far. As Berger and Weber (2014, p14) put their verdict, "even if we take the orthodox measurement of development, and even if we do it in cases where economic growth rates have increased, this does not necessarily translate into improvements in the day-to-day lived experiences of very large numbers of people across the planet (...). On the contrary, inequalities have increased, in some cases dramatically, and new challenges (for instance in health, nutrition and environmental safety) have arisen (...)." Similarly, Shrivastava and Kothari (2012, pp 116–117) contend that in the case of India, "given the sheer number of people who have been paralysed by debt, dispossessed, displaced or otherwise impoverished, it would scarcely be an overstatement to say that development, far from reducing poverty, has actually been creating new, modern forms of it."

Development then not only creates poverty and nurtures inequality, but it also results in a 'dispossession of meaning' (Da Costa, 2016, p188), a 'de-ontologizing' of non-Western (that is, non-consumerist-middle-class) ways of life by instilling that ostensibly underdeveloped, inferior people can only become 'developed' by giving up their cultures, life-experiences and lifeworlds. In short, Development does not see the lives of the majority of the world's population as meaningful and worthy of living and hence aims to 'transform' those lives, with often devastating consequences for the so-called Development beneficiaries.

In turn, this skewed, narrow-minded idea of Development, and education as the panacea to bring Development to the 'underdeveloped' peoples and nations, consequently led to the imposition of one model of 'Education' upon and against any other possible ideas of what *education* is, how education programmes should be implemented and conveyed, who is qualified to teach (only teachers with formal degrees who went through the same Education system they are now a part of, thus perpetuating the modern Education approach) and what its ultimate goals and objectives are.

The current model of Education under the neoliberal Development paradigm that is being pursued by the Indian state together with Development actors and the private sector then needs to be seen in light of the global ascendancy of neoliberalism and its local adaptation in India: Today, the neoliberal mantras of free markets, consumerism and competitiveness reduce the idea of education to a means to be able to compete effectively in the infamous 'global knowledge economy.' It is no surprise, then, that the World Bank's Education Strategy 2020, adopted in 2011 as one of the most recent and influential education policy-shaping tools, sees the role of education merely as recruiting a skilled, disciplined labour force that helps to accelerate economic growth and 'reproduces' a healthy progeny as the next generation of labour:

"Investments in quality education lead to more rapid and sustainable economic growth and development. Educated individuals are more employable, able to earn higher wages, cope better with economic shocks, and produce healthier children. (...) Learning for All means ensuring that all children and youth — not just the most privileged or the smartest — not only can go to school but also acquire the knowledge and skills they need to lead healthy, productive lives and secure meaningful employment" (World Bank, 2011, foreword).

This statement encapsulates how the ideas of the hegemonic, neoliberal Development model are being applied to the education sector as key to achieve the goals and objectives of Development and its exclusionary, narrow-minded ideas and imaginations of what makes a meaningful life. Dr. Nandini Chatterjee of Delhi-based UNESCO MGIEP<sup>[1]</sup> describes this as "the human capital approach. You acquire skills so that you can enhance the abilities of the human being in improving or contributing to financial capital. So technology, technical skills, which will allow you to make more money, catering to whatever the different requirements of the world are, is what has been the focus" (2017, own interview).

In this line, it is important to understand how the Education promoted by Development actors across India not only reinforces the neoliberal Development model, but how it actively takes away people's capacity to lead meaningful lives by marginalising and destroying other ways of life. As Morarji (2010, p52; emphasis

original) based on her field research in rural India observes,

many of my research subjects in rural Jaunpur continue to attach positive meaning and value to rural life and its moral economy, and feel that the compulsions associated with education are not only incompatible with, but directly contribute to the cultural and material foreclosure of rural livelihood choices and an overall sense of prosperity. Rather than assume that social mobility and empowerment are inherent in the experience of education (...) their experiences question the promise of education; that is, what kinds of lives do people have a reason to value? Jaunpuri people's conflicting experiences of education critically challenge the neo-liberal developmental values of education and the market episteme on which such assumptions are based.

This shows once more how the dominant Development approach, and Education as its key tool, takes away students' ability to create meaningful lives alongside others:

Students around the world are actively being de-skilled (particularly those from artisan, healing and farming backgrounds) and are being taught to despise and devalue physical labor — since labor is considered as non-intellectual work. (...) For the first 23 years of their lives, students are not encouraged to be meaningfully involved in productive activities related to their basic needs or their community's needs which would encourage them to understand deep inter-connections or a sense of right relationship/limits vis a vis their natural resources (Jain, nd).

What we need to pay strong attention to with all the talk about the neoliberalisation of education, however, is the idea that state-led education in the form of common schooling or other ways may be, indeed, the lesser of two evils, but that it would still constitute an essential part of the hierarchical, inherently unequal Development paradigm that ignores, marginalises, negates and destroys other ways of being (i.e., other than being 'consumer-individuals' or 'responsible, rational citizens' of the nation-state)

Rather than tinkering around the edges to marginally improve the education system, what is needed then are different, new ideas and visions of education that exceed the (ontological) limits of the hegemonic Development model. One space where such new ideas and visions are being lived and practiced already today is called The Creativity Adda (CA). Based in Delhi, the CA runs three to four hours every afternoon, six days a week, for the students of the Mukherjee Nagar Government Boys Senior Secondary School. It is an initiative hosted by Udaipur-based Shikshantar: The People's Institute for Re-thinking Education and Development.

The CA is a space free from any school pressure, any expectations to 'perform well,' any need to permanently prove one's 'knowledge' and engage in competition with other students, and, overall, free from any teachers or masters that tell the children what to do, and how to do it. Instead, the CA's philosophy is based on the principle of self-designed learning and peer-to-peer learning in which there are no teachers and no students, but only seekers ('khojis') who co-create, design and learn together.

Ashish Tiwari, co-founder, coordinator and facilitator of the Creativity Adda, describes this space and its approach as follows:

At Creativity Adda, we are trying to restore power back to the learner that was stripped away by institutionalization. The learner has a choice what he wants to learn, how and for how long. Nobody is going to force them. (...) We allow students to design their own learning. When we started the place we were also learning. Because creating a space which we call self-designed learning means that the child has his own power to co-create it. But at some point you have to start. You have to begin with something. So we decided to start with music, dance, theatre. (...) Then we talked to the kids more and more. We started making personal connections, relations. (...) At Adda, what we are trying to do is to create a personal bonding so they feel that this is their space. We don't want them to treat us as another teacher. (...) Overall, we create a platform where children can find their passion. They can decide what they want to learn, and what they want to do with their lives. (Tiwari, 2017, own interview).

According to Tiwari, many students, but by far not all who are coming to the Adda, face difficulties in 'normal' schooling. As such, their lives are being considered as less equal and less worthy of living by Development actors and mainstream educationists alike.

Often, they are neglected by the teachers in their regular schools, designated as 'failures.' The teachers feel that they don't know anything, they are useless, they won't achieve anything in their lives, and they are basically left alone without any support till they fail in school or drop out. At Adda, they get their freedom with community - there is no restriction, no compulsion, no exam, no homework, and they do things they really like. In schools they do things they are forced to do (Tiwari, 2017, own interview).

The CA now has five 'hubs' which are the Slow Food Junior Chef's Academy; the Community Media Lab; the Design Studio & Makerspace; the Art, Music & Dance Academy; and the Sports & Fitness Hub. Students can choose to join any of the hubs and explore between the hubs at any time. Many students focus on two or three hubs and engage in week-long or longer projects, which gives them the time to explore their interests and passion in detail and learn according to their own pace. Across the hubs, there are numerous workshops offered on a regular basis by outside guests that are catered to the interests of the students and organised as per their ideas and suggestions.

Each hub is supported by a facilitator who co-hosts the space and shares his or her experience with the children. Importantly, the facilitators are not seen or act as 'teachers' but support in various hands-on projects the children decide to take on together with them.

At Adda, we feel everybody is a student and everybody is a teacher. But in the Indian context, a 10-year old child, if you ask him what he knows, before the kid can even reply, his parents, his teachers, elders, they will answer: 'He's still a child, he doesn't know anything.' At Adda, we are throwing this notion out. We are trying to encourage the qualities everybody already has. How can we utilise these qualities and make a better society or better space. (...) We are saying, you have a special intelligence, skills, you have something, but no one sees it. At Creativity Adda, we are trying to create a space where they can explore themselves and their interests. This is not a vocational training center but a space where each learner can explore their whole, multi-dimensional selves in the world. (Tiwari, 2017, own interview).

The CA thus challenges conventional, mainstream and common-sense notions of Development and Education by introducing a dissensus into the dominant social order. As an 'unschool', it is conceptualised as "a parallel disruptive virus within the general school paradigm. There is a strong attempt to challenge the dominant school monoculture of competition, compulsion, fragmented knowledge, I.Q. labeling, textbooks, reward-punishment, and certification. *At the Creativity Adda, every child is seen as 'intelligent' and 'gifted' (...)*" (Jain and Singh, nd; emphasis added).

Rather than focusing on market-dictated needs as the only way to earn one's livelihoods and eke out a (ever more precarious, insecure, unstable and exploitable-prone) living, the CA and its facilitators focus on the support of the khojis' *will* to create meaningful lives in interaction with others, without pre-determining exactly what such lives should look like in detail, but letting the children explore and decide on their own (and thus not repeating the mistakes of Development and Education). The envisioned lifeworlds possibly resulting out of this initiative thus clearly exceed the ontological limits of the current Development paradigm and broaden our understanding and idea of education as well as challenge us to re-think notions of what makes a meaningful life.

#### ENDNOTES

[1] MGIEP stands for the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development.

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