Narratives of Sustainability and Sustainable Dialogues within Eurasia Community and Beyond is driven by the expectations and hopes of the non-profit organization Eurasia Foundation (from Asia) for creating a new conflict-free global community based on values of mutual respect, solidarity, and cooperation among countries. In line with the Eurasia Foundation's core mission, this volume offers a vibrant recollection of Spanish and international professors who, from an interdisciplinary standpoint, examine ways to advance cross-cultural alliances and to foster intercultural comprehension. Seeking the promotion of multicultural and inclusive narratives of sustainability, framed in post-covid-19 scenarios, this volume underscores how the cross fertilization of the Humanities and (Social) Sciences is vital to the understanding and confronting of our contemporary global environmental challenges.

Questions of Sustainability and the University's Digital Shift in the Post-Pandemic Future

Rina Ramdev
Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, India
rinaramdev@svc.ac.in

Abstract

While the outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic occasioned the need for remote learning and online teaching as necessary, albeit contingent measures, to tide over the closing of campuses worldwide, here in India, state directives like the *New Education Policy 2020* (NEP) are using the moment of the pandemic to usher in large-scale digitalization of pedagogical modes in the university. For this, the pandemic's forced recourse of online modes is being instrumentalized to resurrect a contentious, relegated project involving Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for universities to accept and adopt as a blueprint for the future. In my essay, this misplaced digital optimism that sponsors and promotes MOOCs, and the politics of viable sustainability relayed through a hyped-up optics that the online mode rides on, will be looked at. Further, its effect on students and learning, as well as on non-tenured, adjunct faculty who have been teaching for years, if not decades, in the hope of permanent

positions and regularization, will be highlighted for the retrenchment and upheaval that these courses will leave in their wake.

1. INTRODUCTION

While the outbreak of the Covid-19 global pandemic occasioned the need for remote learning and online teaching as necessary, albeit contingent measures, to tide over the closing of campuses worldwide, here in India, state directives like the *New Education Policy 2020* (NEP) are using the moment of the pandemic to usher in large-scale digitalization of pedagogical modes in the university. For this, the pandemic's forced recourse of online modes is being instrumentalized to resurrect a contentious, relegated project involving Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for universities to accept and adopt as a blueprint for the future. The disastrous fate of MOOCs in the west, after the initial euphoria that had greeted their advent, is something that is being deliberately kept out of conversations evangelizing the digital turn. In my essay, this misplaced digital optimism that sponsors and promotes MOOCs, and the politics of viable sustainability relayed through a hyped-up optics that the online mode rides on, will be looked at. Further, its effect on students and learning, as well as on non-tenured, adjunct faculty who have been teaching for years, if not decades, in the hope of permanent positions and regularization, will be highlighted for the retrenchment and upheaval that these courses will leave in their wake.

The logic of neoliberalism has crept into university functioning in the last decade here in India, imperiling the public model of higher education—even as resisting student and teacher groups from within left-progressive circles have fought hard against the takeover. Like school education, now higher education too is being reined in as an enterprise, aimed at private and not public good—in this justifying the withdrawal of state investment and spending from the public university. The bid to introduce MOOCs as viable, parallel modes

traditional forms of location-based learning. These courses are projected as part of the new hybrid or blended mode, which would make possible the integration of online distance learning with "in-class" campus enrolment. The NEP underlines this innovation thus: "An Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) shall be established which would digitally store the academic credits earned from various recognized HEIs [Higher Education Institution] so that the degrees from an HEI can be awarded taking into account credits earned" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India 2021: 37), and "HEIs may blend these online courses with traditional teaching in undergraduate and vocational programmes" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India 2021: 58). Since the policy views online education as paving "a natural path to increase access to quality higher education" (39), it promises multi-institutional access that would allow students to gain credits from courses across universities, while confined in their remote corners anywhere in the country. In all this, an uncritical digital idealism drafts the NEP's aims and objectives, mounted guilefully upon the language of social justice. By monetizing online courses, universities would open these out to greater numbers than those it has on campus enrolment, but the actual pedagogic value accruing from a course could very easily stand compromised, as Debaditya Bhattacharya points out in "Locked Down, but Logged In!: 'Connecting' to the Futures of Indian Higher Education":

> When transposed into an Indian context, the "social justice" claims enunciated by a digital reinvention of the public university will only end up in a consummate perversion—by making collaterals out of minority, Dalit-adivasi and women enrolments. The policy prescription for such a scenario is to inordinately dilute content and relax testing mechanisms, which would only go on to compromise the credibility of such courses for potential employers and provide no "value-addition" to the skill sets that an incumbent already comes with. (Bhattacharya 2020: 68)

And this, even as a digital apartheid, could separate the data-rich student from others economically disprivileged, who might be unable

to afford data subscriptions to keep up with the demands of the online mode. Access to mobile data within families would be further complicated by the gender of the student seeking access, since in India, the money and effort put into the education of girls are typically less than that accorded to their male siblings. Further, as is the case with young women in India who experience oppressive forms of patriarchal parental surveillance within the confines of the home, the experience of being away on campus would have allowed for a newfound independence, which again would stand compromised as conservative families could view online digital learning as a "safer" option, also allowing for continued patriarchal control. While the contention of affordability is sought to be negotiated by the government through a subsidizing of mobile data charges, it is important to remember that this will be made possible by the state's covert nexus with the telecom sector—owned by the richest and most powerful of India's corporates. Higher education is the new haven for investment opportunities.

New digital technology also ostensibly carries the seductions of greater choice, flexibility, and individualization while willfully overlooking the personalization that in-person teaching and learning carries and where teaching can be paced and redrafted according to classroom responses. Students in India, who could very well be first-generation learners, are able to be a part of the low-fee-charging public university, and who would, in turn, need closer tutoring and attention from teachers. This would not register within the annals of standardized online course learning, unable to account for cognitive reticence and differences in students. Further, students benefit not just from their own personal interactions with professors but also from other discussions forged with their peers in the classroom space. This discounting of academic rigour and debate has become the conditions *sine qua non* of the neoliberal university and its current investments in the digital model:

> The post-academic university becomes a place to practice shallowness disguised as flexibility and adaptability. Lecturing becomes merchandise, and so does academic performance as such. The unholy alliance of state bureaucracy and neoliberal practices—deregulation,

dissemination, and privatisation coupled with bureaucratic control—results in the academic community becoming a tiny and insignificant minority in what we call nowadays the academia. Enormous economic and political pressure coming from the university management and the state establishment makes academic and intellectual freedom vulnerable and fragile. (Donskis et al. 2019: 31)

4. ACADEMIC LABOUR AND PRECARITY

The new digital political economy, rationalized by state policies like the NEP, also bypasses the destabilizing of the teacher by the substitution of digital courses, especially in a country like India, which has one of the largest labour reserves in the world. In the university where I teach, the University of Delhi, there is a large adjunct workforce of more than 4,000 teachers, who comprise roughly 70 per cent of the workforce, whose precarity will be profoundly exacerbated by the introduction of online courses. The introduction of MOOCs will allow the university to cut down on academic labour and create cultures of disposability where adjunct faculty are concerned. Adjunctification is riddled with the anxieties stemming from the very precariousness of non-tenured positions within academia that offer neither benefits nor guarantees. And now, the mainstreaming of MOOCs is the direct fallout of the digital worship that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak warns against, wherein the digital as a labour-saving device is co-opted by the university bureaucracy to save intellectual labour (Spivak 2022: 10: 22). This was also remarked upon by the historian Mukul Kesavan, immediately after online teaching was adopted as a mode after the coronavirus pandemic had struck:

> The state might decide that online teaching can be used for undergraduate education in a dematerialised way, and cut the salaries, upkeep, and funding of public institutions. Also, the idea that teaching can be dematerialised could lead to the next thought — of using resources produced elsewhere to mass-educate people within public education. These are especially true of STEM subjects, which

might reduce universities to examining bodies that have subcon-
tracted intellectual content to MOOCs produced elsewhere. (qtd in
Farooqui 2020)

Within the current shift that the NEP marks, the professoriate is
to be the new rank of content specialists, data labourers, and cour-
se designers/facilitators: "Teachers will undergo rigorous training in
learner-centric pedagogy and on how to become high-quality on-
line content creators themselves using online teaching platforms
and tools. There will be emphasis on the teacher's role in facilitating
active student engagement with the content and with each other"
(Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India
2021: 59). Academic labour is redesignated now, with the role of the
teacher now forced into competitive content creation. As early as
2003, the cultural historian David Noble had launched a scathing
attack on the new "dotcom degrees" and "digital diploma mills" that
were already commodifying education in American universities:

> With the commoditization of instruction, teachers as labor are drawn
> into a production process designed for the efficient creation of ins-
> tructional commodities, and hence become subject to all the pressu-
> res that have befallen production workers in other industries under-
> going rapid technological transformation from above. In this context
> faculty have much more in common with the historic plight of other
> skilled workers than they care to acknowledge. Like these others,
> their activity is being restructured, via the technology, in order to
> reduce their autonomy, independence, and control over their work
> and to place workplace knowledge and control as much as possible
> into the hands of the administration. As in other industries, the te-
> chnology is being deployed by management primarily to discipline,
> deskill, and displace labor. (Noble 2022: 5)

There is every danger of administrators asserting control over the
content being uploaded, with direct censoring of material and also a
censuring of the teacher for betraying a political bias that is at odds
with that of the establishment.

5. CONCLUSION

Finally then, what we need to recognize is that in this digital evangelism is the Indian public university's giant leap into privatization and autonomy. This moment of transition to a new teaching-learning is far from being democratic or empowering for students; rather, it is a transition to a new type of cognitive capitalism. In this, the democratic rhetoric about extending remote educational access to those student demographies unable to overcome the challenges of their locations is nothing but a ruse to sell the online course as a richly accommodative mode. To quote David Noble again: "For the universities are not simply undergoing a technological transformation. Beneath that change, and camouflaged by it, lies another: the commercialization of higher education. For here as elsewhere technology is but a vehicle and a disarming disguise" (Noble 2022: 2).

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