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RETHINKING EQUALITY-UNIVERSALITY MATRIX IN THE MODERN EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE

Abstract

The idea of equality is not new to the disciplines of social sciences and education. The notion penetrated into the lexicon of the modern democratic societies through the Constitutional and the legal frames since the need for treating all citizens equal had been the cherished goal of the states in democratic systems. However, in India, the situation is different or rather complex. The historical fault lines along ascriptive / primordial identities continue to persist. Yet, some of the social welfare reforms post-independence did take the initiatives to address the discriminatory, hierarchical and stratified conditions that posed hindrance towards attaining education. But, despite the efforts at the policy level, the counter claims of exclusion and marginalisation rooted in the policy-practice/implementation gap remained or rather got intensified with the rise of neo-liberalism. The unscrupulous privatisation, driven by capitalist mode of thinking and market oriented ideology that the neoliberal turn brought in, entrenched the divide further in complex ways between the privileged and the marginalised. Today, the notion of equality is experiencing a conceptual void that further becomes critical in the welfare-neo-liberal conundrum. What got missed or rather neglected is a certain engagement with modernity as the void can be traced to have its roots within it. The pertinent questions therefore that need to be asked are: what is the relationship that modernity shares with education? Can something new emerge in the discourse of education if we attempt to critically understand equality from the realm of modernity? Can it create possibilities to emerge new ways of thinking, understanding and practice to address the anxieties around equality in the contemporary educational discourse? These are some of the questions the paper would attempt to reflect and delve upon.

Keywords: *Equality, Universality, Inequality, Modernity, Education*

Introduction

The idea of equality is not new to the disciplines of social sciences and education. The notion penetrated into the lexicon of the modern democratic societies through the Constitutional and the legal frames since the need for treating all citizens equal had been the cherished goal of the states in democratic

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systems. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, a welfare state, is that concept of government in which the state or a well-established network of social institutions play a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of citizens. It is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail minimal provisions for a good life in terms of education, health, housing to name a few.

Specifically talking about education, democratic states globally, did make some conscious effort to develop ways to address the concerns around equality on the belief that “social practice permeates inequality and therefore it should be brought in line with the principal of equality” (Beteille, 2001: 3619). However, in India, the situation is different or rather complex. The historical fault lines along ascriptive/primordial identities continue to persist. Yet, some of the social welfare reforms post-independence did take the initiatives to address the discriminatory, hierarchical and stratified conditions that posed hindrance towards attaining education. But, despite the efforts at the policy level, the counter claims of exclusion and marginalisation rooted in the policy-practice/implementation gap remained or rather got intensified with the rise of neo-liberalism “marked by derailment and shifting away from the constitutional goals of equality and social welfare/justice” (Dalal, 2021: 12). The unscrupulous privatisation driven by capitalist mode of thinking and market oriented ideology that the neoliberal turn brought in, entrenched the divide further in complex ways between the privileged and the marginalised in the name of productivity, efficiency, accountability, transparency, performance, and excellence. Concerns around the idea and practice of equality therefore continue to hold significant attention in the contemporary education discourse as the core-margin dichotomy further deepened with the shifting orientation of the state from a welfare perspective anchored on an egalitarian vision to the regulatory mode rooted in the values of utilitarianism and instrumentality.

Today, the notion of equality is experiencing a conceptual void that further gets critical in welfare-neo liberal conundrum. What got missed or rather neglected is a certain engagement with modernity as the void is traced to have its roots within it. The pertinent questions therefore that need to be asked are: what is the relationship that modernity shares with education? Can something new emerge in the discourse of education if we attempt to critically understand equality from the realm of modernity? Can it create possibilities to emerge new ways of thinking, understanding and practice to address the anxieties around equality in the contemporary educational discourse? These are some of the questions the paper would attempt to reflect and delve upon.

Tracing the Roots Within Modernity: Historicizing the Context of the Concern

“Modernity in India that ushered in with the contact of colonisation, is

associated not as just a point in history, rather it appeared with an enlightenment spirit transcending the past and creating a break from what existed before. Interrogating the legitimacy of the most established pre-modern beliefs, modernity emerged with the promise that championed equality, freedom, progress and change that resulted in a paradigm shift in human relations and thinking. As a socio-political-economic phenomenon, it brought with itself irreversible changes in how societies were structured, and individuals identified with it. This promise of equality, freedom and knowledge has its roots in the explosion of science, reason and technology recognized through the fields of science, law and education. Modernity's promise for equality lies in its scientific rationality that helps shedding off the primordial-parochial skins to adopt for a universalistic approach that helped overcome the burden of ascribed identities as it gets replaced with achieved/attained identities." (Dalal, Anand & Das, 2019: 15). The development of the ideas of positivism, utilitarianism, behaviourism and functionalism in modernity thus helped and created space for individuals to cast off the baggage of their parochial self, rooted in inequality to form and affirm their achieved/acquired self that provides a hope for equality (Dalal, Anand & Das, 2019).

However, critiques of modernity challenged/questioned this narrative of equality. It was recognised that while modern nation state provides equality and freedom, it happens in the garb of latent forms of control through an universalising aspect embedded in a particular kind of rationality. This universalising facet tamed individuals in a veiled/invisible/subtle manner than the earlier visible forms of control and domination leading to the formation of new forms of inequalities that shifted its base from the traditional order to secular domains (Srinivas 1962, Nandy 1983, Beteille 2001, Desai and Dubey, 2011).

Michael Foucault's (1982 and 1990) work asserts this shift of base from traditional to secular realms in the universalising and implicit forms of control. Foucault "traces the invisible form of control in the formation of the modern subject. He finds the ways and means through which individual was subjectivised, which forms the crux of his internal and external modes of power or bio-politics i.e controlling the self of the individual not by external power on the body but by transferring the power within the body of the person and capturing the soul of the individual itself" (Foucault, 1982 and 1990 in Dalal and Das, 2018: 13). "Foucault's work further informed that the contemporary obsession with productivity and efficiency would not have been possible without ensuring control over the individual which is implicit in nature. Foucault argued that the modern nation-state developed a close relationship with the productive forces. However, demanding a direct control of the individual was not possible with the traditional structures, forms of knowledge and power mechanisms. A new form of power therefore emerged rooted in a rationality which is linked to scientific practice. Its main motive was to seek docility of its audience through

a certain idea of science and reason” (Ibid: 18-19).

Foucault’s work thus validates the distancing/break away from the social realm/milieu that modernity laid emphasis on where individuals are bereft of their social world/collectives to establish an individual control over them. This modern form of control was, however, desirable to create obedient, mechanised, trained bodies that helped expand and escalate technologies of production resulting in the emergence of ideas like capitalism, neoliberalism that dominates the discourse and practices in education today (Dalal, Anand & Das, 2019). “The French thinker, Bernard Stiegler (2013), characterised this existing human condition that is significantly relatable in the domain education, as ‘generalised proletarianization’ i.e a loss in the capacity to develop knowledge or production of knowledge reduced to sheer consumption. Diminished to mere order takers and doing as being instructed, a proletariat (teacher or a student) is one who neither can imagine nor can create or think. Individuals become mere compliant workforce who can be manipulated, transformed, improved and analysed through modern power/techniques of control. Any kind of thinking or questioning related to knowledge production is dismissed being antithetical to the attitudes and performance expected towards the kind of techno managerial roles that modernity demands” (Stiegler, 2013 in Das, 2022: 44). This modern form of power, control and domination gets visible/revealed in the equality struggles/battles vis the vis the marginalised in the educational spaces, processes and practices.

The shift of base from traditional/hierarchical order to secular/egalitarian domain Beteille (2001) too talks about when he states, “Indian society is changing from the hierarchical to the egalitarian kind although the change is highly uneven. It is most conspicuous on the constitutional and legal plane where hierarchical norms have been replaced by egalitarian ones. But whereas the law has changed in favour of equality, custom is still largely biased towards hierarchy. Caste bias and gender bias strongly effect the life chances of the individual and restrict the scope of individual mobility. At the same time, the functional requirements of the new educational and occupational systems make the practice of caste discrimination and gender discrimination increasingly anachronistic” (Beteille 2001: 3621).

Interplay of Equality-Universality Matrix and the Paradox of Modernity

“Modernity throws a complex dialectic i.e the formation and transcendence of primordial-ascriptive identities. While one lives in an inter-subjective world that emerges from the baggage of historical memories, traditions, language, culture, there is freedom too rooted in critical consciousness that can question and interrogate even the category of the most sacred” (Dalal, Anand & Das 2019: 17). So in the paradox of modernity an individual gets the flavour of freedom, agency, criticality and simultaneously

experience exclusion, marginalisation, abandonment, pain, anguish, which are existential and socio-cultural in nature. Interestingly, this paradox of modernity can be regarded as heterotopic in nature, a term that Foucault (1984) uses to define modern contemporary spaces/conditions. According to Foucault, “there are modern spaces/conditions that are capable of juxtaposing orders of different kind that are in themselves incompatible. These are spaces where set of relations/conditions/forces exist that are irreducible and not superimposable on one another. Such spaces always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and make them penetrable” (Foucault, 1984: 1-9). Such is the nature of heterotopia that is integral to the modern paradox. Ironically, education as an ideal has to role the ground and bind such spaces of oppositions/heterotopic conditions with its universalistic approach (education is seen as a utopia that exists within heterotopia). But, unfortunately education as an ideal has lost its legitimacy in the modern biopolitical times and hence its universalistic ideals only end up intensifying the complex dialectic- the modern paradox.

To address this heterotopic paradox that modern times invoke, something that is also visible in the contemporary educational discourse, significant would be to rethink modernity’s universalist promise that is found antithetical to ascriptive and specifically marginalised-stigmatized identities posing challenges in the attainment of equality. Essential is to deconstruct the idea of universality specifically in the way its relationship with equality plays out vis a vis the marginalised in the Indian context. What is crucial is to understand that the notion of universality is different from concept of equality. Asserting the distinction, Beteille (2001) mentions, “the principal of universality reminds us that human beings owe a certain consideration simply because they are human, because they are capable of suffering pain, loss and separation and of experiencing and expressing affection, fellow feeling and loyalty. It does not mean that the national product, or even the benefits and burdens of society should be equally distributed among all its members without consideration of ability, aptitude or need. It does not say that valued objects or activities should not be enjoyed by some unless they can also be enjoyed in the same measure by all. The principle of universality cannot wish out of existence the principle of scarcity” (Beteille, 2001: 3623).

The modern idea of universality that is attached to citizenship-a social order based on rights and obligations which is a modern concept is confused with the idea of equality. Social disabilities/disadvantages/asymmetries practiced on the premise of ascriptive/primordial foundations has its roots in culture (Beteille, 2001) and therefore inherent in the very structuring and functioning of the social matrix. The way negotiation and addressing of the concerns happen in the name of equality is something that needs to be seen from a critical perspective. The artificial reducing of inequality by advocating equality in the garb of universalistic mechanisms in fact exacerbated disparities/inequalities.

This being the reason why even though modernity with its universalistic ideals widely promoted equality but the ground realities speaks differently. On the ground, “servility towards those who are socially superior and the expectation of servility from those who are deemed to be socially inferior persists” (Ibid: 3619). The mutation of equality being trapped within the universalistic framework reproduced and reinforced inequality and accelerated its new forms that became detrimental for attaining education.

The pursuit of equality is definitely desirable and necessary in modern education but not with the baggage of universality that attaches the burden of unconditionality to the idea of equality meaning that equality needs to be ensured at any cost and in all circumstances. The problem does not lie in the fact that equality advocated from the lens of universality is unable to harmonise with other social values rooted in social hierarchies but the fact that these values are not irreducible or superimposable on one another to create a harmony. Infact the idea of equality can be fundamentally hierarchical when practiced. Inequality is thus produced in the very processes and practices of education even though it is done through mechanisms that stands for equality its principle ideal (Srinivas 1962, Rawls, 1972, Beteille 2001).

What is crucial is to understand and affirm the “antinomies of equality-universality matrix meaning the inherent contradictions, oppositions, and tensions intrinsic to the notions as a social ideal itself” (Beteille, 2001: 3619). Another significant point that cannot be missed debating the equality-universality matrix is the conception of rights. According to Hannah Arendt (1963), “The conception of human rights is based upon the assumed existence of human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships except that they were still human. In the system of nation state the so called sacred and inalienable rights of man show themselves to lack every protection and reality of the moment in which they no longer take the form of rights belonging to citizens of a state” (Arendt, 1963 in Agamben, 1998: 126). In the above quote the question that Arendt posed is that: why is the human rights framework which stands on universalistic ideals fails when it confronts those who do not possess the same rights i.e the ones that are at the margins of the society? Zizek’s (2008) question too invokes the contradictions within the equality-universality matrix when he asks, “what is such an exclusion of some form of otherness from the scope of ethical concerns is consubstantial with the very founding gesture of ethical universality so that the more universal our explicit ethics, the more brutal the underlying exclusion is?” (Zizek, 2008: 54). What he means is that the idea is not to reject universality in ethics. It is crucial to understand the new exclusionary mechanisms that have come up with the universal framework itself. Reason and Science inherent in the universalist approaches instead of helping transcend ascriptive social categories of caste,

religion, gender or class further legitimises inequality and marginalisation. Interestingly, the modern legal system in India too legitimises the principle of universality in a language articulated through the standpoint of equality. Beteille (2001) remarks, “when lawyers speak of ‘equality before the law’ or ‘the equal protection of the laws’, they have in mind certain rights, capacities and immunities that should, at least in principle, be universally available to all, irrespective of race, caste, gender or any other personal quality of body or mind. When, on the other hand, we speak of equality (or equalisation) of income, we have in mind inequalities that can be measured and that-are perhaps felt to be increasing when they ought to be decreasing. When people say that they are for equality, what they often mean is that they simply want certain basic things to be made universally available to all; but they sometimes also mean that they want every sort of inequality to be eliminated or at least reduced; and the two meanings tend to be frequently confused” (Beteille, 2001: 3623). Here lies the contradiction. The above perspectives thus articulate the ambiguities within the universalistic framework that modernity invokes to promote and practice the idea of equality. This leads to the emergence and formation of new forms of inequality rooted in this equality-universality conceptual misperception.

Thinking a Way Out: Revisiting the Principle and Practice of Equality in Modern Education

This section emerges from the concerns raised in the previous segments on how equality-universality dyad plays out in the discourse of education rooted in the modern paradox and how the universalistic approach, the gift of modernity, has deep-seated ambiguities/contradictions within itself. It is this paradox that instead of making education emancipatory, destigmatizing, liberating that it claims to be in the garb of its universalistic ideals/visions, reinforces and reproduces hierarchies that exacerbates the existing spaces, processes and practices in education with the emergence of new forms of inequalities and asymmetries within the system. Further, the paradox of modernity articulated and at the same time veiled through the principal of universality fails to address the conceptual void within equality, evident in the way equality is conceptualised/perceived and practiced in education.

In this segment therefore there is an attempt to think of a way out by revisiting the principle and practice of equality in the modern education system to deal with the fallacy of the universalistic framework in education and in turn address the conceptual void inherent in equality. French Thinker, Jacques Ranciere’s (1987) seminal work, *The Ignorant School Master*, that argues for equality and democracy as central to the discourse of education would be significant to address the above concerns in education and also finding a way out. Interestingly, this work of Ranciere shows a way to change the manner in which education system, its processes and practices are quintessentially perceived. “Equality in its

most radical shape and form is at the heart of change. In fact, equality is also at the heart of the dead lock that education as a system and its practices are facing” (Ranciere, 1987 in Anand, 2019: 1-2). The deadlock for Ranciere is created by this very supposition of an informed master who has a claim over knowledge against the uninformed/ignorant student. Ranciere deliberates on the displacement of this informed master, the modern idea of a teacher to argue against the hierarchy of intelligences that are considered essential to legitimise modern educational practices. Instead, Ranciere claims for certain equality of intelligences between the master and the student (Anand, 2019).

The narrative of Joseph Jactot¹ that Ranciere refers to in his work completely displaces the way modern education system functions according to him. The narrative of Jactot revealed that “teaching was not in the slightest about cramming students with knowledge.....but he knew equally well that students had to avoid the chance detours where minds is still incapable from distinguishing the essential from the accessory....In short, the essential act of the master was to explicate” (Ranciere, 1987: 3). According to Ranciere, these chance detours that can be chaotic and disorderly for learning, that education system looks at with doubt and distrust, is integral to the discourse. In this thinking, Ranciere is not just questioning inequalities on basis of primordial identities such as caste, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. that exists, but he is connecting the ascriptive identity based inequalities back to the very asymmetry between that informed master and the ignorant student that has to be constructed for education system to function and at the core of which is the model of explication. It may seem that this asymmetry in the master-student relationship is necessary and legitimate. However, Ranciere resists it. For him, “there is a circular logic at the heart of sanctioning of this asymmetry. Ranciere states that when a student is given a book to understand a series of reasoning, a master who explicates is only providing another series of reasonings to explain the book. So the question is, what can the teacher tell that the book fails to do? and if the book fails to explain, then why not have another teacher to explicate on what the last teacher explained? In other words, is it not that we can have another level of explicative process, another teacher maybe to explain this last system of reasons, thereby making the process infinite? This infinite cycle of explication according to Ranciere leads to a logical fallacy, a loop that can only be stopped by making a teacher the sole judge of where it has to stop” (Ranciere, 1987 in Anand, 2019: 1-3). “So the logic of explication calls for the principle of regression ad infinitum: there is no reason for the redoubling of reasonings ever to stop. What brings an end to the regression and gives the system its foundation is simply that the explicator is the sole judge of the point when the explication is itself explicated” (Ranciere, 1987: 4). However, this does not mean that Ranciere is aiming for absolute equality in the education system. In fact, he is arguing against equality as a goal that modern education practice. The problem according to Ranciere, lies in this process of making equality as a goal in the educational discourse. Ranciere’s mentions that emancipation that the modern-universalistic

vision of education claims will not be possible by making structures and systems in ways that it becomes equal for all. This approach will fail or rather never work. Reason being, the structural effect produced by the very existence of the system discriminates and excludes the marginalised and will continue to. For Ranciere, equality should be therefore thought of as a presupposition, i.e a starting point through which differences has to be affirmed and counted. Equality as a presupposition needs to be at the heart of the master-student relationship through which inequalities can be negotiated and engaged with (Ranciere, 1987).

Ranciere further states that, “our problem isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. Its seeing what can be done under that supposition” (Ranciere, 1987: 46). Ranciere in his quote is cognizant of the fact that intelligence cannot be completely equal. Creating a distinction between ‘will’ and ‘intelligence’ Ranciere is of the view that there is a need for ‘hierarchy of will’ over hierarchy of ‘intelligence’. The problem of inequality has its roots in the hierarchy of intelligence between the so called informed master and the ignorant/uninformed student in the education system. In the shift from will to intelligence, the role of the master changes from examining and validating whether a student has learnt or not to whether a student has paid attention (Ranciere, 1987). “He will not verify what the student has found; he will verify that the student has searched. He will judge whether or not he has paid attention.” (Ibid: 31). Ranciere is of the belief that this shift from hierarchy of intelligence to will is possible and so is the potentiality of its practice in the education system. This is because there is something innate about intelligence that calls for equality. For him, the fact that learning happens all the time without the need for explication by the other would not have happened if there wasn’t anything integral to intelligence that could create conditions for equality (Ranciere, 1987). Therefore, Ranciere states, “Intelligence is not a power of understanding based on comparing knowledge with its object. It is the power to make oneself understood through another’s verification. And only equal understands an equal. Equality and intelligence are synonymous terms.” (Ibid: 73).

Thus the Rancierian framework of equality paves a different path to locate equality within the educational discourse. Infact his framework can be treated as a counter critique to works that dismisses the notion of equality that is only meant to reproduce inequality and asymmetry in the education system as for Ranciere, inequalities that education reinforces and reproduces is not because of the asymmetrical society, the educational institutions are part of or the hierarchical social milieu within which the education system functions, instead inequality is the function of education system that is legitimised through its universalistic ideals.

Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to critically engage with the notion of equality and the way it is played out in the garb of universality in the modern educational

discourse rooted in the paradox of the complex dialectic modernity itself throws upon. Further, the paper, through the Rancierian framework makes an effort to rethink the notions of equality and the way it is perceived and located in education and in turn also tries to address the conceptual void/ambiguity that lies within the universality-equality matrix taking away from education its emancipatory, social vision as it is trapped in the fallacy that modern-universalistic ideals/framework of education produces that ironically end up reinforcing/reproducing and exacerbating inequalities and asymmetries in the system-its processes and practices. To conclude, the idea of this paper is not to provide any direction to policy making for an approach that take realistic cognizance of the layered ground realities to inform educational processes and practices. That would require a different set of ideas and discussions. The purpose of this paper is to deconstruct the rhetoric of equality-universality dyad in education and engage with the underlying tensions/contradictions/ambiguities of the notions to address the concerns of the existing conditions in modern, contemporary education. Can we imagine of an education that is able to hold the ideals of modernity and at the same time resist as well as engage with its regressive ideas and practices? This is a question that is important to think, something that this paper is making an attempt to explore and delve upon.

Notes

- 1 Josph Jactot was a lecturer in France who was exiled to Netherlands when the regimes changed. He was appointed a professor by the generosity of the king there. In Netherlands, the problem was that Jactot did not speak Flemish and students did not speak French. To develop a minimal link Jactot picked up the bilingual edition of Telemaque and with the help of an interpreter he asked the students to learn the French text with the help of the bilingual edition that has French and Flemish side by side. He asked them to repeat the same exercise once half the text was done. Jactot's own expectations from this exercise were minimal, this was just a last resort for Jactot to survive in Netherlands. But the experiment exceeded his expectations, students showed marked improvement in their understanding of the French (see Rancere, 1987: 1-2).

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