The Digital University: Imaginations around the pedagogic space for the marginalised

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) in India has seen an exponential growth phase over the last two decades. Challenges of meeting expansion demands along with goals of equity and quality have underpinned discussions on educational reforms as well. The dynamics of market-supported increased access have compromised on goals of equity, whereas the role of technology in assisting growth has been fraught with similar and greater social challenges. A new normal seems to have emerged into the HE landscape across the world in the form of legitimising and rationalising 'digital' as an equal alternative to the face to face. In the context of a developing postcolonial economy like India, this development has further highlighted the contradictory pulls within the emerging aims/purposes of HE. The digital divide even as it impacts or reflects the existing asymmetries in access to resources, also engenders a dilemma with respect to the desired aims of higher education. There appears to be a contingent shift in approach appropriating the discourse of democratisation of knowledge/educational institutions and materially undermining prospects for enhancing social capital of graduates essential for a critical participation in the social, political and economic realm. In this context, the paper aims to problematize the idea of inclusion of the marginalised

through digitalisation of education with focus on the pedagogic space and the possibilities for a participatory, mediated, empathetic and empowering pedagogy. The paper begins by contextualising the digital emphasis in the neo-liberal imagination of higher education in India.

Keywords: *digital university, neoliberalism, reforms, social justice, dialogic and transformative pedagogy*

Introduction

> **'**The expansion of education is no guarantee for bridging inequality. Research on educational stratification suggests that inequality in education between different social strata continues and sometimes even widens in spite of educational growth' (Teltumbde, 2021, p. 520).

Expansion of the higher education (HE) system in India has been met with challenges of equity and quality. The concerns emergent in this context have underpinned discussions on educational reforms as well. Policy discourse has witnessed reform propositions advocating market-supported mechanisms for increasing access as well as a push for digital technology to mediate the expansion. The paper attempts to argue that both trajectories are likely to compromise on goals of equity when juxtaposed against the differential academic trajectories mapped for learners from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, the legitimising mechanisms for normalising early exit from HE systems, or the nature of financing of public HE system.

Post-pandemic, a new normal seems to have emerged within the HE landscape across the globe, which 'legitimises' the digital as a credible alternative to the brick and mortar university. In the context of a developing postcolonial

economy like India, this development has further highlighted the contradictory pulls within the emergent aims/purposes of HE. The digital divide even as it impacts or reflects the existing asymmetries in access to resources, also engenders a dilemma with respect to democratisation of knowledge and aims of enhancing social capabilities of graduates for a critical participation in the social, political and economic realm. This paper explores a foundational question: How are the socio-political and cognitive assumptions about the learner, the pedagogic space and the aims of education constructed in the present-day discourse on 'digital education' in India? How do these assumptions underwrite the new forms of engendering educational inequality?

We argue that the State's conviction about the role of digital platforms/digital university as evidenced in the Union Budget 2022-23 in spearheading equitable access to HE needs to be problematised. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her budget speech said, '...a digital University will be established to provide access to the students across the country for world-class quality universal education with a personalised learning experience at their doorsteps' (Gohain, 2022). The discourse on increase in enrolment is anchored around the inclusion of young people from the hitherto marginalised sections of the society. The capacity in the system requires expansion with increase in the number of enrollments. The digital platforms offer a seductive solution–without necessarily demanding the state to invest on physical infrastructure augmentation, and outsourcing the access discourse/market opportunity to the edtech and fintech entrepreneurial ecosystem. This skews the sharing of public resources to the disadvantage of those already in the margins and normalises a parallel educational trajectory for them. The experience around the globe with open learning, and the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in particular, have highlighted how over 90% of those enrolled never complete the courses (Eriksson, Adawi and Stohr, 2017) and the retention rates range between a

meagre 3 and 15% (Deshpande and Chukhlomin, 2017). The new reform measures or plea for move towards digital platforms is justified through the argument that enabling structural flexibility in entry and exit within the academic world will engender greater learning opportunities for those hitherto excluded from HE on account of opportunity cost of education. The discourse around lifelong learning and skilling for the twenty-first century have added another layer to the rhetoric of 'digital' as the panacea of the problem of HE education access in the country.

The directions for change being articulated within the policy narrative for the HE pedagogic space, with the state celebrating the advent of 'digital university' sits ill at ease with the pursuit of HE as a democratic space for engendering critical reflection and dialogue/citizenship for all. This confidence in the prospect of a digital university emanates from the discourse around MOOCs, which includes predictions that a large proportion of universities will eventually disappear and that academic degrees will be replaced by MOOC completion certificates (Kalman, 2014). Such degrees, encoded in the Academic Credit Banks (proposed to be set up by National Education Policy (NEP) 2020), will be worth presenting to potential employers. The digital university presumes a scenario that institutes of higher education will graduate students whose transcripts comprise mainly of MOOCs and that enormous numbers of academic faculty will become redundant (Kalman, 2014, p.5). The vision is extremely ambitious (but also strategic in intent) in view of the existing state of institutions: only about 22 percent of schools in India have the overall availability of computing devices (desktops or laptops), with much lower provisioning in rural areas (18 per cent) than urban areas (43 per cent). Findings from the UNESCO State of the Education Report for India 2021 document that only about 19 per cent of schools across the country have access to internet connectivity with only 14 per cent in rural areas compared to 42 per cent in

urban areas (Banchariya, 2021). Budget allocations over the last three years for Education in general and public higher education have betrayed a commitment to augmenting the public institutions' infrastructure. Government on its part has positioned NEP 2020 along with the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR) as a war cry for strengthening the digital infrastructure–unifying platforms for 'ease of education' (Bose, 2022).

Goodfellow and Lea (2013) use the notion of digital university to refer to the broad technological and structural changes associated with increased use of digital systems, devices, applications and tools, in higher education settings. They see 'digital university' as a site of considerable tension in which 'fundamentally different forms of social practice around learning and technologies jostle together and strain the boundaries of institutions and the professional communities that inhabit them' (Goodfellow and Lea, 2013, p.2). Thus highlighting an imminent need to engage with the politics of digital higher education–the wider enmeshing of digital processes and practices with the organisation and reshaping of the HE landscape in the country. In this paper, we argue that the possibilities inherent within a dynamic real-time experience of HE spaces is lost in the digital realm amidst the context of an ever stronger surveillance state. The discourse around 'transformatory' import of NEP 2020, particularly the focus on digitalisation and the 'digital university' in the post-pandemic context in India is framed within a neoliberal project of privatisation of HE. There is an opportunity cost hidden here–this project advances at the cost of meaningful and engaging lived experience of the classroom and social experience of the campus space, mitigation of communities of practice that could be facilitated in institutional spaces, mentoring processes and opportunities and the possibility of various formal and informal dialogic processes among faculty members and students. The paper thus explores the promises and challenges of a critical liberal education in an increasingly neo-

managerial and neo-liberal policy context that defines the new 'normal' and the move towards 'Byjufication of HE and the digital university'–synonymous with the rise of ed-tech and platformisation of educational experience in India'[i].

The neoliberal imagination

> ... universities are places where scholarship is cultivated,where evidence and argument are practised, …places of sustained enquiry and higher level analysis, of freedom to create and invent, of openness to peer and public criticism, and where academic virtues of honesty, courage and self-knowledge, among others, are cultivated (see Bridges, 2001, cited in Walker, 2002, p. 56).

A competing imagination of HE spaces is evident in the context of move towards expansion through digital means. As Alcorn, Christenson and Kapur (2015, p. 43) point out, the MOOCs as disruptive technologies in higher education have far greater potential when it comes to, 'the emerging economies of the Global South where demographic imperatives and constrained supply—combined with demand for skilled labor from employers—make it essential'.

Alcorn, Christenson and Kapur (2015) argue that MOOCs may be able to play a significant role in meeting the rapidly growing demand for high-quality, accessible higher education options around the world. Yet, it still remains subject to a critical question of how the steering of state commitment to the MOOCs path reflects withdrawal from funding, what Bridges (2001) refers to, 'universities as spaces of sustained enquiry and higher-level analysis', and positioning of expectations from HEIs within a techno-managerial framework. Expansion of the system as a means of creating an 'effective credentialing system' itself needs to be questioned. Education policy making within the neoliberal context would have this as the primary guiding focus. Credentials to be recognised in the market require their articulation within a framework that

enables their measure in a quantifiable manner. Move towards outcomes-based education (OBE) discourse reflects the strengthening of neoliberal ideology. At its worst, it reduces educational experience to an 'achievement score'-- education divorced from process and context, deeply undermining the radical potential of access to HE. This turn enables normalisation of a particular vision of university as transactional spaces where credits earned would have to essentially correspond to an externally determined qualifications framework and syllabi, making it possible to eventually disembody the learning experience from the corporate life of the university. The discourse of flexibility, efficiency, parity, have been integrated well into the reforms discourse of the new National Education Policy (2020) that posits the creation of Academic Bank of Credits as a structural innovation to integrate seamlessly face-to-face, hybrid, distance, and online platforms for higher education. From a technocratic and functionalist perspective it all fits in too well! Yet, it beckons a reflection and analysis from the lens of social justice to unpack the neoliberal politics of the reform agenda here. Pankaj Chandra (2018) observes:

> …the desire to standardise learning and its administration by both universities and the regulators and policymakers has led to the demolition of academic freedom of individuals as well as the university as a whole.…the refrain from bureaucrats and commercial autocrats has been: why do we need so many teachers? Get that one best teacher to deliver Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to the rest of the world and it will solve all the world's teaching problems! …they would like universities to follow the same curriculum, same books, same lectures, same evaluation, and even the same teachers and the same processes to administer and run departments and universities! (Chandra, 2018, p. 130).

Standardisation in the name of quality control and efficient 'governance' is not merely a lazy approach to governance as Chandra suggests but a much required first step towards the neoliberal 'digitalisation' agenda. It is poised equally as a

hegemonic project that works at micro level to immune institutions and people within them to an independent, critical and engaged reflection on the macro policy context. Academic spaces are expected, within this imaginary, to become conformist to the state narrative, and institutions of learning to operate within a compliance culture, much coveted by any authoritarian regime. Parallel to the project of standardisation, the Indian state seems to be also using the cause of promoting access to higher education as a driving force/narrative to normalize its withdrawal from the public education space that is set for expansion in the coming decade–a space clearly to be occupied and sought for largely by the marginalized and first-generation university students. What is ironic is the fact that even as the policy discourse avows commitment to liberal arts education (NEP 2020), institutions of learning that have upheld the liberal imagination of the university have increasingly come under vicious systematic attack by the power apparatus in the last decade. The radical potential of conscientization within university spaces is seen with much suspicion, warranting surveillance of both individuals and institutional spaces, and beckoning violence as well (Kannabiran 2018; Sundar 2018). The progressive and intense use of a development and reform vocabulary encased in a 'standards', 'quality', 'accountability' discourse, serves to mute, for the masses, the coming together of a hyper nationalistic and neoliberal imaginary of higher education.

Martin Carnoy (2016) argues that state generated social capital matters. Neoliberal agenda in higher education negates this possibility. In the social context of the global South, particularly so in India there is also the very concrete invisibilisation of digital divide, resource gaps and absence of cultural capital which marks the access conundrum. As Sebastian Thrun of Udacity notes, "...a medium where only self-motivated, Web-savvy people sign up, and the success rate is 10 percent, doesn't strike me quite yet as a solution to the problems of higher education" (cited in Kolowich, 2013). In the post-pandemic context where the digital has become part of the 'everyday', the state's

commitment to using this medium indeed as a solution to the problem of higher education is apparent. In the fiscal year 2024-25, Government of India has allocated in the budget Ra 100 crores or approximately 13 million US Dollars to the National Digital University, even as there have been significant cuts to budget allocation for eminent public HEIs and the University Grants Commission (UGC) (GoI, 2024).

The confident march towards the 'digital' route betrays a recognition of these challenges and seems a deliberate turn towards a new 'business model' of higher education in the country. The unpacking of the political economy of this turn point towards 'replicability' and 'banking education' forming the frame for certification charade (Kahn and Kellner, 2007). Credits are seen as the coin of the academic realm (Kolowich, 2013) and their 'mining' and 'tracking' part of a new market and audit regime within the edtech ecosystem. This distortion therefore makes us revisit the question of what does it mean to get HE–a paper certification or experiential enrichment and growth, enabling social capital/social networks? These developments, as visible in the Indian context, are not unparalleled. As Johnston, MacNeill and Smyth (2018) note,

> The consumerist values of capitalism are well-embedded into marketing discourses framed around issues of relentless competition, heightened productivity, innovation, instrumentalism, and marketisation. Nowhere has neoliberal technological discourse become more fierce than in the context of university life (p.v).

A pertinent concern then is to engage with it in terms of how the positivist culture associated with digital technology has the possibility of subverting the emancipatory and pluralistic visions of university life. The concern with social capital that the life-space of universities helps generate, is marked not only by teacher-student engagement but also, and perhaps, more critically, peer

interaction within a diversity engendered social space. The neoliberal context drives a wedge into this project by extending the instrumentalisation and standardisation of curriculum to the pedagogic imagination as well. Johnston, MacNeill and Smyth (2018, p. ix) point out this arrangement interferes "with the autonomy, fluidity, and creative processes of educators". In the name of progress, they note, technology in university life and its associated overreach across domains, has led to increasing conditions of surveillance and control of academics' labour, camouflaged within a distorted rhetoric of efficiency and heightened productivity (Chattopadhyay 2020). The underlying myths behind the grand but deceptive transformative claims that accompany possibilities attached to digital university, they claim, will "function to intensify the political economic grip of neoliberalism". The recent experience of academics being targeted and gagged alarmingly points towards this trend legitimising a distorted picture of liberal education. Sundar and Fazili (2020) point out how repression of dissent on university campuses has taken the form of arrests, banning of student and faculty unions and service rules have been imposed that would prohibit faculty from writing for the press, participating in demonstrations, and a variety of other activities. Propaganda in the media has served to almost indoctrinate the view among the public how the critical voice of the academic is subversive of the national interest. These challenges are likely to be complicated further as edtech platforms like Coursera, Byjus, Udacity, etc. compete to be 'the educational platform of the future–not just for MOOCs but also for credit-bearing online courses', selling technology and online-support services to HEIs, including government universities and colleges. The distortion of pedagogic imagination that accompanies such a project has implications for what higher education will mean for the disadvantaged and marginalised students who manage to cross the HE access barriers.

Imagination of the pedagogic space for the marginalised

That knowledge and power are mutually constitutive has been extensively discussed by Marxists, critical theorists and other scholars (Althuser, Gramsci, Freire, Giroux, Foucault and others). This also implies a reciprocal relation between access to knowledge and its advancement and access to acquiring and shaping material and symbolic resources. In the context of India, an important gatekeeper of material and symbolic privileges has been 'caste'. Explaining this, Chakravarti (2018) writes,

> An important aspect of the caste system is that those who have dominated the means of production have also tried to dominate the means of symbolic production. This symbolic hegemony then allows them to control the very standards by which their rule is evaluated, so that the perspective of the lower castes has no place in it… Today, struggles over resources for the Dalits[ii] are simultaneously struggles over socially constructed meanings, definitions and identities (pp. 7-8).

This struggle requires that the being and the voice of the oppressed become active presences in the knowledge spaces. However, as Guru (2002) and Rege (2016) point out, academic spaces remain deeply hierarchical where at best the oppressed can be objects of research or be restricted to the 'empirical'. Theorising remains the domain of the privileged. Both term this binary as one of 'theoretical Brahmin' and the 'empirical Shudra[iii]'. Rege (2016) argues,

> Women, dalits and adivasis may be included as substantive research areas of sociology and in optional courses, but this inclusion keeps the cognitive structures of the discipline relatively intact from the challenges posed by dalit or feminist knowledges (p. 8).

These articulations raise significant concerns regarding how the inclusion of the historically marginalised and oppressed is imagined. This concern is poignantly voiced by hooks (1994) when she writes,

> I came to theory because I was hurting...I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing (p. 59)

It is this imagination of 'inclusion' where the oppressed are not reduced to mere receivers of content and skills as in the Banking Model of education (Freire, 1970), but are acknowledged as active participants in a collaborative process of grasping and making meaning, that we wish to retain as we examine the pedagogic space in the digital mode. If for a moment one was to imagine that the digital divide could be overcome in near future, would the nature of the pedagogic space in the digital mode be facilitative for the inclusion of the marginalised? Are access to the learning platforms and materials all that are needed to facilitate the inclusion of the marginalised in the processes of learning in formal educational spaces? The problems with the arguments that digitalisation will lead to inclusion of the marginalised go beyond the concerns regarding the unequal distribution of digital resources. The disadvantages are not merely restricted to the inequitable access to academic spaces and resources. They extend to their participation and experience in the processes of learning. The unequal schooling context in India marked by hierarchies and inequality in availability of funds, academic infrastructure, presence of permanent qualified teachers and the social-cultural capital that children themselves bring to school, ensures that the starting point in higher education is not equal for all students (Sadgopal, 2010, 2011). In such a context it becomes important to revisit what it takes to shape a pedagogic space that is facilitative and has transformative potential. The position here being that it should enable possibilities for the

historically oppressed and marginalised to develop conceptual rigour, critical perspective and an active voice in the emerging knowledge discourse that can contribute to challenging and transforming conditions of oppression.

Reflecting on her student days at Booker T. Washington school, Black feminist scholar-activist Bell Hooks (1994) shares-

> Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers… we learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonisation… My teachers were on a mission…(they) made sure they "knew" us. They knew our parents, our economic status…and how we were treated in the family (pp. 2-3).

hooks (1994) goes on to contrast this experience with the one on entering a school post racial integration.

> Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle… we soon learned that obedience and not a zealous will to learn, was expected of us (p. 3).

In the excerpts shared above, hooks is not arguing in support of segregated education. Rather, she examines the segregated and the integrated spaces to understand how the nature of educational spaces and the actors in them (mainly teachers) can either facilitate or undermine the possibilities of learning, liberating and empowering. In doing so she is able to bring out some important aspects of a classroom as a facilitative space- it is a space that aims to empower the learner and to do so, there is an active attempt to understand and know the learner.

However, such an understanding cannot result from merely an interview, however intensive, with a student during the admission process or a few feel-good rapport building sessions in the initial classes. According to Giroux (1987), this requires that teachers 'develop pedagogical conditions in their classrooms that allow different student voices to be heard and legitimated' (p.13). These pedagogical conditions necessitate an active empathetic listening while being collaborative participants in the educational space. It is while negotiating and making sense of the collaborative teaching and learning process that the histories, experiences, potentials and challenges of the participants become relevant and also articulable.

Rege (2016) reminds us that 'certainty and confidence' that accompany expertise of a teacher can foreclose possible ways of looking and listening if not reflected upon. As Hooks (1995) adds, it is not just the student but also the teacher who finds a space to grow and is empowered in an engaged pedagogy. A space of dialogic interaction requires sharing on part of both, lest sharing selectively makes one vulnerable. Hence a space where both the student and the teacher can actively and empathetically listen and share cannot be one of rigid boundaries and linear transmission or acquisition. It needs to be a dynamic and evolving space shaped by both. However, while discussing the relevance of sharing experiences and particularly students' histories, experiences, potentials and challenges in educational spaces, an important caution that Freire and Macedo (1995) alert us to is to not reduce the sharing of experiences to a form of 'group therapy'. Not denying the importance of psychological understanding of experiences, they argue that the discussion of experiences should not be removed from the 'problematics of power, agency and history' and the process must invariably involve 'theorising about the experiences shared in the dialogue process' (p.381).

IV. Pedagogic significance of participation and dialogue

The role of social context, participation and dialogue in facilitating the movement from everyday and experiential to abstract and theoretical, have been examined and conceptualised by several socio-cultural learning theorists like Vygotsky (1978, 1987), Bruner (1996, 2009), Cole and Engestrom (1993, 2007), Rogoff (1998) and others. These are reflected in the conceptualisation of cognition as 'a collaborative process' (Rogoff 1998, Stentsko and Arievitch 2004, Bertau 2014), 'distributed' (Hutchins 1991, 1995, Gardner 1993) and 'situated' (Lave and Wenger 1991, Engestrom and Cole 1997) as opposed to one marked by individual-collective dualism. In contexts of learning, Resnick, Pontecorvo and Säljö (1997) use the metaphor of 'growing' into competence in contrast to being 'taught', arguing that this metaphor 'focuses attention on the ways in which people mature *within* an environment' (p.12). For critical pedagogues like Freire and Macedo (1995), dialogue 'presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of learning and knowing' as it 'characterizes an epistemological relationship' and the 'social character of the process of knowing' (p. 379).

Participation in social interactions and particularly dialogues, allows a variety of entry points and moments for developing critical reasoning faculties. For instance, one form of pedagogically significant social interaction is 'transactive discussion' (Berkowitz and Gibbs 1983). In this, participants in a collaborative activity use their turn in a conversation to draw upon a peer's reasoning or articulation by way of paraphrasing, critiquing, elaborating, etc., to clarify and nuance one's own ideas. Another social interaction that aids development of reasoning capabilities is 'accountable talk'. According to Resnick et al. (1997), accountable talk refers to social interactions where individuals are required to 'defend and justify their observations and conclusions' (p. 15). It is in the spaces of interaction with academic peer groups and communities that questions

and challenges are posed to the participants and they are expected to accept the accountability of supporting their claims through certain collaboratively developed and agreed upon standards of reasoning and evidence. Pedagogically informed questioning is also a useful strategy in strengthening learners' metacognitive functioning. It is through these and other forms of interaction in a pedagogic space that a learner is able to access concepts and the discourse around them. Denial of a collaborative and dialogic learning environment to the students coming from the marginalised contexts hence becomes an act of cognitive and epistemic injustice. Cognitive injustice as it isolates the learner in a cognitive journey that is essentially collaborative and situated. Epistemic injustice since by eliminating possibilities of dialogue, it renders the learner's subjectivity pedagogically irrelevant and creates an unbridgeable distance between the learner and the concept.

The formal and informal pedagogic spaces of interaction also lead to emergence of communities of practice and it is in the process of becoming full participants in them that the 'meaning of learning is configured' (Lave and Wenger 1990, 29). Nag (2022) through an exploration of women students' experiences in university spaces highlighted the importance of participation in different communities of practice that emerge within and outside classrooms in educational spaces in shaping the identities of learners. The research highlights how often women students and research scholars struggle to identify themselves as contributing members of academic communities and are pushed to see themselves only as recipients. This happens when institutional norms and cultures restrict their interactions and active presence strictly to lecture hours in the classroom. The situation of an online learner is not a dissimilar one, in fact only more worrisome. The online platforms, even as they may claim to provide opportunities of interaction, offer very little in terms of a meaningful interaction that goes beyond question answers and clarification of doubts. The discussion

forums and discussion boards are also restricted in their potential for helping build an argument instead of articulating an already formed one. In research exploring students' online learning experiences in a state university in Delhi during the Covid-19 lockdown, Navani and Nag (2021) observed that several students missed the classroom discussions that were possible due when the teaching learning had not shifted online. Based on the reflections shared by students they note,

> The gaps or struggles in articulation are supported by the peer group or the teacher who may prompt or subtly guide to help the student reach the articulation. When one is physically distant from the teacher and the peer group, writing a thought as it develops, becomes a lonely exercise where a thought can be shared only when fully developed and written. There is little possibility of it being facilitated and by the time one completes the process of articulation, the class may have moved forward and hence the spontaneity of participation is also compromised (p.22).

They further argue that any collaborative understanding arrived at in a classroom is never just a sum total of individual inputs, but rather is arrived at by reflecting on and building on each other's interventions. This collective working which involves working towards shared goals through a collaborative, mutually facilitative process contributes to a student becoming and feeling oneself to be a participant in a community of practice. According to Lave and Wenger (1990), to become a full participant in a community of practice requires 'access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation' (p. 101). If denial of access to peer group interactions and collaborative spaces within or outside the lecture hours can prevent students from becoming full participants in a community of learners, the challenges to community participation are graver in case of digital universities.

A denial of access to learning communities in real time academic spaces also has consequences for access to academic communities and networks of scholars and researchers. For communities that have been historically excluded from the processes of knowledge access and advancement, a digital platform of learning implies a continued disconnect from the larger academic community. Guru (2002) has referred to how these historically accumulated inequalities 'reinforce dalit epistemological closure' and also how it has helped those born in privileged castes to consolidate their 'cumulative advantages over dalit/bahujans through fellowships, membership and opportunities to lead intellectual and cultural bodies (p. 5005). This implies that the need for integration and collaborative participation of students in learning spaces is needed not just for the marginalised to be able to access and contribute to theoretical advancements but also for the privileged to realise the inadequacies and gaps in the current theorisations resulting from the participation of few.

It is also important to acknowledge the role of university spaces in creating possibilities of potent human encounters among students embodying diverse contexts of disadvantages, marginalisations as well as advantages and privileges. Real time encounters in real time spaces (within and importantly also outside classrooms) allow one to see the world as experienced and lived by others, humanises differences, and creates possibilities for associations and organising that can have transformative potentials. It becomes possible to engage with each other outside the binary of us and them scaffolded and enabled by the critical and humanising educational spaces of the university that necessitate a reflective encounter with the realm of 'universals' and 'particulars' and prioritise becoming over essentialising. The idea of 'associated living' and its significance for values of fraternity and democracy as articulated by Ambedkar (1936/2014) is of particular help here . In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar writes,

> If you ask me, my ideal would be a society based on *Liberty*, *Equality* and *Fraternity*… An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts… there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words there should be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen (Ambedkar 2014, p. 260).

The formation of such channels, modes of association and possibilities of organising requires a space that is also marked by availability of duration in which organicity, spontaneity as well as reflective participation of the everyday can be possible.

Lastly, as hooks (1994) reminds us, "engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to 'empower' students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process" (p 21). The non-interactive or delayed interactive space of the digital does not allow the being of the teachers and students to be expressed and thereby connect. Close human encounters in a safe, multicultural space create possibilities for revisiting, unlearning and relearning through hearing and beginning to recognise different voices. Herein lies the promise of education enabling critical reflections, questioning and transformation of divisive and oppressive structures.

Concluding remarks

Accessing higher education for more than paper credentials requires an engaged nature of pedagogic and social participation. The neoliberal technological discourse underlining the legitimisation of the idea of a digital university

impacts the nature of university life in concrete ways that are likely to weaken and disempower those who are already in the periphery of social hierarchies. The paper has problematised state's avowed commitment to artificial intelligence and the 'digital' as a panacea for the deepening socio-economic and political inequalities engendered by the neoliberal market logic. Complex socio-historical-economic faultlines of social experience that mark the human experience and can be understood meaningfully within a collegial lifeworld, are rendered as insignificant issues of concern within the digital university discourse. This is achieved by camouflaging the technocratic approach within the garb of a social justice frame and making a case for neat technical solutions for problems that the discourse simplistically reduces to a mechanistic and technical one. The facade of equity also breaks down as one pushes for logistic arguments to defend the tracking of students from disadvantaged contexts into an open and distance learning mode and legitime the new alternative through a narrative of paradigm shifting technology. As educators there is a need to interrogate perhaps how the imagination of learning space and of education itself is likely to be undermined within the changing scenario. This problematisation of higher education's future is perhaps not simply to be dismissed as inertia but a requiem for significant pedagogic imaginaries which have at heart a critical yet engaged ideals of teacher- student relationship, classrooms as meaning making spaces, institutions as harbingers of social capital hitherto systematically denied to those in social and economic margins. It is a question of politics of access and reproduction of social inequalities through the emergent neoliberal policy regimes of higher education. The agenda for equity in higher education will require visiting, revisiting and questioning the material and ideational landscape and examining how the reform paradigm advances or subverts a truly democratic ideal for education that can be truly emancipatory.

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Notes

[i] The rise and fall of the Edtech boom in India is synonymous with Byjus taking over all smaller edtech startups in the country and its recent insolvency. India had emerged decisively as the world's second-largest edtech market with Edtech being India's most heavily funded startup segment, receiving an influx of US$ 4.73 billion in 2021 alone (Sarma and Jaybhave, 2024). Major players like BYJU'S used this wave for acquisitions and mergers and creating an illusion of a revolution in the education sector.

[ii] The term Dalit means '*oppressed', 'broken' or 'crushed' to the extent of losing original identity'* and has often been used by some to refer to the historically oppressed castes or the scheduled castes (as per the Constitution of India), emphasizing the radical and transformative potential of the term. [Guru, G. (1998). Politics of Naming. *Seminar* (471), pp. 14-18. https://www.india-seminar.com/2018/710/710_gopal_guru.htm]

[iii] The terms 'Brahmin' and 'Shudhra' refer to two of the four varnas (a system of hierarchical social stratification in the Hindu society). See Teltumbde, A. (2010). Introduction. The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Aparthied. Navayana.

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