IS THE CURE WORSE THAN THE DISEASE?

REFLECTIONS ON COVID GOVERNANCE IN SRI LANKA

EDITED BY
PRADEEP PEIRIS

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Not-so-free education: State-citizen relations in Sri Lanka's educational policy response to the pandemic

Hasini Lecamwasam

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is turning out to be one of the most serious challenges facing humankind the world over. It is threatening the very survival of our species, and after more than a year of battling the pandemic, governments have started buckling under the pressure of effectively responding to it in medical, logistical, economic, and social terms. These pressures are felt by different countries differently, and the variance is largely attributed to the resources at their disposal, including and primarily economic. Even though the virus itself is indiscriminate in who it affects, countries in the developing world, by socio-economic design, are more vulnerable to it and the ripple effects it causes.

As a developing country already grappling with serious economic issues (among other things), Sri Lanka was from the outset particularly vulnerable to the disruptions of COVID-19. This became evident across sectors starting with the economy, whereby many particularly in the informal sector were seen struggling to

survive in a situation of dwindling income induced by conditions of restricted movement, with no comprehensive relief package in place to assist them especially after the General election of August, 2020. The effects of collapsing domestic economies are spilling over into other terrains, leading people to violate COVID-19 protocol in search of employment, increasing domestic abuse and violence, and disrupting education in households that can hardly afford to spend even on basic survival.

Against this backdrop, I focus on education, one of the few sectors that has managed to continue through the pandemic even amidst great challenges. Taking state-sponsored education, also known as 'free education', as my frame of reference, I seek to visit the question as to how the pandemic has impacted the relationship between the state and citizen, using the case of education as the prism through which to look at it. In this connection, I reflect on whether it is possible for the country's system of free education to maintain its egalitarian spirit, if access to it is no longer dependent on merit alone, but rather mediated by one's spending capacity, which then leads to questions of state responsibility and what is happening to it. This line of thinking unfolds in a context where education has been required to shift online given the pandemic situation, without making adequate facilities available for all to access the process equitably. Given the democratic commitments upon which free education in Sri Lanka is premised, I argue that the failure to level out differential access and the push to continue on with educational activities seem to compromise the core of its democratic mandate, to the effect that free education may no longer even be itself.

The most fundamental peril in this shift is that it normalises the mediating role of money in facilitating access to things that we ought to have by right, and things that are essential for the realisation of our subjective conception of the 'good life'. It is important to bear in mind that online education is not an isolated occurrence necessitated strictly by the pandemic, but rather is intrinsically connected to a larger context of an increasingly privatising educational landscape, whose operational logic is also money. This is a slippery slope that

will open up the potential for the privileging of greater and more numerous forms of privatised education, starting with the gradual monetisation of the means of access to 'free education'.

In order to make this case, I draw on my own experience as one working in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka, in addition to some qualitative discussions I have been part of. These narratives are supplemented by the findings coming out of the 'Socio-Economic Index In the Face of COVID-19' survey conducted by Social Indicator, the survey arm of the Centre for Policy Alternatives. The survey was conducted between the second and third waves of the pandemic, and therefore reflects those realities. Additional qualitative discussions included individual and group interviews with activists, educators, and families of students. The resulting analysis begins with a brief introduction to the context of education in Sri Lanka and the changes already under way therein before the pandemic, and moves on to a descriptive account of education through the pandemic with special reference to the challenges faced. In the next section, I dissect the larger implications of these developments, and conclude with some observations.

The context of education in Sri Lanka

'Free education' in Sri Lanka was introduced, more than anything else, as an ideological project of levelling out the socio-economic differences that impede individuals from accessing education and, by extension, better life opportunities. It was thus motivated by the "egalitarian ideology of lessening social inequalities", and as envisioned "opened up opportunities for greater social mobility on the part of disadvantaged social groups" by way of facilitating access to prestige professions such as law and medicine (Jayasuriya, 1969, p. 170). Introduced by C.W.W. Kannangara, then Executive Minister of Education, Sri Lanka's system of free education acted throughout the country's late-colonial and post-independence eras as the "greatest social leveler" (Amarakeerthi, 2020), seeking to "dismantle the notion of education as a privilege of the rich" (ibid). It has, for

the longest period, constituted a shining example of social justice given how its "democratic potential ... [and the] task of empowering the socially marginalized" have made it into "one of the cornerstones of what citizenship means in material terms" whose broad objective is "a meta theoretical and political narrative of critical consciousness as Paulo Freire most famously stressed." (Sivamohan, 2021)

However, this core mandate and operational logic of free education has, since some time now, been coming under increasing strain. Sri Lanka's ever worsening economic performance – like that of many other developing countries – has compelled it to resort to loans from global financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Such credit has implications for all sectors of the country, education included, and is in fact given out with specific conditions laid down for whatever sector is being funded. Consequently, the nature and trajectory of Sri Lanka's educational sector is increasingly being pushed in the direction of reducing the 'financial burden' it places on the state (part of the larger project of cutting back on public spending and subsequently shrinking the public sector), and grooming the graduates of the system for the 'job market' (Punchi, 2001; Perera, 2021), all in the name of economic progress.

These shifts are largely symptomatic of what is called 'neo-liberalism', varyingly understood as a growth-driven economic policy package; a tool of aggressive, authoritarian capital; a political project of the 'have's of accumulating at the expense of the 'have not's; and a morally reprehensible politico-economic project that resists redistribution, democratisation, and social welfare (Venugopal, 2015). My own understanding of the term aligns more with the leftist critique of the concept as a largely deliberate project of capital that is at once deeply political (in the sense of being predicated upon inequality and the relations of power it gives rise to), and paradoxically also driven by an extremely de-politicising ethos (of seeking complete homogenisation of society in the market mould).

In education, neo-liberalism seeks change both in its content as well as institutional frame. It envisions change in the content of education to respond to market needs by way of a) imparting the

required skills and competencies (Perera, 2021), and b) by instilling the moral ethos of a 'responsibilised individual' able to fend for her/himself, in which belief system the state is "no longer responsible for providing all of society's needs for security, health, education and so on. Individuals, firms, organisations, schools, hospitals, parents and each individual, must all take on (and desire to take on) responsibility for their own well-being." (Davies and Bansel, 2007, p. 251) It envisions changes in the institutional frame of education, more specifically public education, by way of advocating significant cuts on expenditure, such that it is "reconstituted ... as part of the market" where previously it was "supported as essential to collective well-being." (ibid, p. 254)

What should be borne in mind is that Sri Lankan public education, particularly its tertiary level, has been undergoing such changes for at least two decades now (Perera, 2021). It is in this context that the further changes induced – or in some instances exacerbated – by the pandemic should be understood, starting with online education , but encompassing much more including the employability narrative.

Education under COVID-19

On the surface, it may appear that education, compared to other sectors, has relatively little to complain about in terms of the impact of the pandemic. It has admittedly been one of the less disrupted sectors by COVID-19, given its ability to continue through 'work from home' arrangements. However, as sectoral overviews generally do, this bigger picture tends to mask the many difficult realities underneath. It is my intention in this section to sketch out the strategies adopted by those in education (both givers and receivers), and their actual impact on the ground level.

Strategies adopted

Across the world, the primary response to containing the spread of the virus has been lockdowns and other means of social distancing. Consequently, in many countries, physical premises of

schools and universities have been closed down, and educational activities have been shifted online as a means of ensuring uninterrupted education through the pandemic (Toquero, 2020). This sudden shift to online methods has been aptly phrased as 'crisis learning' rather than online learning per se (Pace et al., 2020). However, the scale and extent of online educational activities obviously vary from one context to another. For example, a 2020 report compiled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on the global response to the pandemic in the education sector, notes how countries such as Australia have made provisions for fully equipped online platforms to continue educational activities, while less developed nations seem to rely on more informal means of coping with the pandemic. Argentina is a case in point, where teachers work in rotating shifts to provide access to educational resources and sometimes food for the most vulnerable of their students, in addition to making learning resources available over online platforms. Yet other countries such as Belgium and Israel, the report notes, also broadcast lessons over national television, in order to reach out to those who may have difficulties in accessing online platforms (ibid).

In Sri Lanka too, a combination of these measures has been put in place to ensure educational activities continue uninterrupted. In the state education sector, the most comprehensive measures have arguably been introduced at the tertiary level, where institutionally-sponsored learning management systems have been put in place to continue educational activities. Since state-sponsored secondary education in the country is not streamlined enough to facilitate such centralised methods, many schools are left to their own devises in this regard. At both levels, however, access to the internet (by way of possessing the necessary connection as well as equipment) is presupposed on the part of both students and teachers. It could be argued that teachers in secondary education are under greater strain in this regard due to the absence of any institutional platforms to help them perform their expected functions.

Therefore, the effectiveness of these strategies are compromised to a significant extent by a seriously unequal landscape of resource availability and access. For instance, the survey revealed

that the studies of 4% of the national sample in the school going category and 0.9% of those receiving tertiary education had come to a complete halt, by as early as the first wave of the pandemic (please refer tables 45 and 46 in annexure 3).

The survey figures on access to electronic equipment should shed further light on this. Although close to half the sample (with family members currently engaged in educational activities at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels) reported to have enough electronic equipment to facilitate continued access to educational activities to all in the household, as much as 31.5% said they had to share, while 5.6% said they had to borrow. 2% reported to be completely left out of such activities for lack of access to the necessary equipment (please refer table 49 in annexure 3). Similar patterns were visible in relation to internet connections and financial resources as well (please refer tables 50 and 51 in annexure 3).

The topline report of the survey ('Socio-Economic Index in the face of COVID-19', 2021) revealed a telling pattern in this regard, where a marked difference was observed along the urban-rural axis. On the three counts of electronic appliance ownership, access to a good internet connection, and the capacity to spend on online education, those from urban areas reported higher levels of ability than their rural counterparts (p. 18). It is worth noting that the vast majority of the student population in state-sponsored education is concentrated in the rural sector, at both the secondary and tertiary levels, and therefore this reality is likely more pervasive among beneficiaries of free education than even the results of this survey suggest.

What should also be emphasised here is that it is not about the numbers. It is, rather, about the moral commitments violated. In a system of education that has pledged itself to the principle of equality (from which follows equitable access), even if one person is left behind for lack of resources, the primary ethical commitments of the larger system may be considered compromised.

In this backdrop of extreme inequality, different teacher and student groups across the country have used – and are using – different mechanisms to keep up with their teaching/ learning

activities. In a discussion conducted with a group of secondary school teachers, it was revealed that there were serious disparities in terms of how much content has been delivered over virtual media depending on whether the school was close to a city centre or not.[1] This fact concurs with the findings coming out of the survey as well, wherein significant variations over the issue of accessibility are observed along the urban-rural axis (please refer tables 49, 50, and 51 in annexure 3). These differences include the percentage of students attending online classes, the level of ease of access for teachers, as well as the rate at which auxiliary commitments such as parent-teacher meetings take place. On all these counts, the school located in the urban neighbourhood was by far ahead of the rural schools.

One teacher from a rural area reported that she has to spend as many as six hours every working day beside a nearby lake in order to receive the required signal strength to conduct classes online. Administrative pressure on teachers to somehow ensure that the required amount of content is delivered within a stipulated time period has resulted in teachers being forced into taking such drastic measures to comply. Both urban and rural school teachers in this discussion also shared that their schools are pressurising them to conduct online cultural activities for Vesak (including synchronous activities such as singing religious songs, and asynchronous activities such as compiling photo records of students' Vesak celebrations), in spite of the huge challenges involved.

However, interviews conducted with two principals from a primary school and a rural national school, offered no corroboration of this fact.[2] Both principals acknowledged the difficulties involved, but did not report of any serious pressure from the zonal education office – to which they are directly answerable – in this regard. Rather, they shared that there were directives to continue educational activities as best they can. Both admitted, however, that no institutional provisions were/ are made available to this end, and schools are left

1 Discussion with school teachers from Matara and Kalutara (virtual), 27 May 2021.

2 Discussions with two school principals from Kurunegala and Walapane (virtual), 05 June 2021.

to their own devises, consolidating extant hierarchies between and within schools. For instance, access to at least a smartphone with WhatsApp is presupposed for participating in educational activities, thus leaving some students out of the process completely. What these individual incidents mean within the broader context of the welfare state will be discussed later.

A participant of another group discussion conducted among mothers of school going children shared that alternative means of accessing education have been devised, which require going to a pre-designated place in the closest town to fetch and photocopy study material.[3] While this is economically much more accessible than online education, given the social distancing requirements of the pandemic situation, it stands to reason that these options were not used regularly. In fact, the teachers group revealed that there are, among their students, those who live in extremely remote locations with absolutely no internet connectivity, and from where access to the nearest town is very difficult particularly in the lockdown conditions of limited food supplies and restricted movement. As a result, many students from such localities miss out on accessing study material left to be fetched in midway locations. On one such occasion, one respondent in the group reported, a whole group of students from such a location missed a mock test and the opportunity to receive feedback for their performance because they could not come to the nearest town frequently enough.

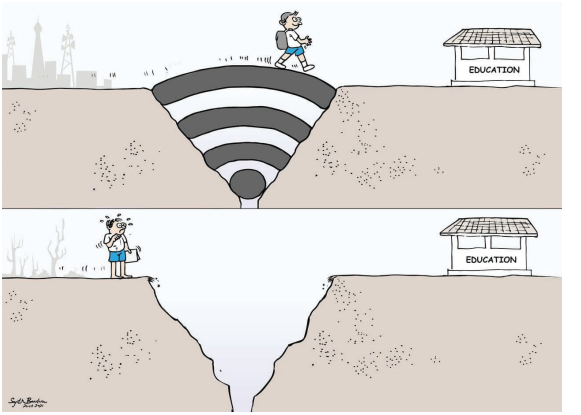
Personal experience teaching in an institute of tertiary education sheds further light on the issue. In courses conducted online, the number of regular participants is consistently less than the number enrolled in a given course. Further, the number participating in WhatsApp groups tends to be greater than that on the institutional platform (Moodle), presumably because the latter consumes more data. On a few unfortunate occasions, some students were unable to complete their end of semester examinations online (as revealed

3 Discussion with mothers of school going children from Moneragala (virtual), 06 March 2021.

by the difference between the number of students enrolled and the number that submitted their end-semester examination answer scripts online).

What has been the impact of these developments? The next section delves into this issue within the larger frame of equality that free education supposedly draws on, and the equitable access it presupposes.

The impact



Source: Bandara, 2021

Pandemic-induced (and sometimes exacerbated) inequalities in education, as mentioned at the outset, are not peculiar to Sri Lanka, but rather shared across many developing nations. In Pakistan, for example, online education has proven unable to "produce desired results ... where a vast majority of students are unable to access the internet due to technical as well as monetary issues." (Adnan and Anwar, 2020, p. 45) In fact, it may be unrealistic to assume equitable access even in developed countries, where impressive macroeconomic indicators tend to mask actual and serious disparities embedded in the social fabric. For instance, Li and Lalani (2020) report how in the US, nearly 25% of 15-year-old learners do not have a computer to work on. UNCTAD's head of digital economy Torbjörn Fredriksson has noted how the consequent gap may further feed into

an already intense digital divide, running the risk of "those that do not have access ... being left further behind as digital transformation accelerates ... " (*Coronavirus reveals need to bridge the digital divide*, 2020). Admittedly, the effect of this is exacerbated in developing countries, where the more glaring extant inequalities are likely to be compounded as a result.

Given that the virus situation is very much current, precious little can be found by way of systematic research on its impact on education in Sri Lanka. However, much debate surrounds the decision to shift to online education at such short notice, particularly in state education institutions where many from underprivileged backgrounds complete their education. Jayaratne (2020) uses anecdotal evidence to substantiate a similar claim, showing how the lack of access to internet and infrastructural facilities has, in some cases, resulted in students getting their friends to complete and submit assignments on their behalf. Given this ground situation, the presidential directive to continue business as usual, and the task force that was appointed to inform of "any delay or default", have drawn much criticism. Some have noted how the directive is worded in a way that has reduced systemic inequalities to individual successes or failures, taken to reflect commitment or the lack of it (Ranasinghe, 2020), signalling a spreading neo-liberal ethos.

The survey findings reproduced above speak to just how restrictive access to education has been in the pandemic context. In addition, the reported levels of satisfaction with online education effectively communicate the success of its intended impact. The opinion was divided almost equally, with a slightly higher percentage of respondents reporting they were satisfied than those who reported otherwise (please refer table 53 in annexure 3). That nearly a half of the sample was dissatisfied with online education in general is reflective of many things. The inequalities compounded and intensified by the sudden shift to the virtual mode are key among them, as is elaborated below. However, even in situations where access has not been an issue, online education is known to have had detrimental health implications due to the strain it puts on the eyes, shoulder muscles, and spine even of very young children, as a mother of three children

in primary school shared in an informal exchange.[4] Conversations with teachers of both secondary and tertiary institutions,[5] and my own personal experience, reveal this to be the case on the individual educator's side as well.

Epistemologically, online education – in spite of its admitted merits particularly when used in blended environments (Dede, 2008) – tends to be detrimental to the social and constructivist thrusts of education. These strands of educational theory attempt to facilitate learner-centered creation/ construction of knowledge that is context- and content-dependent (Rovai, 2004; Liaw, 2001). Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2006, p. 443) show that "the time and locational aspects of traditional classrooms, which provide a built-in structure and opportunities to use rich communication media, are absent" in the virtual experience, rendering it an inadequate substitute. Even though approximations of such learning can be facilitated in highly advanced online settings, it presupposes equitable access and equal facilities on the part of all learners involved, not to mention teachers, and it is here that issues of extant inequalities become relevant.

These issues have also been the central focus of many qualitative discussions on pandemic education that I have been part of. In one such discussion, a participant highlighted how relations within the house as well as neighbourhood are strained by limited access to electronic equipment for children to continue their educational activities. Within households, siblings have to compromise to make sure everybody gets the opportunity to participate in at least some of their online educational activities by foregoing others, given that parents cannot afford individual equipment for all in need of them. Among households, those with greater access to equipment such as smartphones are shutting themselves off from neighbours in need of them, because they themselves can hardly afford such facilities, let alone share them.[6]

4 Informal discussion with a mother of school going children, 12 June 2021.

5 Discussion with school teachers from Matara and Kalutara (virtual), 27 May 2021; informal discussion with two teachers from a tertiary institute, 19 April 2021.

6 Discussion with activist group in secondary education (virtual), 07 April 2021.

In tertiary education, on the institutional level, disparities consolidated and exacerbated by the sudden shift to online education have started to generate considerable dispute and resistance, both among students and teachers. On the one hand, there is pressure from various quarters to 'get things done' so boxes can be ticked, students graduated, and then released to a failing economy that may well be unable to absorb them. On the other, there is a push back to these directives that is gradually gathering momentum. Teachers are conflicted as to the course of action to be taken in this moral dilemma, particularly given that examinations are conducted online – which is itself coercive given the serious resource constraints confronting many students – and there is a moral obligation to prepare students to this end. Torn between demands, sometimes from students themselves, to complete work on time, and the equal – if not greater – force of the moral case involved, teachers find themselves unable to take a strong stand on the issue of online education.

In all these developments, certain fundamental principles on which our society are organised are being ever so subtly – but decisively – renegotiated in a way that alters the very nature of the social contract therein. The implications of pandemic time policy directives on education are, therefore, analysed in detail in the next section.

What does it all mean?

What do these experiences tell us about where we, as a political community, are going? What do they say about the principles on which our social existence is modelled? How are such principles evolving, especially in the context of a global pandemic and the emergency mode of decision-making it seems so effectively to justify? What bearing has such evolution had on the social contract in Sri Lanka? When reflecting on these questions, two overarching themes seem to emerge about the new ideological and mental parameters within which decisions are increasingly made. Both of these themes, I submit, can be subsumed within, and in fact emerge from, the larger neo-liberal system.

Neo-liberal rationale

A recurrent theme in the discussions with those involved particularly in secondary education – teachers, students, principals – is that despite the supposedly 'free' education system in place, responsibility for keeping up with educational activities through the pandemic has fallen largely, if not entirely, on the individual student/ parent, teacher, or sometimes principal. The real tragedy of this situation is that this state of affairs has been so normalised as to make people assume individual responsibility for the continuation of their/ their children's education, with absolutely no discussion of their right to such. The so-called welfare state has been completely written off of its responsibility to facilitate equitable access to education, no questions asked.

This attitude was particularly prevalent in a principal interviewed for the study. Clearly a man of exemplary work ethic, he was nonetheless prone to reduce structural issues bearing on online education to matters of individual commitment. While admittedly there are concerns of individual motivation and commitment involved in the equation to an extent, the propensity to boil the entire situation down to a matter of individual choices completely discounts the crippling influence of structural impediments on one's ability to participate in online education, whether as a student or teacher. In this scheme of things, those who do all the work by themselves 'without burdening the system' (because "even the government doesn't have money noh?")[7] are lauded for their work ethic, while the issue of institutional responsibility for free education is left completely unaddressed. The lack of institutionally provided platforms to conduct online educational activities and make available the necessary learning material for asynchronous learning, is never questioned. Rather, what is questioned is the lack of commitment and motivation on the part of individual teachers to 'somehow' continue their teaching engagements, bearing the financial cost of these initiatives by themselves.

7 Discussion with school principal from Walapane, (virtual), 05 June 2021.

This principal in question had gone so out of his way as to spend on data packages for those members of his staff who could not afford to do so. He had even instructed, quite genuinely out of concern, those parents who could not afford a smartphone to facilitate their children's education, to tap into the savings they had left aside for their child's future in order to secure a smartphone. While certainly admirable on the count of dedication and sincerity, this mode of reasoning is nonetheless lethal to any possibility of a rights discourse even emerging, let alone sustaining itself.

In tertiary education, marginally greater consciousness in this regard seems to prevail, possibly due to the history of struggle in the university space. Conversations over issues of equitable access and pressure on faculty are, however feebly, happening, complemented by processes of collective decision-making at the faculty level. Institutionally sponsored learning management systems have been made available for teachers to conduct teaching in a manner largely at their discretion, negating the need for teachers to individually finance online teaching, and minimising the costs incurred by students as well.

This is not to suggest that all is well in universities either. As mentioned before, the efficiency rhetoric is clearly taking over, not just on the administrative side, but also on the side of students who are, understandably, in a hurry to graduate. It is worth noting that the employment bottleneck intensifying by the day does not figure prominently in this train of thought, as students scramble to exit the university into a world of work that they hope awaits them, only to be crushingly disappointed. The pandemic is further restricting employment opportunities already monopolised by network politics, leaving fresh graduates in despair. All blame for this is pinned on the university for not imparting the right 'skills' that would render their graduates more 'employable', pushing academics to efficiently build skills, while the gaping structural hole in the economy continues to be ignored.

Neo-liberal ethics and ethos

When any discussion on rights and entitlements is gradually squeezed out of the rationale within which decisions are made, as mapped above, the result is an ethos wherein efficiency calculations dominate over normative reasoning. In this scheme, everyone – including those likely to find themselves particularly marginalised by such thinking – tends to prioritise an attitude of 'getting things done' over forwarding rights claims or thinking about the politico-moral commitments that make such claims possible. It is the atomising individualistic logic of neo-liberal thinking that perpetuates and normalises this sort of mindset, rendering many unable to appreciate how this may constitute a relinquishing of at least some of their rights.

It is against the backdrop of this troubling state of affairs that we have to consider free education and its likely future trajectory. When citizens increasingly take it upon themselves to see that access to education is secured for themselves/ their loved ones on an individual/ household basis, the concept of free education is gradually hollowed out, to be replaced by a conception of education first as a matter of individual responsibility and choice, and later – and more dangerously – as a commodity. It is instructive, in this relation, to also pay attention to the trends emerging in privatised forms of education in the pandemic context. As the survey revealed, 79.7% of the respondents with school going children in the household who attend tuition classes reported that such classes continue through the pandemic (please refer tables 54 and 55 in annexure 3).

The propensity for privatised forms of education to continue largely uninterrupted, even when free education is collapsing in part, says much about our priorities set within the neo-liberal frame of rationale. This shift in mindset is both a cause and consequence of these changes occurring in the larger educational landscape. It is telling that one of the two principals interviewed for this study in fact spoke highly of tuition classes as a shining example of the difference that can be made when individual educators take their responsibilities seriously. He attributed this increased sense of responsibility prevalent in the tuition classroom to its performance-based reward

system, particularly for the teacher. While there is a lesson to be learnt in this, advancing this line of argumentation will lead to further monetisation of education, and consequently its complete commodification at the cost of the ideological commitments of free education.

What this discussion hopes to achieve is highlighting how the increasingly prevalent neo-liberal rationale in the present education system may slowly but surely push us to abandon our democratic commitments as a political community. In this emerging rationale, ethical commitments are being redefined in the market mould, wherein individual commitment and responsibility are valorised over and above rights claims on the discriminatory system, which are delegitimised as an excuse for laziness. At the current stage where the system is in transition to this new model of thinking, free education functions as a mere progressive frill to what is essentially a system of education driven by money, rendering it more morally palatable.

Conclusion

My attempt in this chapter has been to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between the state and citizen, through the prism of education. My point of departure was the sudden shift to online education that was justified by the pandemic and the social restrictions it imposed. However, given that access to education during this period was not institutionally provided, but rather mediated by the individual student's ability to afford a functional internet connection and the necessary equipment, I question whether free education can continue to call itself such anymore. This shift, I argue, has compromised the egalitarian commitments upon which free education is premised, because it has consolidated – and in many cases, exacerbated – extant marginalities in society.

I wish to emphasise that these developments have implications beyond the pandemic, and are in fact underpinned by realities that well predate the pandemic as well. The portrayal of online education as being without alternative and absolutely necessary for

the foreseeable future, with no institutional support provided, is but an early step toward the monetisation of education, starting with the means of access to 'free education'. When access to education is monetised, responsibility for facilitating it no longer rests with institutions, rendering education a commodity. As such, all talk of welfare is effectively replaced by the market logic, making rights claims impossible, despite extreme – and widening – inequalities.

The lack of a push back against this state of affairs, and the individualisation of responsibility it normalises, is demonstrative of the pervasive apathy characteristic of the spreading neo-liberal ethos of the present times. A handy supplement to this has been the efficiency rhetoric of the education apparatus and students, who are both made to believe that the sooner education is completed, the better students will be able to contribute to the economy of the country and at home, despite glaring evidence to the contrary. Driven by the efficiency rationale and the urgency it encourages, this line of thinking has come to be equated with common sense.

What is observable here is the gradual consolidation of neo-liberalism through education, wherein the pandemic simply appears to have expedited and justified the shift. Education is no longer a medium of social justice nor the right of people, but rather a commodity that in turn serves individual economic interests. In this scheme, free education simply serves the function of rendering this shift more morally palatable by holding up the pretense of equality for as long as is necessary for the market to transform education to fit its needs.

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