

Emerging Asia: The Paradigm of Unevenness and the Limits of Inclusive Growth

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Abstract: The contemporary times have seen a rapid emergence of Asian economies with the rise in the level of education and informational infrastructure. Centrality of both information and education defined the new order of things. India, while seeing an increasingly expanding informational infrastructure however has not been able to install a parallel structure in its educational and particularly higher education segment. While it has consequences for overall development, this influences the long term directions in the way development itself is viewed through the categories of other societies. For an inclusive economy therefore an equitable and accessible educational structure must be the central and not a peripheral or instrumental concern.

Keywords: *Informational order, Higher Education, Inclusion, India, Asia*

INTRODUCTION

It is almost two and a half decades since Manuel Castells introduced the concept ‘informational order’ where he showed that information in the late twentieth century was not merely an adjunct to the economic and other structural parts of society but rather a social formation in itself. Castells saw generators of knowledge, the institutions of information collection and diffusion, and the discourse to which they gave rise as autonomous forces for social and economic change (Castells and Manuel, 1989).

INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE

In the new order of things that is unfolding before us, information has been the fulcrum of the movement of people, goods and services. In quite a serious vein one may even argue, contra Castelles, that information is not an autonomous domain but rather is part of the economic order itself. It is here one also meets the liberal argument that we live in a knowledge economy, which also suggests that knowledge and economy are somewhat interlinked in a manner to how Michelle Foucault thought the combination of power and knowledge were the signature tune of the modern times (Michel, 1980).

It is at this point in the history of our times that one wishes to argue that the informational order that we are witnessing unfolding before us are bringing its own demands upon the economy. This is most visible in the way the different instruments of the order mediates the articulation of people who want impediments to well-being removed. The idea of knowledge and information here are two of the most influential concepts that have captured the popular imagination. Significantly, one has not yet agreed on the point when education, or for that matter, knowledge began to be the template of the developmental in the world in general and Asian societies in particular. By 1994-5 one sees that the People’s Republic of China understood it most clearly as did Singapore and Japan. Peking and Tsinghua

Universities for example, each received \$225 million from 1999 to 2003 (Mahbubani and Kishore, 2010). Knowledge, more importantly its higher educational component, became the area of concentration in these societies and their vision came to place higher education as the pivot around which the new institutional structures were woven. However it is here that the unevenness of the story begins to catch up and the future of the developmental path has to take note of the issues arising from impediments to an Asian convergence.

STATE SYSTEMS IN ASIA

The unevenness in Asia is most pronounced in the different state systems. The different political regimes in Asia have spawned different growth and development trajectories but all yoked under a larger capitalist order. It is in such a situation that one needs to talk about the different informational regimes which have emerged in different contexts even when there is a talk about globalisation and homogenisation. There were exceptions like the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Korea, and the Vietnamese State which had adopted different paths to develop themselves. The adoption of the capitalist path by China, however, has led to this alternative model gasping for fresh breath.

It is under this overarching capitalist paradigm that different state systems were trying to structure different growth regimes. The liberal democracies of for example India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, or Japan or the different people's democracies, for example of China or Vietnam, have over the last half a century followed the Capitalist growth models with different local ideological or managerial shades (Chandra and Bipan, 2000). Development of an autonomous and rational individual with consuming propensities was in some sense like the telos of their developmental path, which has left many out of the developmental story. They may be individuals like the single parent slum dwellers or communities like the tribal groups in India or veddas in Sri Lanka or in many cases minorities. It is here that the developmental story has to rewrite its own possible course as well so that inclusion can be its own element than merely an implant.

The challenge for the new century in Asia is to navigate a unifying informational order in the light of different state systems in the largely capitalist atmosphere. The most important element which will help this to happen is education with an idea of excellence and inclusion. I propose to analyse the University system in India in the context of coming up with a new information order that has the potential of bringing some kind of evenness in a large economic and political space characterised by such unevenness.

COMING OF THE INFORMATIONAL ORDER

Although a lot of debate has taken place to reach an agreement on what is 'information', there has been a broad agreement among economists since the late seventies, based on the work of Porat and then by the OECD's intervention on the subject, in which an informational good or service is defined as 'directly useful in the production, processing or distribution of information' (Porat, 1976). There are primary as well secondary and even tertiary information goods. Changes since 1980s in the whole of the communication arena have threatened to make all these divisions meaningless.

However in the domain of social policy, information has increasingly become very crucial in the debate on democracy with people like Amartya Sen as well as many liberal philosophers arguing that the liberal social and political order rests with the freedom of

information which in turn allows human beings to make correct choices in their social, political and practical lives. The centrality of information hence need not be overemphasised. The informational order that one talks about in today's world is premised on the idea that it is sine qua non for envisioning a democratic order.

What is increasingly also being seen is that in theoretical parlance the informational order is not linked with education. It is here where I shall try and argue that education and educational structures should be seen in close link with the policy parlance so as to prevent a widening of the hiatus among social classes due to the machination of economy. An indication of such a delink in policy prescription can be seen in the initial years of the informational economy, which has been analysed so as to suggest the measures have been taken to boost it up: "We have omitted mention of education here, even though it is part of the information infrastructure, because it is not the focus of the present study" (Kelkar *et al.*). In the actual operation of the market too one witnesses how asymmetries of information make people economically suffer in the educational market.

In the last thirty years India has travelled far and the major indicators of an informational order have already set in. Teledensity, telephones per 100 persons has moved up from 0.8 in the 1980s to almost 73 in 2014, which is almost a surge. The most spectacular increase is a jump from 18.22 in March 2007 to 73.01 per cent in 2013, with urban density at 144.02 and rural at 41.70 per cent (Prasad *et al.* 2014). The rural urban divide too was clearly exposed during this jump and the debate on the digital divide came to the surface. There are large telecommunication networks in the country and major investment has also come in. In recent times there has been a major initiative of a National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN) which has been envisioned to aim at reducing the digital divide (NOFN, 2015).

While the informational order is expanding, its linkage with education remains an issue which requires a closer scrutiny. How, and in which order, shall both be linked into scripting a developmental paradigm is spoken of quite regularly although the answer is not quite clear as yet. While the informational order is seen as merely instrumental in the whole project of education, education and also particularly the higher educational segment has not yet been found in its definition in the same scenario. This becomes complicated when we see that it is higher education which has been playing a key role in indicating a rapid convergence of the economies towards a higher level of development and quality of life. The Asian scenario is also quite often seen in terms of the rapid evolution of an excellent University segment with Japan, Singapore and China bringing their Universities up to what is now considered a Global level.

UNIVERSITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

We shall, therefore, examine the location of the university segment in this perspective. The universities in India, primarily in the state sector, are almost 500 in number of varying standards with around 30 central Universities directly sponsored by the Union Government. The universities are different from the professional institutions, some of them declared to be of national importance as they have earned a name for themselves, like the Indian Institute of Technologies of Mumbai, Kharagpur, Kanpur, Madras and Delhi and Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore established by the private initiative of Indians in colonial India for conducting scientific research not encouraged by the colonial government. That was the beginning of a large number of technological institutes across the country. The post-1980s saw a surge of technological institutes. The same professional degree by the mid-1990s

onward became a byword for a 'degree', giving entry to a software firm as the area soon proved to be competitive for India globally. From 2000 onwards, the number of software recruitments was so huge that it began to denude the research potential of many of the colleges due mostly to the students going to the market for jobs rather than entering into academia by doing research. One soon realised that the engineering institutions began losing their research and teaching excellence and almost all the students who could have gone ahead in the area of research began joining the software and BPO firms almost akin to the United States engineering graduates joining Wall Street.

With undergraduate liberal education requiring a large number of colleges whose numbers did not grow as they did in the case of the engineering colleges, by 2010 the pressure was obviously on the government to come up with a visible action plan to start new colleges. The Knowledge Commission in 2007 came up with the recommendation that 1500 universities and institutions were needed in the near future (Tilak, 2007). From 2009 onwards, there was the other pressure on the state as the right to education was now declared as a fundamental right and the state was now required to set up hundreds of thousands of schools and teachers. It is in this narrative site that the discussion of all policy changes has been taking place so that while the states tackle this, it also makes the Indian education and institutions globally competitive.

Lack of availability of quality institutions and placement has led hundreds of thousands of students to migrate to foreign countries for higher education, thereby causing a lot of financial transfers abroad. This, as the policy papers have been saying, also has cultural and social consequences. As Mahbubani had already suggested those who are going to these universities in the West are not necessarily going to very progressive and non-insular institutions: and some issues highlighted are beyond the primary concerns of the state that a lot of money is going out of the country (Mahbubani and Kishore, 2010).

With the increasing demand for new places and institutions, the Indian government has been concerned with the situation as the political economy was gravitating towards a greater need for skill development. The immediacy of the need for employment generation of millions and the industry trying to retain its competency, the emphasis was fast moving towards this segment of education leaving behind the Higher education segment starved of both funding and attention. The Education Committee appointed by the Ministry of higher Education in 2014 laboriously and bureaucratically drafted the National Policy on Education in 2016 and after its diagnosis of the malaise has come out with many recommendations. A close look suggests that the committee seems not very familiar with the dimension that has already been in vogue in the Asian scenario where education has been brought to the centre of the developmental paradigm. Commending administrative and technical solutions to many of the problems, the NEP diverged from the visions of the ongoing experiments in Asian societies. For example while the Asian universities have increasingly been given administrative and financial freedom so much so that they can even hire foreign academics, the NEP initiates a discourse which is suggestive of centralisation and an increased template for control. Its discussion on the policies, on education, it is employability and poor quality that emerge, and rightly so, as the core concern of the Committee, the end of the tunnel is quite invisible in the report.

Notwithstanding many opinions on the other side, the Universities are the lynchpin of the educational or if we may say so, educational order in India for the last two centuries. While it defined the way the liberal spaces were created and a political culture has been articulated

through the portals of the universities, it is also blamed by many as the reason for discriminatory attention towards primary and mass education. However since 1900 onwards, the nationalist intelligentsia have also pointed out that these two ends of the spectrum have never been seen as antagonistic but complementary. It is the university, it has been argued, which would supply the innovators, qualified teachers, journalists, policy makers and scientists and dreamers, it is therefore important that the order is nourished. Today any serious reflection at the state of affairs, as the NEP, assures they have done, will show how the decline of Indian Universities have created a state of despondency at all level and in every segment of education in the country.

One of the main reasons for the Universities to be in a continued mess is because the demand for equity and inclusion is moving faster and mobilising public opinion quite larger than the expression and articulation of the need for excellence. The political class, sensing that excellence is of a second order problem has also moved to the policy of inclusion more stridently with accessibility as the leitmotif of all politically expedient policy decisions. This has some real background to it. The Gross enrolment ratio in the Indian educational system (by 2014 planned to be 15%) is abysmally low in comparison to the developed as well as to many developing countries. It is therefore with a sense of urgency that the state has decided to raise it (Agarwal, 2009). However the number of institutions required to be in place to accommodate the increased number is not quite proportionate. It is here that the issue of democratic paradoxes become quite clear. The fact that the number of people who are outside the school system is so high and therefore requiring immediate attention gets the priority than to improve the institutional mechanism directed to what may be called quality education. The increased informational media is brought here to bridge the gap and is sought to mitigate the situation.

INFORMATION AND NEW ECONOMY IN INDIA

Since the 1980s the expansion of an information and communication network has been quite a startling fact in Indian society. The contribution of ICT to the economy began to show perceptible increase and soon the idea, described as hegemonic by some, of a 'knowledge economy' began to take quite an upswing (Thomas and Pradip Ninan, 2012). By 2000 Knowledge economy and Information and telecommunication technologies became almost synonymous even among serious commentators.

While there is no doubt that the information technologies have changed India beyond recognition, it has created certain interesting side effects which are yet to be discussed in detail. First, it has attacked the earlier models of restraints and saving and brought the model of consumption inherent to the developmental model that we discussed initially, to the forefront. Information through television, through internet or through other social media has increasingly begun to define the consumption aspiration as well as social desirability hitherto associated with a small elite. In this sense, the information revolution is co-terminus with the rise of a new market which too is supposed to be coinciding with the rise of a middle class with a staggering mythical figure of 29 million.

This class/consumers also began to impact upon the preferences of state policies and it is here that State, society and polity began to convulse. While the state increasingly began to shed its character of holding up a social consensus between different classes accommodating liberal democratic structures of its polity, the demand from this new section, quite vocal, was too strong to ignore and therefore a new regime of policy and

prescriptions came in. The elections in India from 2004 onwards, and more importantly in 2014, were a manifestation of the new class alignments and demands. There was in 2014 a demand for development: and all critical insights suggests that while there were different perspectives of development, there was also an understanding that development was becoming also an empty metaphor: allowing people to craft narratives of their own choices. While this grand metaphor of development has been raised through effective ICT usage, demonstrating the new Informational order, one had some uneasiness in seeing that the issue of knowledge and education, though seeming to be integral to it, was in actual analysis not part of it. The telos of Informational order seems to be its own mirror image. It seems Manuel Castells was right. The informational order was an autonomous domain.

This sense of the autonomous has been strengthened by the way the states have been trying to integrate and include those who are outside the pale of the informational order into its umbrella. However reading the recommendation of the National Optical Fibre network or what has been suggested to be named as Bharat net, one at the same time sees that the informational order tries to link the distant rural areas to the large informational mainstream. Connecting the entire rural hinterland to broad bandwidth, however suggests that Castells may be slightly more enthusiastic. Informational order cannot be separated from the way the economy and society have been moving. The effort while connecting people as an aim is also coinciding with the effort of the Indian state to develop the common market of India removing all barriers through what has been called the GST or Goods and Services Tax Bill where the common tax policy will create smoother market access to the goods and services policies for the whole of Federal India with the states being guaranteed their share. This is also linked to the execution of the idea of Smart cities project which aims at developing a couple of dozen cities in the country into what has been billed as smart cities to link up through a different ICT network more closely. This too is the process of making them relevant for the advanced capitalist economy.

The nature of information now becomes the central piece of this discourse. The poor, the marginal or those who are not exposed to the operation of the logic of market led economy will be at a loss even when they are brought under some inclusive umbrella through an information network. One therefore would like to argue that inclusion must also discuss the nature of information too that is being required for a person to feel included.

INFORMATION, EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

Now in all of these, a careful reading shows us that the processes in many ways do not originate with the Indian knowledge sector, the Universities. Thus at even the conceptual level, there is a wedge between the new informational order which is linked with the new capitalist developmental order, and the institutions of knowledge and institutional order of knowledge production in the society. This is very significant as the university is the only space, apart from the parliament, that the most marginal and discriminated has some voice and presence. Thus the state is left bereft of the voices from the knowledge sector of the society to be fed into the developmental order to which it could have helped suggest the ways and means to drive the policies of inclusion. Thus the complications that will come later would have been discussed in the initial stages itself.

Universities worldwide have become the centres which are the hub of knowledge production and dissemination. Under the new capitalist order, the universities are becoming almost similar in their spirit and culture. It is therefore argued that the universities would

have helped the different Asian societies design a new informational order helping a more inclusive society through their interventions in the ways the policies are crafted.

It is not possible for growth to be inclusive until and unless the academic discourses acknowledge the sources of exclusion of the population from participation in economies. The source of exclusion from the process of economic growth takes place when the persons are not acknowledged as economic agents and their capabilities as producers are not recognized. In economic development, those who speak of access to education, skills and training, access to infrastructure so as to facilitate the individuals even as consumers of these essential services do not acknowledge the individual as a producer. How can we use information and the institutions of higher education to promote inclusive growth?

CONCLUSION

What are the kinds of data and information which promote inclusive growth? In short, these are data which integrate producers with larger markets. Prices of commodities reported out of local markets, integrated at levels of aggregates at the market levels are important instruments of market integration.

There are business papers which report commodity prices at the levels of metropolitan cities, there are business papers which report data from class I cities but there are newspapers which report data even from the village mandis. The economies of newspapers make them national and hence the national scale retards their reportage in disaggregated levels. The institutions of higher education can, by their use of disaggregated data and their aggregated summaries of such data integrate the concerns of local producers with the concerns of the national markets.

The sum and substance of the above argument is that education be geared towards greater and greater levels of symbolic analysis in which the local level data can be integrated into enlarged spaces of national discourses. China is an interesting case in the point. Here the numerous small producers have built up a formidable economic front in producing various consumer items like umbrellas, shoes, torches, bags, boxes and even electronic items. The physical networks that exist from the villages to the global traders operate wonderfully to make China today in command over half of the world's economy. Institutions of higher education are wonderfully placed in using such local level disaggregated information into aggregate and collective economic actions.

Higher education needs to be reworked towards the establishment of a new regime of information. The information must track the areas of concern for democracies, namely the ease of doing business at the ground levels, the ease of changing over businesses, the ease of finance for small entrepreneurs, tracking the financial health of households over time, the ease of upward social mobility indices; these in addition to the regular data such as access of drinking water, pucca roads, pucca roof, television, computer literacy and so on.

For purposes of inclusive growth, the growth concerns must emerge as part of the curricula of elementary education and institutions of higher education must integrate these concerns in a manner of building up. For the institutions of higher education it is important that instead of adhering to theories which have been produced abroad in contexts completely different to ours, one must build theories from indigenous contexts and histories. Such exercises will require a thorough understanding of one's own societies through one's own

sets of data, and information sources, frameworks developed through a sense of history pertaining to one's own society. A problem of intellectual colonization and now intellectual post colonialism of discourse has coloured our sense of our own histories. It is high time therefore that the indigenous ideas of balances be brought in to make our educational sector the centre of the discourse of the informational order into the other way around where the informational order is a mere a tool of expansion of the market and education becomes a mere appendage. Such a people centric planning is the way to include people.

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