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IMPACT OF ED-TECH AND ONLINE TEACHING ON HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY

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Keywords	Abstract
Online Education, Ed-Tech, Pedagogy, Critical Thinking, Commercialization Of Education, Learnification Paradigm, Algorithms, Analytics, Behavioural- Psychological Profile, Engaged Pedagogy, Passive Consumption, Compartmentalisation Of Knowledge.	The field of Education in the last two decades has seen a sea of changes. The advent of online education has redefined the meaning, structure and practice of education. The structural, pedagogical changes have affected teaching-learning process, assessment and roles of the institutions. Online education has been touted to democratize education because of its “easy access”, learner centric approach, flexibility of time, unrestrained space, hybrid/blended learning with special emphasis on skill acquisition and employability. With so much of hype and promises around all the statutory bodies, central, state and private universities have embraced online education resulting in a boom of Ed-tech companies. The Covid Pandemic accelerated the process. What has been the impact of online education? Can it replace the traditional classroom learning? If traditional classroom is truly replaced what will be its implication? Has online education as flattered by Ed-tech companies lived up to its expectations? The article tries to throw some light on the same.

The education system, an institutionalized classifier... transforms social classifications into academic classifications, with every appearance of neutrality- **Pierre Bourdieu**

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar gave a clarion call – “Educate, Unite and Agitate” on July 20, 1942 at *All India Depressed Classes Conference* in Nagpur. He, as an individual had understood the importance



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of education to organize and mount a struggle against systemic injustice perpetrated by the privileged. Since then, the underprivileged section of the society to a large extent have realized the importance of education and made it to corridors of higher education. Simultaneously there has been a counter movement to deny and derail their education through policies, change in the pedagogy through structural changes, pulling education out from the modern education scientific rationale to a mythical, jingoistic mode of learning and recent inclusion to this growing list deceptive and disguised way of denial has been the boom of Ed-tech in India.

The existing/traditional classroom mode of learning has facilitated critical thinking. Students have sat in classroom with other students hailing from various strata of society. They had a shared blackboard to focus upon. The classroom thrived on interpersonal communications, questioning, satisfactory answers and group discussions. In a way classroom was the first real lived experience how democracy functions for the students. In the classroom, it was a kind of citizenship training. In recent days the mode of learning has made way to mode of instructions gyrating around information, exams, vocational training and skilling. Blackboard, buzzing classrooms have made way for online virtual platforms. Thus, effectively Individuals digital screen disconnects the coming together of the students.

The policies which have ushered in the online virtual mode of education has been criticized as policies which was pushed through without sufficient deliberation and broader consultation with stakeholders, civil society organizations and the public in general. It is blamed to have exacerbated exclusion by ignoring social injustice and mass education. It is seen as a policy which encouraged further commercialization of education by deepening the role of private players. Above all these aspects, what has been an alarming development is the sudden boom of Ed-tech. Several amendments were made to enable universities and colleges to ‘collaborate’ with Ed-tech platforms for ‘developing course content and financial rules’ (Barman)

Our country witnessed a sudden surge of interest in online virtual education during Covid-19. It is estimated that close to USD 1.4 billion in investments was attracted to India. (Singh) Many industry pundits predicted the investment tripling in few years. Until then little-known startups Unacademy, Eruditus, UpGard, BYJUs became a household name. As per the new educational policies these Ed-tech companies are considered as “technology service providers.” Universities are constantly encouraged to sign memorandum of understanding with these Ed-tech which has given rise to valid doubt about the autonomy of universities and the course content offered. There is troubling suspicion regarding the ownership of the metadata too.

For time immemorial classroom learning had its own aura. The very assembling of students in a confined space symbolized unity in diversity. The classroom space was made for interaction and co-evolve. Ideas were exchanged and opinions were expressed. Questions, doubts, disagreement, claims were made. Intellectual tussle never resulted in verbal spat or disputes. Learning in classroom was purely a social activity. It was a sublime example of democratic process. Rightly, classroom,



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gathering of students in a space was at the very center of conceptualization of modern universities and learning process.

In stark contrast to the physical classroom, the EdTech promoted online learning is basically driven by an 'algorithmic architecture' and 'business models' (Dijck, 2018. pp. 117-136). As the Dutch media scholars J. Van Dijck, T. Poell and M. de Waal argue, the pedagogical philosophy that underlies such corporate assembled online courses is 'datafication and personalisation. The main claim and promised of EdTech companies are that they can offer to the students a customized education by extensive use of artificial intelligence, teaching analytics, cloud computing, and learning apps. EdTech companies, thus understand learning as highly individualistic and driven by technology, analytics and algorithms. They further claim that these customised programmes and algorithms can replace the teacher's professional, astute judgement with 'learnification. The learnification paradigm is the belief that 'learning can be managed, monitored, controlled, and ultimately modified in each student's personal a customized algorithm that tracks, maps and stores information on their abilities, emotional states and psychological mind' through dispositions.

The much popularised and trendy customized education through algorithms and analytics constantly collect the exhaustive data of the student. Every digital indent, in the form of a like button, an emoji, a quiz, a survey or a click, adds to the assembling of the user- students' behavioural-psychological profile, which in the absence of legal protection, can be turned into an exclusively owned raw material to be repurposed by the platform. Abstract automated instructions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) are designed in such a way so as to train and modulate an individual for the passive acquisition of skills, which is in complete contrast to learning as a social activity that involves critical thinking.

In sync with the aim for individualized passive skill acquisition extensively promoted Edtech, the new education policy also advocates for a 'multiple entry and exit option, or what Dipsita Dhar describes as the 'fatal illusion of choice.'" Henceforth a single year at college would be enough to earn a certificate. As per the changes brought in If you clear two years, a diploma could be acquired, finish three years, you can get a degree and push for a fourth to get a multidisciplinary honour in bachelor's degree. The student could weave in and out of different colleges by doing different years at different times. Facilitating these multiple exits and entries will be an Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) that digitally stores all the course credits and makes them commensurable even when earned from different higher education institutions over several years.

Edtech companies in the guise of flexibility, 'multiple entry and exit', customised learning have embarked on systematically dismantling the core of the classroom culture nurtured diligently for centuries. The Edtech companies are thus destroying the very idea of achieving group solidarity through learning. Moreover, as Dhar correctly warns us, the many social and financial reasons why a student is forced to discontinue or compelled to abandon the programme midway will no longer be addressed. Instead, the reverse will play out, where compulsions (financial, gender, caste or otherwise) to drop out from college can now be officially normalized as issues of individual choice.



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All these changes brought in without much deliberation during the time of pandemic will be disruptive and detrimental to the previous intellectual standing and the goodwill of India's public higher education institutions. These changes should also be viewed in unison with unprecedented arising of a situation where intellectuals are tarnished, slurred and students attacked. Another alarming trend is how the on the social media/main stream media research students carrying out research on grants are dubbed as parasites feasting on tax-payers money!

The digital media is weaponised too. when weaponized as political and ideological infrastructure, digital media could be readily deployed to outwit, out shout, and overwhelm the academic world, which prefers doubt over simple conclusions, and whose claims, relatively speaking, are ponderous (Kahneman 2013). Compared to the agile circulation of 'information-forwards' by 'WhatsApp University, the academic university would fall woefully short in trying to win over the public.

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that the power of WhatsApp University lies only in how rapidly it moves fake news or misinformation. Instead, as Rachel Botsman argues, the credibility and persuasion of digital technologies derive from how it evokes 'trust'.

Previously, trust flowed 'upwards' to referees, regulators, gatekeepers, authorities, watchdogs, and experts. For example, the intellectual standing of the academic professor and the university is based on the judgements of subject experts and their proven expertise. In contrast, trust in digital technologies flows 'horizontally' or as 'distributed trust, where approval is generated from how 'fellow human beings' score through ratings that build 'reputation trails' (Botsman 2018, pp. 8-9, 81-108). Think, for example, how an Uber or Airbnb experience is evaluated based largely on user feedback: the number of likes, comments, emojis and negative ratings. In the digital age, for Botsman, the emergence of distributed trust has, in fact, begun to increasingly offer ways for undermining the 'old sources of power, expertise and authority' (Botsman 2018, p. 8).

Bell hooks in her book *Teaching to Transgress* states that the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility which has been undermined by teachers and students alike who seek to use the classroom as a platform of opportunistic concerns rather than as a place to learn. She gives a call for renewal and rejuvenation of our teaching practices. She looks at teaching as a performative act with space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, compelling, engaging, uniqueness. Bell hooks states that pedagogical practices should emerge from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical and feminist pedagogies with the blending of complex multiple perspectives. It should interrogate biases and not reinscribe systems of domination. She emphasizes that the pleasures of teaching is an act of resistance countering the overwhelming boredom, uninterest and apathy that so often characterize the way professors and students feel about teaching and learning, about the classroom experience. She appeals to teachers to make classroom an exciting place, never boring. She elucidates and further says that to make classrooms exciting one has to move beyond accepted boundaries with flexible agendas, and willingness to allow spontaneous shifts, serious intellectual deliberations deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in



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genuine recognition of another's presence. She views the classroom always as a communal place enhancing the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community, a place to reinvent, rediscover, run counter to values and beliefs learned at constricting and conforming conservative homes.

Education is increasingly becoming an act of passive consumption. Students are expected to consume information fed to them by a professor and able to memorize and store it. It is turning hostile to student participation. This rote, assembly line approach to learning is failing to see that the students as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences instead of just categorizing them as seekers of compartmentalized bits of knowledge. The existing educational structures seem to further denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of mind/body split, promoting and supporting compartmentalization, one dimensional allegiance. The rise of Edtech and online education is a massive leap in this direction with total disregard for liberatory inner well-being, healing and union of mind, body and spirit.

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