

State, Market, and Prospects for the Public Sphere: A Study of Sri Lankan Higher Education during the Pandemic

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the discourse that has come to the fore on the challenges faced by Sri Lanka's state education sector – better known as 'free education' – in the backdrop of Covid-19. Sri Lankan free education constitutes an ideological project that ventures beyond pedagogy and into the terrain of egalitarian social transformation. However, much of this ethico-ideological commitment has been abandoned in the interest of 'getting things done' in the context of the pandemic and the consequent shift to online delivery of education. Critically interrogating the debate around this issue, we submit that the seeping of market rationality into the university space erodes into the inclusivity, commonality, autonomy, and criticality that define the public sphere that the university is assumed to constitute.

Keywords: Public sphere, Covid-19, Sri Lanka, Free education

Introduction

Since April 2020, Sri Lankan state university students have continued their studies online. If the pandemic continues for another year, we will have at least one batch of graduates who have never stepped into a university and met with their lecturers and peers. However, this article is not wholly about students missing the university culture or not being able to utilise the physical resources that state education has made available for them. Rather, our focus here is on the injustices and inequalities that the online teaching mode has institutionalised over the past two years, and how the university community is responding to it. In doing so, we seek to assess the critical potential of the university as a site of public sphere.

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In the conditions of the current Covid-19 pandemic, in many countries and across numerous fields, authorities have favoured ‘what can be done’ over ‘what ought to be done’. The shift to online teaching should be understood in this context, where the initiative was viewed as a ‘natural choice’ by the government and university regulatory bodies, given the situational constraints. A majority of the country’s academics and students also readily joined these ranks, as it seemed to be the only viable solution available in the midst of the pandemic. However, in many cases, neither teachers nor students had the necessary infrastructure nor, in some instances, the technical competence to engage effectively with online education. The university system does not possess the necessary material and human resources to facilitate online teaching, as evidenced by the constant technical glitches in learning management systems and video conferencing platforms. Therefore, online platforms significantly affect the process and thereby even the content of university education.

The deficit between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ in delivering university education over virtual media has fuelled a serious debate over a wide range of issues pertinent to free education. It centres on two discourses: The first articulates cautious support for online education as the only mode available during the pandemic period for continuing educational activities, while acknowledging its many adverse effects in both social and epistemological terms. The second rallies support for online education outright, capitalising on largely uncritical support flowing in from various quarters. What intrigued us enough to commit to this essay was the puzzling observation that many academics who benefitted from the emancipatory conditions afforded by free education, and rose to their current positions thanks to them, showed no qualms about the inequalities that online education institutionalises in the pandemic context. We were particularly struck by the way in which market rationality is increasingly coming to be equated with common sense, leaving very little space for any other way of seeing and being with the world. We venture into this essay, therefore, to interrogate the impact of the particular variant of market rationality that has crept into the university space, fundamentally compromising its democratic character, including and especially the element of contestation. We understand this shift as particularly inimical to sustaining a public sphere within the university, yet a public sphere is crucial if the university is to continue as a democratic space.

As participants of the debate, we draw largely on our own observations, in addition to a collection of secondary sources as we probe the dynamics of the discourse on online education and social justice. In order to investigate the puzzle that paved the way for this

essay, we employ Jurgen Habermas's contributions on the public sphere and the work of many scholars who advanced this concept. We set the context by providing a brief account of Sri Lanka's free education system. Next, we outline our understanding of the public sphere, drawing primarily on Habermas but also on others who have responded to him. This account is supplemented by a discussion of the university as a site of public sphere. Within this larger frame, we proceed to sketch out and critically interrogate the nature of the debate, unfolding in state-sponsored higher education, over the implications of the sudden, pandemic-induced shift to online education for the university as a site of public sphere in Sri Lanka. We conclude with some reflections.

A Brief Account of Free Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's 'free education' is first and foremost an ideological project with a commitment to equality motivated by the 'egalitarian ideology of lessening social inequalities' and, as such, 'opened up opportunities for greater social mobility on the part of disadvantaged social groups' by affording them access to professions such as law and medicine, which were considered to be highly prestigious at the time (Jayasuriya 1969: 170). In the democratising ethos of the immediate post-Donoughmore period, there was increased sympathy and tolerance in society for the cause of social justice, encouraged and compounded by similar changes occurring elsewhere in the world, particularly Britain (Kannangara 1943: 116–36). However, the passage of introducing this sort of sweeping educational reform was in no way smooth.

C.W.W. Kannangara, Sri Lanka's (then Ceylon) first minister of education and the original proponent of free education in the country, regarded the function of the colonial system of education as divisive and discriminatory. In the dually stratified colonial education, vernacular schools facilitated access to 'less aspiring jobs' such as traditional physicians and school teachers, while the more prestigious white-collar jobs were reserved for the English-educated class, which attended expensive private schools located in urban areas (Punchi 2001: 367). Kannagara's reform proposal primarily sought to address the resultant – and ever-widening – social chasm predicated on class bias. As expected, the proposal had to weather staunch opposition from anglicised elites whose distinction and thereby interests were threatened by the proposed reforms. The reforms were pushed through nonetheless and came into effect from 1945 (primary schools) 1953 (secondary schools), and 1960 (universities), respectively (Little 1996). As a result,

education participation rates increased dramatically over two decades, and urban rural and gender disparities declined rapidly, unlike in other countries in South Asia. While over half the school population and nearly three-fourths of the girls had been out of school in the thirties, the age-specific participation rates of the 5–14 age group were 76.7 % for boys and 72.6 % for girls in 1963 ... with the change of media of instruction enrolment rate in grades 9–10 doubled from 69,233 in 1952 to 151,265 in 1957 and nearly doubled again to 294,253 in 1965. The cumulative benefits of free education and the change of media of instruction in secondary schools and the arts faculties of universities saw a threefold increase in the number of university students, from 4039 in 1959 to 15,219 in 1964. (Jayaweera 1989: 4)

The impact of this initiative, needless to say, has been a radical broadening of the social bases of education recipients, particularly at the tertiary level after the *Swabhasha* move of the early '60s (Jayasooriya 1965), and a slackening of the grip of caste by facilitating upward, merit-based social mobility that has freed youth from being defined by their birth status (Hettige 1992). The cumulative effect of this has been that free education has become the 'greatest social leveler' of post-independence Sri Lanka (Amarakeerthi 2020).

Free education is, of course, not without its contradictions. It was introduced into an already unequal landscape that was the work of colonial educational policy, whose end result was to introduce and sustain a class cleavage defined by access – by means of wealth and social standing – to English-medium education and the better prospects it afforded (Jayasuriya 2010). When free education was introduced, this extant cleavage also fed into generating hierarchies among academic disciplines, specifically between the Social and Natural Sciences, given the greater availability of facilities for subjects in the Natural Science stream in the better-equipped urban schools that tended to cater to those from privileged backgrounds (Gunawardena 1982).

The resultant social gaps along class lines were exploited by subsequent regimes, starting with that of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in the run-up to the election of 1956, promising upward mobility to hitherto marginalised social groups (Bush 2003). However, these promises fell flat in glaringly obvious ways in the subsequent years. With the lack of economic growth corresponding to the expansion of higher educational facilities resulting in widespread un- or underemployment and consequent disillusionment among the

large numbers graduating from universities, frustrations erupted in the youth uprising of 1971 (Obeysekere 1974: 375). Additionally, by this time, the country's economy had taken a hard hit with the decline in the surplus that plantation crops had been generating since the colonial period. On top of it all, an ethnic conflict that quickly spiralled into an all-engulfing civil war further eroded an already failing economy (Jayasuriya 2014: 173). The consequent 'crunch', so to speak, meant far fewer employment opportunities for the thousands of youth now graduating annually.

The open economy reforms of 1977 promised everything that this state of affairs did not: greater employment opportunities, greater upward mobility, greater economic prosperity, and greener pastures more generally. Despite the positive tone of this shift, and in addition to triggering yet another (and much more violent) youth uprising in the late 1980s, the reforms were also instrumental in hailing in an era of unprecedented changes to the macro-structures of Sri Lanka's political-economic landscape, education included, on the pretext of making structural conditions conducive for the positive transformation many hoped to see.

Given Sri Lanka's wobbly economy, struggling to open up, the country – like many of its counterparts in the developing world – had to comply with conditions laid down by global financial institutions. Education has not been an exception in this regard, leading 'free education' to come under ever greater strain due to the push to reduce public spending on economically unfeasible ventures such as welfare apparatuses, of which free education is an integral part (Punchi 2001; Perera 2021). The world over, higher education – particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences – has been coming under increasing pressure to synthesise its 'output' with market demands (Pusser 2012: 37) to the extent that 'we may question whether they remain instruments of neoliberal policies, or whether they are on the verge of becoming neoliberal institutions' (Ibid.). In the context of this already constricted space, Sri Lankan education – particularly higher education – encountered the new crisis presented by Covid-19. But before moving on to discussing the impact of pandemic-induced changes on the potential of the university as a site of public sphere, it is important to first sketch out our understanding of the public sphere.

A Theoretical Approach to the 'Public Sphere'

In his seminal work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as the coming together of 'private persons' for 'public

concern' or 'common interest'. The medium of communication in this space, according to Habermas, is rational dialogue and debate geared towards critically treating the state and the market – both of which are distinct from the public sphere – and, necessarily, the public sphere (society) itself as well. In Habermas's conception, the public sphere is seen as a domain of social life where public opinion is formed (Habermas 1991: 398).

A few defining features of the public sphere can be gleaned from Habermas's explications: First is 'publicness' or, more commonly, 'publicity', which literally translates to 'openness' (Cefaï 2017). By 'openness', or accessibility afforded to all, Habermas attempted to conceptualise a state of affairs in which public issues were open for deliberation through processes of argumentation, dialogue or communication, amounting to a 'public use of reason' understood in the Kantian sense (Ibid.). In Calhoun's recounting,

[p]ublicity was, according to its very idea, a principle of democracy not because anyone could in principle announce, with equal opportunity, his personal inclinations, wishes, and convictions – opinions; it could only be realized in the measure that these personal opinions could evolve through the rational-critical debate of a public into public opinion. (Habermas 1962: 219, as cited in Calhoun 1996: 29)

Second, the idea of 'public concern' or 'common interest', in turn, stems from the idea of 'publicity' but refers centrally to the content of debates and deliberations taking place in the public sphere, rather than its nature. Such content, according to Habermas, should not centre on matters that may be deemed 'business or private interests' but rather on broader matters of 'general interest' (mwengenmeir n.d.). Third and last, from the previous flows the point that the public sphere is 'not commandeered by the market or the state' and, therefore, acts as independently of the state as it does of the market (as interpreted by Goode 2005: 38). The public sphere, then, is a crucial site of democracy that mediates between the state and the market, subjecting both to public control.

These conceptions have understandably come under attack because the public sphere they articulate is very restrictive. In Habermas's defense, however, Fraser (1990: 58) posits that '[t]he object of inquiry [here] is the rise and decline of a historically specific and limited form of the public sphere'. Habermas acknowledges that in the conditions of mass democracy that we see today, this kind of public sphere is no longer tenable, and therefore highlights the need for a new kind of public sphere that can 'salvage the arena's critical

function', but stops, rather oddly, without describing the boundaries of such a space (Ibid.). Nonetheless, as Fraser further argues, since Habermas's specific form of bourgeois public sphere does not constitute an adequate conceptual tool 'to serve the needs of critical theory today', one needs to venture beyond it, even while drawing on it.

Of course, Habermas is fully aware that the bourgeois public sphere has evolved further and further away from his conception of it. Here, the inadequacies of an admittedly powerful articulation come to light. For instance, the 'publicness' of the public sphere has been hotly contested, particularly following the entry of more pronounced 'private interests' that centre on very specific groups and their demands. These latter interests implicitly and explicitly highlight how the supposed commonality of interests touted by the classical bourgeois public sphere were in fact specific to that class, and failed to represent the needs and aspirations of other groups in society who later seized the space opened up by mass democracy to do exactly that. Calhoun (1993), while outlining the merits of the Habermasian conception, too, concedes that the public-private dichotomy it presupposes is detrimental to any expansive conception of the public sphere, because it precludes matters of, for instance, identity formation as essentially private and therefore not constitutive of an issue of public concern.

The lesson to be learnt from the Habermasian conception of the public sphere, however, lies in how the state, market, and society are aligned in this constellation. Civil society, Habermas tells us, is 'not commandeered by the market or the state' and therefore acts as independently of the state as it does of the market (Goode 2005: 38). However, this should not be taken to indicate any neutrality on the part of civil society. As history clearly demonstrates, civil society has variously represented the interests of the feudal aristocracy, merchant capitalists, welfare interventionists, and so on (Ibid.). During these various epochs, civil society has sometimes pushed for minimal state intervention in citizen lives to enable the realisation of their private interests, and at others for more state intervention in citizen lives to level out the differences in enabling such realisation (Ibid.; Calhoun 1996). In other words, civil society has at certain points asked for a greater role for the market by curbing that of the state, and at others, a greater role for the state to curb the advances of the market. In these oscillations, the constant has been that of a critical 'public' – a historically evolving body in which dominance has been enjoyed by various quarters during different periods – making claims on the two principal social organisations for the realisation of their interests.

The importance of the public sphere lies in its potential as a mode of societal integration. Public discourse ... is a possible mode of coordination of human life, as are state power and market economies. But money and power are non-discursive modes of coordination ... they offer no intrinsic openings to the identification of reason and will, and they suffer from tendencies toward domination and reification. State and economy are thus both crucial topics for and rivals of the democratic public sphere. (Calhoun 1996: 6)

The multiplicity of such public, particularly in conditions of mass democracy, inevitably results in multiple such interests, giving rise to multiple, and sometimes competing, claims on the state and the market. This quality gives rise to contestation, that central tenet of the public sphere, signalling the prevalence of multiple ways of negotiating with the world, constituting at its core a democratic endeavour.

The University as Public Sphere

The conception of the university as a site of public sphere is fundamentally tied to the concern over what qualifies as an issue of public concern. While the university initially was associated with universality – even though the term is etymologically derived from the Latin word *universitas*, denoting a legal collectivity or guild (Rudy 1984, as quoted in Ambrozas 1998) – and therefore by extension as involving deliberation on matters of ‘social’ concern, later interventions such as the feminist movement endured, showing that ‘universality [in the university] ... inheres in the multiplicity that makes up the whole, rather than a single universal truth’ (Ambrozas 1998).

It is from this multiplicity, and the encounter between various manifestations of it in a single space, that the element of contestation – so central to the public sphere and to democracy itself – is introduced to the university. As Henry Giroux would have it, ‘The university is ... a site of contradictions and struggles and in my mind a public sphere where one of the most important struggles over the formative culture necessary in a democracy...’ (in an interview with Harper 2014: 1081) unfolds. These multiplicities and the encounters between them can then be subjected to critical treatment through the conversations happening in the university space, within and outside classrooms, thus facilitating the emergence of a critical consciousness (Freire 2005: 35). It is this diversity and criticality

whose combination marks the university as particularly emblematic of the spirit of the public sphere.

In Sri Lanka, the university space has been the site of many (sometimes violent) struggles for greater redistributive justice, as our account of the history of free education demonstrates. In each of these instances, claims have been made on both the state and market, in the interest of greater society. Admittedly, fractured voices and interests have clamoured for a space in the discourse, but this has only added to the democratic quality of the public sphere, understood in the revisionist, post-Habermasian sense briefly outlined above. However, fundamental transformations in the nature and orientation of the Sri Lankan higher education sector that predate the pandemic were compounded and expedited due to the changes introduced during the Covid situation.

The Debate on Higher Education in Sri Lanka during the Pandemic

Due to its ability to continue over virtual arrangements, education the world over has managed to survive the disruptions of the pandemic far more than other sectors. In Sri Lanka too, in spite of vast and glaring inequalities, education from kindergarten to post-graduate level has continued not only to deliver content, but to perform such other activities as interim assessments, examinations, parent-teacher meetings, and even extracurricular activities.³ Serious structural injustices and their resultant inequalities have always plagued Sri Lanka's free education system, particularly at the primary and secondary levels (Kadargamar 2021). Even though the tertiary level has by and large been able to level out these differences by facilitating equal access to resources on-site, we have observed on numerous occasions how a student's spending capacity, the stamp of pre-existing inequalities, continues to bear on their ability to reap the benefits of the university experience. The absence of the cushioning effect of such institutional mediation in the shift to online education – by way of providing the necessary equipment and infrastructure, among other things – has triggered a lively debate amongst the university community, which was our inspiration to develop the argument made in this article, and which we briefly present below, before dissecting its implications for the university as a site of public sphere.

3 Discussion with school teachers (virtual) on 27 May 2021.

This debate centres on exchanges between two broadly opposite camps. The first camp's endorsement of online education is cautious, and predicated on the absence of an alternative in the crisis situation. It also continues to raise concerns about the associated social costs of reinforcing marginalities and heightening inequalities, as well as the adverse effect of online teaching and learning on the essence of education. The second camp, in contrast, unequivocally supports online education not only as a remedy to continuing education amidst the current health crisis, but also as a desirable arrangement whose potential should continue to be explored beyond the pandemic. For them, the introduction of online education is part of a larger project of modernisation of higher education, which in turn is considered a virtue because of its purported ability to yield economically measurable results.

In Sri Lanka, the social cost of the sudden shift to online education has been particularly evident, given that the vast majority in the country benefits from a system that ensures at least basic access to education at the primary, secondary and, on more restrictive terms, tertiary levels. The shift to internet-based education, however, has posed a host of challenges to this system, not the least of which is the issue of accessibility, for students and sometimes teachers as well. In this light, pushing for greater acknowledgement of the difficulties faced by students – as well as some teachers – in continuing educational activities online is, by extension, to argue for greater inclusion in the higher education space. This exercise simultaneously constitutes the representation of a 'common interest' (in light of the large proportion of university students coming from marginalised backgrounds, as evidenced by a high proportion of them receiving need-based financial aid, and our own experience), and very much a pushback against the state attempting to force through changes that violate the moral commitments of free education. We submit, therefore, that the first camp very much aligns with our understanding of the public sphere and its hallmark characteristics of publicity, common interest, and autonomy from the state and market.

On the other hand, the second camp and its cause intensify the socio-moral crisis propagated by the pandemic in higher education primarily in two ways. First, the push towards online education has normalised a practice of 'getting things done' regardless of the associated social cost. Second, the new economic pressures introduced by the pandemic have largely legitimised this view by furthering a narrative of efficiency and the need for students to graduate without delay and start contributing to the economy. Both have contributed to the market logic that occupies the place of pride in social discourses, by and

large overriding all other concerns and viewpoints. This hegemonisation of the narrative has significantly eroded the critical potential and autonomy of the public sphere that the university is supposed to be emblematic of.

In the line of reasoning adopted by this second camp, the efficiency rhetoric of ‘getting things done’ takes precedence over critical reflection and intervention, as well as equity concerns, effectively pushing beneficiaries of supposedly ‘free’ education to spend on accessing their education, if that is what it takes to complete the process on time. This has come to denote, among other things, the gradual monetisation of the means of access to free education by way of its individual recipients bearing the cost of internet connectivity and electronic equipment. The frequent invocation of this argument has become so normalised as to inculcate a rationale of individual responsibility for education that is no longer institutionally mediated, and to perpetuate an ethos whereby those who are unable to afford such access are individually blamed for lack of commitment and laziness (Lecamwasam 2021). When education is gradually commodified thus, its potential for critical dialogue, that key tenet of the public sphere, withers away, transforming education into a tool of the market and therefore not a site that contests it, as the public sphere is principally supposed to do.

Additionally, the pandemic has pushed governments to take increasingly desperate measures to ‘bounce back’, including pushing higher education to produce graduates who are most likely to yield direct utility to national economies. It is needless to highlight the fallacies involved in this inference, not the least of which is an evidently crumbling economy in the face of Covid-19. Nonetheless, publicly funded higher education institutions in Sri Lanka continue to face political pressure in this regard, largely because the narrative around graduate unemployability predates the pandemic, and was simply exacerbated by it (Lecamwasam 2021). Thus, we see how the critical capacity of universities is increasingly being eroded by the market ethos.

These developments signal a pattern: the market is being brought into public education through state initiatives. The state and market, no longer antithetical forces, are merging to govern society under a single, overarching, all-engulfing logic of market rationality, significantly affecting the individual’s ability to be a reflective citizen and person. As Goode (2005: 24) concludes,

today's ethic of good citizenship does not demand that our opinions are "tested out" in the argumentative crossfire of the coffee house or, for that matter, the Internet discussion group. Rather, the governing logic is that of the market: the analogy is the educated consumer who, before plucking goods from the supermarket shelf, carefully considers the range of choices on offer and the cases that competing corporations make for their products.

Conclusion

In this article, we attempted to reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated changes on the publicly-funded higher education landscape of Sri Lanka. Like many other countries, Sri Lanka too had to resort to virtual methods to continue activities in the educational sector, given the social distancing requirements of the health crisis. However, given that a majority of the receivers of education in the country benefit from its system of 'free education', the sudden – and institutionally unmediated – shift to online education had a hugely detrimental effect on many students, not to mention teachers. At the tertiary level where we are employed, this series of events sparked a heated debate between those who extended the minimum amount of support necessary for online education to see students through the pandemic (while continuing to raise objections related to redistributive justice), and those who by and large unequivocally supported the shift not only for the duration of the pandemic, but for beyond as well. The latter group's case hinged on the need to 'modernise' education such that its beneficiaries (now increasingly called 'products') become 'attractive' to the market.

Our reading is that the case forwarded by this second group, and the increasing legitimacy it is coming to enjoy – is inimical to any prospect of the university continuing to function as a meaningful site of public sphere for three reasons. The first two have to do with the characteristics of the public sphere we have outlined above. In terms of openness (publicity) and accessibility, online education excludes many from meaningfully participating in the university space as students, and much less as active agents of society, culture, and politics. As our preceding discussion shows, the virtual space by socio-economic design mirrors and perpetuates exclusions in the larger society, the undoing (to the greatest extent possible) of which takes conscious effort and commitment.

On the count of common interests, however, waters become muddier. One may persuasively argue that it is impossible to label some interests as 'more common' than

others, and that all interests are ultimately specific to certain groups and their ambitions. This has in fact been one of the key responses to Habermas, as our discussion on the evolution of the debate on the public sphere demonstrates. As such, arguing in favour of online education irrespective of its social cost, is as much an expression of a vibrant public sphere, as arguing against it is.

Notwithstanding this second characteristic, however, the push for online education in this particular context may well undermine the conceptual and actual autonomy of the public sphere from the state and market, as well as the distinction between the state and market themselves. What we see here is the market making inroads into publicly funded higher education not as a separate force, but precisely through the state. In other words, it is the state that ensures compliance in making universities adapt to the market mould. By uncritically succumbing to – and even endorsing – this demand, the university simply becomes the mouthpiece of a state that is incapable of acting as an alternative to the market.

The other reason why online education may undermine the university's prospects for constituting a site of the public sphere is somewhat, though not wholly, independent of the three characteristics outlined previously. This speaks to the larger implications a weakening public sphere has for active citizenship, and thereby for democracy itself. Even though the past two years have witnessed much awakening on the part of civil society actors in Sri Lanka – including the university community – in response to increasing authoritarianism in and financial mismanagement of the country, this does not seem to extend to a critical treatment of the market logic seeping into other spheres of public life such as education. For instance, many academics who took an active part in protesting against the militarisation of education were also seen enthusiastically championing narratives of online education as a source of revenue for the increasingly privatising public university, and the need to align education with the requirements of the market, among others. For us, this is indicative of an erosion of criticality in society as a whole, whereby market dictates are accepted unquestioningly, and pushed forward with socially blind aggression, in the name of economic efficiency.

When people are stripped of their critical faculties and absorbed into this sort of market ethos, citizens transform into consumers, from active agents to passive receivers. Given the general decline of democratic standards across the world in the pandemic context, the university may be our last hope against an advancing market and the top-down, conflict-

averse, homogenising political order it prefers. The state, that alternative force to the market in spite of all its historical evils, has fallen. Let us guard the last bastion.

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