

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 35



Reforming  
Indian Higher Education  
and the  
Importance of  
Global Collaborations

by  
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# Reforming Indian Higher education and the Importance of Global Collaborations\*

Earlier this week in Hyderabad, I presented a lecture at the annual conference of The Association of International Schools in India (TAISI), an association of IB and international schools in India. In the lecture I talked about global mobilities and how these have profound implications for thinking about educational policy and practice. I argued that not only people but also money and capital are more mobile than ever before. There is also the mobility of ideas and ideologies. Cultural practices too are mobile, resulting in greater possibilities of cultural exchange. Beyond these mobilities, and perhaps more significantly, I suggested that there is the global mobility of hopes, desires and aspirations that people have of their futures. Indeed, it is through these mobilities that a culture of rampant consumerism has become globally ubiquitous, with market thinking becoming legitimized and even normalized. We have all begun to think in market terms as our hopes, desires and aspirations have in a sense become globalized.

In the lecture in Hyderabad, I argued that public policy alone cannot adequately address this global shift, because what we are witnessing is a historically significant

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\* Professor Fazal Rizvi delivered this lecture at the IIC on September 27, 2011

cultural shift. I suggested that education needs to play a greater role in tackling what are effectively shifts in globally circulating values. To do this, I believe a different mode of learning is needed, designed to explore issues that cut across national borders and cultural traditions, in terms of normative conceptions that transcend the discourses and practices of the market. I call this cosmopolitan learning.

My thinking on cosmopolitanism is derived from a number of different traditions, but differs markedly from its popular meaning. In popular discourse, cosmopolitanism is now largely considered in terms of cosmopolitan lifestyles, the lifestyles of an increasingly transnational urban elite. In contrast, I believe that there is another richer tradition of thinking about cosmopolitanism, going back to the Stoics in ancient Greece and also I believe some of the Buddhist traditions. This tradition involves a perspective on the ways in which we know the world and how, through this knowing, we should relate to each other across different cultural traditions. This view is more about global social and cultural formations than about opportunities of consumption associated with cross-border economic exchange.

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The trouble with much of our current thinking about cosmopolitanism is that it has become reduced to market thinking, through a rearticulation of our critical vocabulary in terms that are instrumentally defined. This has happened with most of our moral concepts, including justice for example, and even freedom. Under the instrumental neo-liberal mode of thinking, such moral concepts have been re-articulated in market terms, given meaning that is detached from their moral origins. So for example, the idea of equality of education is now widely re-defined in terms of access to institutions such as universities on market terms. Issues of the conditions under which students are able to participate in those institutions or the outcomes of education have been largely side-stepped and marginalized.

This is clearly also the case with the idea of cosmopolitanism, which is now widely used to refer to matters of lifestyles, and various patterns of consumption, rather than about moral aspirations, about the ways in which we should live and learn across cultural and national differences, under the assumption that we all inhabit the same earth and our lives are inter-connected and inter-dependent, and that most of our problems

are global, requiring global solutions. The fundamental question we now face then is how to recapture the critical moral language which has become subsumed within a broader neo-liberal ideological framework, where moral notions such as equality are now interpreted in instrumental terms.

In the paper in Hyderabad, I suggested that in order to re-capture a critically moral vocabulary in the era of global interconnectivity, we need a notion of cosmopolitanism focussed on the requirements of this learning about interconnectivity and indeed interdependence. Cosmopolitanism, I argued, should involve critical conversations across cultural and national differences. As Indian higher education seeks to reform its policies and practices, global collaborations established to facilitate such cosmopolitan conversations can play a major role in the processes of reform. This is what I want to discuss with you today.

My interest in Indian higher education is relatively recent, stretching back to 2006 when I began thinking about the ways in which Indian universities were engaging the processes of globalization. A short sabbatical in 2007 at the Zakir Hussain Centre for Educational Studies at JNU enabled me to immerse myself in reading and learning as much as I possibly could about the challenges facing Indian higher education. During that sabbatical, I managed to talk to a large number of policy makers, university administrators, faculty and students, and many others in India. Over the past five years, I have continued to keep track of new policy initiatives designed to overhaul the Indian system of higher education. I should make it clear however that I still regard myself as an outsider to Indian higher education, not least because its forms are so complex, so enormous, so extensive and so multi-layered and multi-dimensional that trying to capture it in some simple way is both not possible but also perhaps undesirable. So all I can do today is to offer you some general impressions of the key issues I am trying to understand.

The overwhelming impression I am left with after five years of examining shifts in Indian higher education is that the system as a whole has a deep sense of policy

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anxiety – that it recognizes both its problems, and the challenges it faces in addressing them. This anxiety is expressed in a range of policy debates. Perhaps the most intractable debate relates to the issues of demand, and access and equity. Each of the Government's policy prescriptions to meet the fast growing demand for higher education, among the marginalized people in particular, is met with considerable resistance, with fears about quality used to undermine the attempts to ensure greater equality of educational opportunity. The nature of the relationship between equity and quality remains unresolved. Another debate relates to the privatization of provision. While it is widely accepted that some level of privatization is inevitable, there is little consensus over the questions of exactly what kind of privatization, and how privatization should be organized, structured, overseen and indeed allowed to grow. The issues surrounding the Foreign Education bill are trapped within the framework of these debates. Other debates relate to some of the more complex cultural issues on campuses, where the possibilities of changes to the traditional modes of governance are greatly feared among some faculty and students. Issues of corruption are often mentioned, but seldom addressed.

Now while there is a high degree of suspicion about issues of expansion and equity, privatization and governance, there is also an almost universal recognition that major policy reforms in these areas are necessary. It is widely acknowledged that the Indian system of higher education is not working as well as it could and that unless major reforms are put in place, and are largely successful, India could lose the advantages it currently enjoys in the global knowledge economy. It is widely suggested – by the National Knowledge Commission, for example – that India cannot sustain its impressive rates of economic growth without fundamental reforms to its system of higher education. There is clearly a sense of urgency to which the Government is trying its best to respond, with a range of initiatives and inducements.

At the institutional level, there is clearly no uniformity in the ways in which Indian universities are responding to the challenges of reform. And perhaps this is inevitable in a federal structure where policy coherence is never easy to achieve. I want to argue that global collaborations potentially have an important role to play in overcoming some of the blockage to reform, for it should be noted that the sources of policy anxiety in the

Indian system of higher education are not only located within the local and national politics. They are also partially global. The urgency that India feels about reforming its system of higher education is linked to its concerns about the relationship between the national and the global. It concerns the question of how its system of higher education should respond to the pressures of globalization and the knowledge economy.

In most policy documents on Indian higher education, the concept of the knowledge economy has become ubiquitous, as has the discourse of globalization. However, it is less clear how these concepts are understood, and which perspective on globalization and the knowledge economy is considered preferable for India. There is recognition of the need for a new focus on knowledge that is not necessarily disciplinary but inter-disciplinary or post-disciplinary. Yet there is a concern about how to move beyond the traditional subjects to a new understanding of knowledge, and its utilization more appropriate for the contemporary era. This is most evident in policy concerns about the poor state of research infrastructure appropriate to the needs of the knowledge economy. The key question is how locally generated knowledge might become more appropriately aligned to the new labour market requirements, especially given the realization that many of the new jobs in India will result from the new processes and practices associated with the global knowledge industries.

In 2007, I met a number of industrialists in India, and talked to their human resource managers, who expressed a common complaint about the poor state of India's higher education. This complaint has clearly filtered down to the policy field. In this way, there is an emerging alignment across corporations and India's policy class. Both interpret the imperatives of globalization and the knowledge economy in similar ways, in an increasingly neo-liberal language concerned with human capital formation for the accumulation of capital. This implies corporatizing higher education, privatization of many of its functions and thus transforming its governance practices in the image of the corporate sector.

An important aspect of this transformation involves calls to make Indian universities globally competitive. There is a great deal of concern in India about the poor performance of its leading universities in the global ranking systems that have become

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popular benchmarks around the world. Shanghai's Jiao Tong Ranking, and that produced each year by the Times Higher Education Supplement, are now widely discussed in India, with the fact of the poor performance of its universities noted as a major source of concern. Much has been written in recent years about the politics of global comparisons in higher education. These comparisons however no longer represent a game, but, around the world, reflect serious national concerns about the ways in which a country's universities are located within the emerging global architecture of higher education. Universities are thus no longer viewed solely as national institutions but located in a globally networked set of relationships.

Furthermore, a reference to global competition now constitutes a major factor in the justification of particular programmes of reform and the distribution of resources and incentives to drive them. In India, the allocation of funds for reform is now partly driven by the need to create 'world class universities'. It should be noted, by the way, that after the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, the lack of resources is no longer considered a major problem in Indian higher education. Rather it is the pattern of distribution of resources to meet the rapidly growing demand that is considered a more urgent issue. While the issues of reservation, and access and equity, and uneven quality, especially in the private sector and the appropriate regulatory and accreditation framework are matters that are widely debated, so is the allocation of large sums of money to create new 'central' universities that are globally competitive. These debates are particularly fierce in the context of Indian federalism.

Many of these concerns are of course not unique to India. To a greater or lesser degree, every system of higher education including Australian, American and Canadian are debating issues of access and quality, privatization, governance and global competitiveness. There appears to be a global struggle to understand these historically important questions, even if the sources and the languages in which these are talked about in various locations are somewhat different. And while these questions are articulated in ways that suggest local and national specificities, there is also a remarkable degree of convergence in their policy framings.

Consider for example the problem of massification. As India deals with the policy pressures associated with the rapidly growing demand for higher education, the United States too faces issues arising from the development of its elite system of higher education into a mass system. It is important to note however that while in the United

States the participation rates are approaching 80 per cent, in India we are looking at a mere 15 per cent. The American sociologist, Martin Trow, raised the issues of massification in the mid 1960s, arguing that all developed economies will face the challenges of their higher education systems moving from elite to mass. Indian higher education still remains relatively elite, but the issues of how to manage rapid growth rates in demand are similar. In recent years, the idea of public-private partnerships, or PPP, has been presented as a solution to the problems of access and equity. In the Indian system, with its mostly private colleges affiliated to public universities, PPP is not of course a new idea; what is new however is the question of how to better coordinate and control the growth of for-profit institutions. In trying to meet this challenge, the Indian policy makers can learn much from the US experience.

The Indian system has less to learn from the US about the knowledge economy. It is widely argued around the world, that the knowledge economy requires new graduate skills – graduates who are technology savvy; creative, innovative and entrepreneurial; culturally adaptable; committed to life-long learning. Universities around the world are thus experimenting with new curriculum, designed to meet the emerging demands of the labour market. It is equally clear however that the case for the new labour market is overdrawn, for most people continue to work in highly reutilized jobs. So if you look at the kind of jobs that most graduates are getting, they are not in the creative industries, even if they work in industries that are highly technologized. Just because you use computers to manage a MacDonald's store does not mean that you need to know the programmes that coordinate the work flows, inventory and the like. Assembling a computer does not require you to be able to write software programmes. In fact very few people are employed in jobs associated with the new knowledge industries.

Most people everywhere are employed in the old industries even as there is a move away from the manufacturing to the services sector. But it is important to note that labour markets have different formations in different countries. The reason why I am pointing to this difference is to note that policy mimicking is not always appropriate, and that we ought to be very careful about such notions as

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knowledge transfer and policy borrowing that have become a part and parcel of the literature on international management. To assume global uniformity in the requirements of a globalizing labour market is to ignore the national specificities that are still relevant to the ways in which the significance attached to knowledge and work are culturally inflected. What this suggests is we cannot understand the global shifts in the nature of work in economic terms alone, but that a cultural understanding of global processes is equally important.

This takes me back to my discussion of global mobilities of people, money and ideas, and how they have the potential of transforming our cultural practices, and reconstituting our communities, but in ways that are different and uneven. To illustrate this, I might tell you the story of the village where I was born in the district of Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh. What has struck me about the village is that its cultural economy has become totally transformed as a result of a number of its young men going to the UAE to work there. The village's economy is largely a remittances economy. Indeed it could be argued that the village now participates in an economy that consists of transnational flows of money. This change is affecting the ways in which students at the village's two schools think about their aspirations. What do you think they want to do when they grow up? They all want to go to Dubai and come back with large amounts of money for themselves and their family. Their hopes and desires are now shaped by the global economy. So the mobility of those few people who have moved clearly has an effect on those people who remain at home. In other words, there is a deep relationship between mobility and immobility, transforming the cultural politics of the place, reconstituting the space within which the people of the village live, form relationships, and forge their view of the future – but always at the intersection of local traditions and global inputs.

This raises a whole range of complicated questions about the cultural politics of the place and the space that is becoming increasingly transnationalized. Transnationalism has an impact on new cultural formations in India. Another way to describe how this is so is to look at Bollywood and the ways in which it now deals with images and issues that are mostly transnational rather than national. In the 1950s, most Hindi films, such as those made by Raj Kapoor, were informed by a national politics, about India's post-independence moral aspirations of fairness, and equality of opportunity, linked to a democratic socialism of the Nehruvian kind, if you like. The kind of politics that Bollywood now offers is about transnational lives, romanticizing, idealizing those who have the resources to travel abroad, and about the lives of diasporic families whose relationship to India is now mostly symbolic. The nation's urban young in particular have now embraced this cultural politics, linked to the possibilities and imaginary rewards of global mobility.

These examples show how global mobility now needs to be treated as a central concept in our attempts to understand contemporary youth cultures, policy options in education as well as its institutional practices. If we don't understand mobilities not only of people but also of images and ideas, of culture practices, of youth cultures and of hopes and desires, then we can't comprehend the new world in which policies might be developed and would be effective. This is a world in which transnational connectivities are ubiquitous, but in which emerging cultural politics works differently in different locations, at the intersection of the global and the local. In this sense what we now have are both connectivities and disconnectivities, both conjunctures and disjunctures, both embeddedness and disembeddedness. If we were once largely embedded within a national space then while the nation continues to be significant, the processes of embedding now occur differently in relation to the processes of disembedding caused by various global interventions.

Now if we accept this account of the cultural shifts taking place in our communities then this has major implications for thinking about global collaborations in higher education. I have earlier used the phrase 'the changing architecture of global higher education' to highlight the ways in which higher education is now organized, deeply affected by the shifts in cultural politics and political economy. Some of these changes are of course organic, taking place without administrators and policy makers even recognizing them. So the questions for policy are: how should we understand and capture these organic changes in order to be able to respond to them; how might we steer shifts that are organic towards directions that are culturally and educationally productive; how do we link these changes to our national aspirations, and how do we meet the various demands of equity so that it is not only a small elite minority that benefits from them?

To my mind, the changing architecture of global higher education can be summed up in the notion that it is both an expression of and a response to global mobilities. In other words, the organicity that I have talked about is one of its dimensions and the response another. How do you bring together the expressions of globalization on the one hand

Global mobility now needs to be treated as a central concept in our attempts to understand contemporary youth cultures, policy options in education as well as its institutional practices. If we don't understand mobilities not only of people but also of images and ideas, of culture practices, of youth cultures and of hopes and desires, then we can't comprehend the new world in which policies might be developed and would be effective

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and responses to globalization on the other? This is a fundamental question for reforming higher education. In what follows I want to argue that global collaborations have a key role to play in re-thinking higher education in these terms. This is so because knowledge is now remarkably mobile, demanding transnational knowledge networks. If the production of new knowledge now takes place at the intersection of various mobilities then an understanding of new knowledge is best achieved across transnational processes.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine how knowledge could be largely nation-bound. It is now clear that knowledge has slipped out through porous borders, both disciplinary and national. With the increasing mobility of knowledge have emerged new demands for managing institutional practices associated with knowledge creation and dissemination. Clearly therefore the need to learn from each other has never been greater. Yet it is also clear that the circulation of ideas, images and ideologies seldom takes place in a space characterized by a relative symmetry of power relations. We know from the history of colonialism, for example, that knowledge transfer and knowledge mobility took place in a manner that was one-directional. Similarly, to talk of the global convergence of policy ideas and of knowledge is to ignore the asymmetries of power relations within the framework in which convergence takes place.

An example of this complexity can be found in the notion of 'regional policy harmonization' in the European Union. Under this policy perspective, the Bologna Process has sought the harmonization of higher education policies and structures across its member countries. But already some of them, such as the Greeks, smell a rat, suspecting erosion of some of their autonomy. Since the Bologna Process largely recommends a set of ideas about higher education reform that requires Britain to do very little while it requires Greeks to do a huge amount, the Greeks are understandably miffed, and suspect the discourses of harmonization and global collaboration to be ideologically driven. The same is the case with issues of commercially motivated academic mobility of students across national boundaries. Globally, attempts have been made to encourage such mobility, but also regulate global trade in educational

services, under the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). It is clear however that those global trade regimes generally favour powerful countries at the expense of the weaker one. The Indian Government is rightly very careful about signing up to GATS because it remains unsure about its exploitative potential embedded within the Agreement's asymmetries of power.

So while global collaborations can serve a major role in reforming India's system of higher education, it is important that the purposes of such collaboration be clear, as well as the ways in which it is enacted. Global collaborations are of course not new to India. Ancient universities such as Nalanda attracted and worked with students and scholars from around the world, with the aim to live and learn together, developing a sense of belonging that can be called cosmopolitan, trying to determine how we not only belong to a particular region, linguistic, ethnic or religious group but also to the world as a whole. Under colonialism, Indian universities worked with a different conception of collaboration, based on the assumptions, normativities and standards set in the nineteenth century by British universities such as the University of London. Indian universities imported, as part of the colonial processes, most of the British curricular and pedagogic models, promoted as modernity and what counted as higher education's contribution to modernity.

In the contemporary neo-liberal era, the notion of global collaboration has once again been reshaped and rearticulated. Collaboration is now increasingly conceptualized in market terms. Collaboration is largely about an economic exchange in the dissemination, certification and ultimately the sale of knowledge. I have worked in Australia both as an administrator and as a researcher, and it is hard for me to deny that the idea of global collaborations in Australia has not now in fact been institutionalized in neo-liberal terms. This has led to the commodification of education, with commercial factors becoming dominant in the determination of the products and services that could be exchanged and the price that ought to be charged.

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There is thus no single essential way of thinking about global collaboration in higher education. It is clearly a dynamic notion that it has changed over the years. This realization enables us to problematize the very notion of collaboration, the reasons for why we should collaborate and what we should collaborate over and indeed how. Furthermore, we need to ask what would count as successful collaboration, what would be the measures of our success. Those are fundamentally normative rather than technical questions. They are also political, not only with respect to the issues of power, but also the extent to and conditions under which the benefits of collaboration are distributed.

In terms of its benefits, one way of thinking about global collaboration is to consider India's contribution to the development of global higher education and to assess the global contribution to Indian higher education. The Indian contribution to global higher education is a most understated story, largely because this collaboration is not necessarily at an institutional level, but at the level of people to people. A very large Indian academic diaspora now exists, making a huge contribution to global knowledge production. Many of the diasporic Indian academics working in the West were trained in India, whose global contribution needs to be made more visible. It is largely invisible because we don't talk about it often enough, probably because it is not measurable in quantitative terms, or indeed in financial terms.

Over the past twenty years or so, the number of Indian students going abroad has increased significantly. With the emergence of a strong middle class in India, this number is likely to rise. Indeed the rapid rise in the number of IB and international schools in India, many of whose students aspire to an international education, may be viewed as a major indicator of the contribution that Indian students are likely to make in the development of higher education systems around the world. At the graduate level, international students play a major role in the creation of new knowledge, and its commercial application. I was told a few years ago by a friend at MIT that the United States currently has between 400 and 500 Nobel Prize winners, and that half of these Nobel prizes were won on the backs of the labour of international students. Indeed if you drive past a lab at 3 o'clock in the morning at a US campus, you are unlikely to find Anglo-American students but students from India and China examining the test tubes

or doing those calculations on the computer that are fundamental in the development of new insights. Equally, however, the global contribution to Indian higher education cannot be under-emphasized, for the development assistance programme, especially during the 60s and 70s, assistance in the creation of some very significant institutions such as IITs, IIMs and more generally in the areas of skills development and research training have played a major role in shaping Indian higher education.

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It is clear then that there is nothing new about global collaborations, nor about the organic links that individual scholars are able to develop across national boundaries. At the policy level, however, the nature and scope, and purposes, of collaboration cannot be assumed. The basic question is not whether there should be collaboration, the question is rather of what kind, how and under what terms and with what consequences. As I have already noted, recent thinking about global collaborations in higher education has become dominated by market considerations. Indeed when the Times Higher Education ranks institutions of higher education, it gives a significant weighting to the number of international students and faculty. The number of mobile students enrolled at a university is taken as a major important indicator of collaboration, along with the financial contribution they make. At the institutional level, global collaboration is highlighted through such initiatives as franchising, twinning, articulation arrangements, and campus development, each viewed as commercial ventures designed to raise revenue for the home university.

I am not going to argue that these are bad things. The question rather is how we make sure that the collaborative relations they represent do not become exploitative, and that educational considerations are not subsumed under commercial imperatives. In recent years, attempts have been made to benchmark programme articulation as a way of ensuring that collaboration is efficient and effective. But the problem with such initiatives is that they risk losing sight of local knowledge. The same applies to efforts in quality control and accreditation regimes. In the development of common structures and frameworks, the word 'common' is always dangerous. Within the global market in higher education, there is evidence both of competition and cooperation. We often think of competition and cooperation as being two separate concepts, but in reality they are inextricably linked. Competition often occurs under conditions

of some kind of cooperation even if it involves recognition of the common currency under which competition becomes possible. In this relational way, competition requires cooperation while cooperation also involves some degree of competition.

Set against this analysis, the Indian system of higher education is justifiably suspicious of market discourses of global collaboration in higher education. This suspicion is justified, not least because collaborations occur in spaces defined by asymmetries of power often leading to exploitative practice. The challenge therefore is how to develop a policy understanding of global collaborations in higher education that does not discourage the mobility of people and ideas, and perhaps even the mobility of money, but instead imagines a sense of new possibilities and the ways in which global collaborations might be mutually beneficial and contribute to reform initiatives in India.

In my view, global collaborations are a good thing, and in any case it cannot be prevented, because of the organicity of people's mobility in the era of globalization. Given this fact, how might we harness the energy associated with mobility? How might India's contribution to global higher education in its organic forms and the global contribution of Indian higher education now be more appropriately acknowledged? How might higher education in India utilize what I call exogenous

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policy resources and synthesize them with endogenous policy traditions? How might we create a space in which collaborations take place defined by symmetries of power for mutual benefits? How might we think about sustainable and deep collaborative linkages beyond the piecemeal and symbolic efforts, in the interest of the system as a whole rather than a few select individuals and institutions? How might global collaborations develop the capacity to speak to and benefit the system more widely?

Indian higher education faces the challenges of how to become better embedded with the emerging global architecture without compromising its policy and its academic traditions; to think about higher education reforms in global rather than national terms; to realize that globalization is organic and perhaps even inevitable, but to recognize

also that the terms in which we interpret globalization are not universal, not incontestable, not something that is either given or natural.

In an era of globalization, these questions are fundamental to the development of Indian higher education. They need to be addressed at many different levels. If they are only discussed within the policy circles or the academic field, and amongst higher education experts, they would go nowhere. They demand robust and critical conversations that are multi-scalar and multi-dimensional. Institutions themselves have to start asking questions about the ways in which they might synthesize their policy traditions and exogenous policy advice. Policy and administrative units such as the Planning Commission and the UGC need to consider how they might facilitate this conversation, how they might steer institutions to think about global collaborations and their potential for reform in a whole range of ways. International and non-governmental organizations need to think about these issues as well because they have now become significant players within the global architecture of global higher education.

In these conversations, transnational corporations and employers need to be also involved. My interviews with human resource managers of trans-national corporations have indicated how incredibly interested corporations are in higher education, for their decisions about foreign direct investment often depend on it. They are often working assiduously, perhaps behind the scenes, in attempting to steer governments towards certain policy preferences. In other words, they are promoting global collaboration on their own terms. And then of course there is the global academic diaspora. The academic diaspora is becoming increasingly proactive in policy advice. What policy advice they give, that advice is often more significant than is realized.

So critical conceptual conversations about global collaborations are absolutely necessary in forging their role in the development of the Indian system of higher education. But the manner in which these conversations might take place requires us to think about histories of collaboration in higher education, consider their changing modalities, their changing justifications and their changing forms. We need to realize that collaborations are not simply given by policy regimes but

need to be negotiated and shaped through continuing conversations with those with whom we want to collaborate. This requires us to think relationally and critically, and be historically and politically reflexive, and unless we do this, new forms of colonialism may haunt us yet again.

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