Chapter 6

Summary and Findings of the Study

The present chapter attempts to summarise the findings of the research that was aimed at understanding the status and nature of higher education in the state, the extent of the shift towards privatisation and the role of the state or government in this regard. Building on the theoretical underpinnings of state-education relationship, neo-liberalism and the nature of higher education in the new-liberal era, the study tried to understand the developments in higher education sector in the state of Assam.

The researcher tried to delineate the relationship between state and education with the help of three primary approaches- Liberal- Pluralist, Functionalist, Marxist and Neo-Marxist. While the functionalists primarily concentrated on the role of education of socialisation and selection in the maintenance of social cohesion, the Marxists analysed the state education relationship in terms of perpetuation of the already entrenched class structure of a capitalist system. The Marxist framework was less about the implications of the state apparatus or policies for the education system and the effect of state education relationship for the society. The emphasis was rather on how the state and the education system is used by forces outside of it for the fulfilment of their pre determined objectives. Such analysis does not take into consideration the autonomous nature of the state or the education system. This has been considered as the reason for improper and incomplete understanding of the state-education relationship and the relationship between society and education as such. Taking a different position, the Weberian and liberal-pluralist framework situates the state in a multi-centred power matrix. The liberal pluralist understanding that state policies are determined not only by the ruling or the capitalist class and that education is a site of constant struggle and
conflict among various groups and sections a society is significant. It is to be realized that state and education are not monolithic agencies and are systems with their own priorities and needs. In this regard, Roger Dale’s analysis of the state as an entity with its own needs and priorities and limitations in fulfilling those holds significance. Also, the problems of the state system and those of the education system are not similar; it has crucial significance in understanding the perspective of state and educational policies in the underdeveloped nations. Unlike the western developed countries, the needs and priorities of the underdeveloped nations have to be understood in the context of their unique social, cultural, economic, political and international circumstances.

Given the broad perspective of the idea of neo-liberalism, an attempt has been made to put forward a brief outline of the idea by exploring the inputs of prominent thinkers. While neo-liberalism as ‘renewed liberalism’ upholds individual freedom thereby advocating retreating role of the state, the nature of neo-liberal state is not one of minimalism. A neo-liberal state rather has an all pervading presence facilitating the operation of the market. Neo-liberalism in a bid to ensure individual prosperity further reinforces the entrenched class structure and jeopardizes the larger goals of democracy, social justice and equity. Higher education in a neo liberal era witnesses a changed system of education along the market principles as prescribed by international financial institutions. Accordingly higher education shifts from being a public good to a private good, while this diversion in focus builds an asymmetrical society where education is turned into a commodity- the accessibility to which is determined by the consumer’s socio-economic standing.
Indian higher education since the very beginning faced a great demand for expansion of the system as it has come to be associated with the most needed socio economic mobility, especially for the marginalised sections of the society. Due support of the state in the expansion of the system was necessary and pertinent. However, the system was marred by various constraints ranging from expansion at the cost of quality to socio economic disparities. Higher education policy of the Indian government began with considering higher education as an instrument of all round development of the nation encompassing social economic and cultural aspects; and the state was assigned the responsibility of its expansion and innovation. However, the liberalisation policies of the Indian government adopted in the 1990s in the form of structural adjustment policies brought about a new era for social sectors like health and education with reduced role of the state and increasing influence of global imperatives. Accordingly, market has been assigned the centre stage as the panacea of all the ills plaguing the developing countries.

While higher education had received a residual status in various plans and policies, it has started facing resource cut in total expenditure since the late 80s. In the post-liberalised era, Indian state further withdrew from its responsibility towards expansion, funding and improving the quality of education. Policy implications of the government were influenced by conditions like efficient use of resources; self financed education and what Michael Apple called as 'doing more with less'. Policy decisions before 1992 had no mention of private education and these were largely aimed at ensuring quality education in an environment of democracy and social justice.

Privatisation of higher education in the state of Assam got crystallised with the enactment of the Assam Private Universities Act of 2007. Though there have been a number of private institutions of higher education operating in the state, they were
affiliated to public universities. But with the enactment of the act, private actors have formally been incorporated in the higher education sector. Privatisation of higher education has primarily been a fallout of the failure of the public institutions to meet the rising demand for higher education, ever increasing aspirants and the demand for professional education as well as an unwillingness on the part of the government to spend as much of resources as is required to develop. An education system which can cater to these demands is another major reason for encouraging private endeavour in the higher education system of the state. The state government encouraged and initiated privatisation because it is believed to reduce the burden of the government and provide professional education which can guarantee employment to the students. Since the enactment of the Assam Private Universities Act, 2007 six private universities have come into existence with primary thrust on professional education. A simultaneous development has been the introduction of the self financed courses in public institutions which was also aimed at enhancing professional education and financial self sufficiency of the public institutions.

Private higher educational institutions came up to cater to the unmet demand of professional education and to correspondingly reduce the financial burden of the government to introduce such courses. Introducing such courses come with twin advantage- these courses help the institutions attract the students for the attached job opportunities of these courses and it also provides freedom to these institutions to determine the cost of these courses as they wish (Mukhopadhyay, 1996). With the drive for professional education with due encouragement from the government, higher education has come to be synonymous with job and employment. Higher education certainly qualifies as an avenue for socio economic mobility. But is employment the end
of higher education? Or are there some larger goals of higher education missed in the drive for professionalism? However what needs to be understood is if employability is taken as the cure to all the ills of higher education, is the avenue equally available to everyone! If placements and jobs be the be all and end all of higher education, where will we land up in terms of achieving the larger goals of higher education! As Avijit Pathak (2013) argues, that with the expansion and predominance of the market rationale, there is a simultaneous jeopardisation of the pursuit of fundamental knowledge seeking. While professional education fulfils the goals of the corporate world, and the aspiring middle class, the profundity of higher learning is devalued in the process (Pathak, 2013, p.155).

The logic of tapping other sources of funding for higher education in the form of privatisation also creates a system of profit making. The twin aspect of complete privatisation and high fee is not supported by a corresponding liberal scholarship provision which can benefit as many students as possible. The scholarship programs of the private institutions are benefitting a very small number of students and the scholarship amount is not sufficient to finance the education received in private institutions.

Private institutions have been able to generate the much needed employment with students getting jobs through both campus placements and outside placements. However, most of the students are not satisfied with the jobs that they are engaged in. Also there is excess availability of professional graduates who are unemployed due to non availability of satisfactory jobs. There is a possibility of waste of financial and human resources due to lack of proper planning and availability of excess amount of
professional graduates. The data revealed that while on the one hand private institutions have been able to generate employment for the students, the students are mostly dissatisfied with the jobs that they are employed in, and some did not join. A number of students also opt for higher education for better career opportunities.

Those who support privatisation of education and do not see any problem with high fee of private education consider educational loan as a viable means of support to the needy students and enhance accessibility to higher education. However, the concept of educational loan views higher education as an individualised good rather than a social merit good and a public good. Seen within the realm of individualised good, the onus of higher education is moved from the society to the families and the individuals pursuing it. Educational loan also works as a compulsion upon the students to take up unsatisfactory jobs. Educational loans work less in favour of the students and more in favour of the institutions.

The growing demand for higher education infers an expanded and democratic system of higher education so as to make quality education accessible to aspirants of all sections of the society. While expansion has been achieved by privatisation, democratisation of the system is still not in place. As the cost of private education is borne by the students, it ends up levying high fee on the students. Given the dominant nature of putting the financial burden on the students, private education has a limited expansion reaching out to a limited beneficiaries- urban middle and upper middle class sections of the society who can afford to bear the ‘cost’ of such education. The system will thus reinforce the already entrenched structures of dominant socio economic status by building an elite and segregated educational system, which will generate inequality of opportunities and
restrain social mobility. Equity in higher education can be achieved by its expansion with more and more institutions coming to the fore so as to benefit as many aspirants as the society may produce. While expansion has been achieved, the objective of equity has not been fulfilled. Accessibility of the weaker sections of the society to the education system stands highly compromised in the face of profitability of private education and the corresponding high cost of such education. These sections remain outside the benefits accrued from higher education. This leads to a corresponding deprivation of the upward mobility of the weaker sections in social hierarchy and “human freedom”. What operates therefore is a vicious circle of- “vulnerable positionality, deprived opportunities and barred mobility to rise up in the ladder of social hierarchy”. Majority of the beneficiaries of the private institutions are those belonging to financially well to do families, including those belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward communities, which bears a testimony to the fact that the students of underprivileged classes do find equal accessibility to these institutions. The capacity to pay over the capacity of merit enforces the prohibitive condition whereby it is disbelieving that a private institution will absorb a student of a lower class uneducated family of a backward region as easily as an urban middle class student.

Professional education needs huge funding and given financial constraints, government cannot solely provide the funding. Properly designed cost sharing of some kind is not totally objectionable. But the ways that have been adopted are complete privatisation and exorbitant fee structure; the twin aspects and in the absence of a thoughtful scholarship agenda would jeopardize the process of establishing an egalitarian education system of ensuring the accessibility of lower classes of the society. The role of the
government is in a critical juncture now. While the government should ensure equal educational opportunities for everyone, burgeoning demand of professional employment oriented education and financial constraints on the part of the government prevent it from controlling and regulating the private institutions.

Not regulating or controlling the private institutions would be tantamount to authorising those who are there to make profit out of education. There has been a reiteration on the part of the government that it should not impose much control or restriction on the private institutions, all in the name of conferring autonomy. But that would mean attrition of all social control or regulation over the private education system. The private universities act states that the sponsoring body should make an endowment of Rs. 10 crores, but does not specify the social responsibilities of these bodies. The act on the other hand proposes to accord total discretion to the private bodies to decide the amount of fee to be collected from the students and also determine differential fee structure for outside students. Investing in human resource is another thing, and facilitating the ground for private investment to make profit in the process itself is altogether a different concern.

In the privatisation initiatives of the government, the poor, vulnerable and the deprived ones find no place. Also beyond the professional compulsions, there is no reference to larger social needs and goals. While utmost and impressive thrust has been put on relevance, skills and quality, access to education does not receive any primacy. This creates anxiety about the future of the young generation hailing from the weaker and poorer section- their prospects of individual growth as well as their potential creative and productive contribution to the development process. In the context of a highly
stratified societal structure and tremendously narrow configuration of opportunities, the prospect of social harmony, individual mobility is in peril in the privatised setting of higher education.

There is also the dimension of claims of the community over the individual’s resources, talents and creativity. A community that absolves itself from the responsibility of investing in the human resources eschews its moral claims on the individuals. The creative, productive individuals of the society will thus end up responding to market rather than societal needs. Education should be infused with the larger goals of building creative minds which are bound to be relevant and useful for the society. Contribution of these well developed fine minds in different areas of life ultimately leads to an enriched quality of life. Also, societal requirements are more constant than the market demands. The market is also embedded with huge imbalances in the demand for human resources leading to instability and frustration.

Privatisation and professionalization of education has a tendency to turn individuals into atomic beings, whose actions are motivated by pure individual interests devoid of collective concerns. Increasing interest for professional ‘useful’ education might be tantamount to colonisation of the sphere of education, which in turn would obstruct the process of creation of ‘organic intellectuals’. It is dangerous to reduce the spaces of learning to mere spheres of utility at the cost of denying the importance of academia in addressing the larger issues of immediacy in the local as well global context (Pathak, 2013).
While education is increasingly being privatised, government endeavour in the sphere of higher education has not been totally on the decline. While there has been an increase in the state funding of higher education, the increase has mostly been in non-plan expenditure. Plan expenditure of higher education has not been very encouraging. The influence of the government has not completely waned down, and the influence of political aims finds visible presence in educational goals and initiatives of the government. There has been noticed a drive on the part of the government to establish educational institutions guided by political and ideological orientations. Though it is not a new phenomenon in so far as it has been noticed both at the level of national government and the preceding party in power in the state, such moves amount to political and ideological impingement in the neutral sphere of education. Along with liberalisation and privatisation, higher education can also possibly become a tool of ‘ideological legitimisation’ by the political authority.

Suggestions:

Based on the current research work and the findings of the study, the researcher intends to make the following humble suggestions-

- Government Endeavours to Ensure Accessibility and Equity in Higher Education

Privatisation of education in the neo-liberal era has turned education into a private good dependent on the individual well being more than a public good that everyone is supposed to get an access to. However privatisation is not the solution for a country or for a state with low per capita income, where majority of the population is still dependent on public education, more so for higher
education. Expansion of public education therefore remains a necessity. Private institutions of higher education are primarily supposed to augment professional education to enhance employability and to reduce the burden of the government. But, it needs to be realized that if employability should be the goal of higher education, why not this opportunity be equally available to everyone, which surely cannot be achieved by private institutions given the exorbitant cost of private education. The government cannot totally absolve itself from the responsibility of ensuring quality higher education to all the aspirants at affordable prices.

- **Devise Alternative Sources of Funding**

It needs to be questioned as to how much of the cost of education can be or is to be borne by the students. Tilak (1995) argued that full cost recovery from the students is practised nowhere in the world. In western countries like US, student fee of major private universities constitute a tiny part of total costs of education (Tilak, 2014). As per the Assam Private Universities Act, students fee constitute the major part of the general fund out of which the recurring expenditure of the private institutions are to be met. It is important that alternative sources of funding are explored so as to reduce the burden of cost of education on the students.

- **Government Control and Regulation over the Private Higher Educational Institutions**

It is of pertinent importance that the government retains some control over the private institutions of higher education. Because the private institutions have contributed towards expansion of professional education, employment
generation and reduced financial burden on the government, the government cannot shy away from its responsibility of ensuring accountability from the private institutions, especially in matters like fee structure which has direct bearing on the causes of equity and social justice. Private sector cannot be allowed to consider education as a profit making business. Institutions should raise funds from other sources to meet the cost of education and the fee of the students should only form a small part of it.

- **Initiation of Students Assistance Programmes**
  It is to be realized that the high cost of private professional education is not supported by a corresponding system of student scholarships or loans which is sufficient to support the students. Provisions should be made for liberal scholarship schemes or other facilities which can truly benefit the students and work in their favour than the private educational institutions.

- **Joint Initiative of the Government and the Private Investors**
  Given the resource crunch of the government and its inability to provide quality education to the aspirants of higher education, it is plausible that the higher education sector can be managed by public-private partnership. Such partnership will ensure private investment in sharing the cost of education with government; and government’s stake will help achieve the goal of equity in education.

**Scope of Further Research**

The present study is a preliminary one and is limited in scope and limited by time. The study could not take into account various other crucial complex issues relevant for an in-depth understanding of the topic under research. To corroborate the findings and
understanding of the present study and for a better perspective the present status of higher education in the state of Assam, the other complex areas relating to the topic need to be studied and analysed.

Higher education under a changed regime stands at a much complicated juncture beyond the facet of privatisation. Increasing significance and intervention of institutions like RUSA and the establishment of new bodies like Higher Education Commission of India will bear noteworthy implications for the higher education sector. Another serious issue of concern in the higher education scenario of Assam is the issue of provincialisation of educational institutions. The issues of non-provincialisation of educational institutions, non-fulfillment of vacant posts in provincialised colleges need to be examined for a detailed understanding of the status of higher education in Assam and the role of the government in this regard. Careful, in-depth perusal of these issues can also help in devising better ways to deal with the challenges of the higher education sector and to realise the goals of higher education.

**Conclusion**

Higher education has moved from being a public, regulated sector to a private, deregulated sector. Though shift towards privatisation and deregulation of higher education is not yet complete; the state is gradually moving towards privatisation. Government’s patronage of higher education has not been totally on the decline; however its role is not in conformity to a public higher education system in the context of Indian liberal constitutionalism. The role of the state governments carries immense significance in so far as education is essentially a state responsibility, including higher education. While the government rationalises privatisation of education, it must be
realised that the government cannot totally absolve itself from the responsibility of providing higher education, given that we still are a welfare country as enunciated in the constitution. Even if to play a complementary role, private institutions should be promoted within the framework of existing state control. It needs an active state intervention and commitment of state rather than a free market based approach to the expansion of higher education.

All the individuals, vulnerable groups and deprived sections of the society are entitled to education as a democratic right. It is an equaliser of opportunities and facilitator of social mobility. Also, education integrates the individual to the collective. It provides a ground for the society to prepare and mould its younger generation towards creating a just, democratic, harmonious and humane society. This vantage point should provide the rationale ground to treat higher education as a human right of all, more so of the weak and the vulnerable.