

# **The National Education Policy, 2020**

## **A mixed bag of glitzy rhetoric and uncertain future**

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The National Education Policy 2020 is at best a cleverly crafted ‘masterpiece’. The 65-page document has generated enormous discourses, both appreciations and displeasures, as this policy brief, waiting to receive the details, has become a source of division among many stakeholders. A cursory look at the policy, especially the 22 fundamental principles (p 4-6) gives the reader a sense of ‘feel good.’ The policy begins with a right triad, “Education is fundamental for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development.”

Some of the positive aspects of the policy include: India has a new National Education Policy after 34 years, a clear vision that curriculum and pedagogy must develop amongst students a deep sense of respect towards fundamental duties and constitutional values (p. 7), inclusion of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) of children in the 0–6 age group within the education system (p. 8), medium of instruction until at least Class 5, but preferably till Class 8 and beyond, in the mother tongue/local language, wherever possible, and to be followed by both public and private schools (p. 14), constitution of a gender inclusion fund (p.27), standardising Indian Sign Language (ISL) across the country (p. 16), multiple entry and exit points in undergraduate degree (p. 38), multidisciplinary approach combining liberal arts and science along with more vocational subjects (p.

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37) and soft skills and establishing “Special Education Zones” (p. 27) in disadvantaged areas and in “aspirational districts” (p. 25).

However, there are many contentious issues. These are: high handed centralisation by dismantling autonomous educational bodies and bypassing adherence to principles of Concurrent List, red carpet welcome to private investment and foreign universities, which would add huge financial burden on the students, establishment of large, multi-discipline universities and colleges, replacing decentralised universities and affiliating systems, surreptitiously pushing Sanskrit as a source of knowledge under the garb of promoting ancient culture and knowledge system, promoting teaching by volunteers neglecting the role of the teachers, lack of appreciation of diversity and pluralism and setting up unequal level playing ground without adequately addressing existing unequal opportunities and inviting the rural poor to be on par with aspirational urban middle class. While updated educational policy is essential, NEP neither provides reasons for giving up some established decentralised ways of functioning nor makes it clear what it intends to do by ‘value’ additions as it claims. On both counts, it hides much more than what it reveals.

As much has been written about new pedagogical and curricular structure and regulatory paradigms, the scope of this article is limited to examining a few critical dimensions of this policy, especially from the perspectives of the marginalized sections of our society.

### ***Content must be read in a Context***

When the entire world is gripped with Covid-19 pandemic and its devastating aftermath on economy, and the future being marooned in the clouds of uncertainties about basic necessities of life for millions of poor in the country, one wonders why such a policy on education was announced in a hurried manner. Even if the government in its wisdom considered Covid-19 as a temporary phenomenon and the current crisis in economy need not be linked to educational policy development of the country, it ought to have been sensitive to various other analyses of the Covid-19 scenario, especially its impact on educational scenario of the country. A report titled, “Lives Upended: How Covid-19 threatens the future of

600 million South Asian Children” was released by UNICEF on 23 June 2020. The report clearly warned the global communities that decades of progress on children’s health, education and other priorities are at the risk of being wiped out<sup>1</sup>. It is surprising to note that without any consideration of the current crisis, the NEP 2020, was approved by the Union Cabinet of India on 29 July 2020, making no mention of the impending challenges whatsoever, especially for the education of children.

As per the policy, the next two years will see far-reaching changes in both higher education and high school education - Academic credit transfers for select institutions, multiple exit and entry points into higher education; introducing a four-year degree programme by 2021 for Central universities and for others by 2022 and initiating common entrance tests by February-March 2021, and administered, possibly, by May 2021<sup>2</sup>. When most of the educational institutions are under heavy strain due to Covid-19, it is rather difficult to understand the intent that propels highspeed structural changes. On the other, the policy claims that India will have an education system by 2040 that is second to none, with equitable access to the highest-quality education for all learners regardless of social or economic background (p.3). It looks wired. If there are justifiable reasons for the same, the citizens must have the right to know the details.

Moreover, the timing of introduction of NEP 2020 cannot be viewed in isolation. The country has witnessed unprecedented decline in the secular and democratic ethos of the country in the last few years. One cannot restrict this discourse only to the abrogation of Article 370, Citizenship Amendment Act, attack on freedom of speech, targeting of human rights defenders, Supreme Court judgement on Babri Masjid and so on. The government also clandestinely pushed Draft Environment Impact Assessment 2020, Criminal Law Amendment Act and announced 1000 crore funding from the Central government, for a yet to be a functional institution like the Jio Institute, in the Institute Of Excellence (IOE) list<sup>3</sup> during the pandemic period.

As education falls under the Concurrent List, the states ought to have been duly consulted. Also, a healthy discussion in Parliament would have been the right step as this policy is envisaged to shape the future of India,

especially the young. Many perceive that NEP 2020 was pushed through, when the democratic ethos of the country was in its low ebb. However, RSS affiliates welcomed this policy, stating that over 60 per cent of their 'suggestions' have been met with<sup>4</sup>.

### **Developing 'duty-conscious' Global Citizens**

The policy aims at developing global citizens with deep-rooted pride in being Indian. "The curriculum and pedagogy of our institutions must develop among the students a deep sense of respect towards the Fundamental Duties and Constitutional values, bonding with one's country, and a conscious awareness of one's roles and responsibilities in a changing world" (p. 6). While the policy refers to human rights, it does not emphasise the importance of fundamental right of the citizens to education. Critics also comment that absence of right to education and in contrast, the emphasis on duties could be an attempt to promote the concept of 'nishkama karma'<sup>5</sup>, a Brahminical thought premised on caste hierarchical system.

More than half a century after Independence of India, the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002 inserted Article 21-A in the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right. The citizens expected that the new policy framework will take forward universalisation of education by strengthening public education system and expanding its scope following Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. By conspicuous silence on this matter, NEP leaves 'education as right' in high and dry, without openly negating it.

### **Affordability and Equal opportunity must precede Quality**

Recognizing prevailing unequal opportunity in education, Kothari Commission in its report in 1964-66 recommended the establishment of a Common School System for all children irrespective of their class, caste, religious or linguistic background. The commission stated that in order to fulfill this purpose, neighborhood schools should be established in all localities, which could potentially promote social harmony and equality of

education. Moreover, such system will compel the rich and the powerful class to take interest in the system of public education. This proposal was incorporated in the first National Policy on Education in 1968 and again in the second policy in 1986 as well as its modified version of 1992. Without effecting this policy change, successive governments ended up in providing various poor sections of society with cheaper and parallel streams of education under all sorts of euphemisms.<sup>6</sup> NEP 2020 fails to address the growing school differentiation and only proposes establishment of “Special Education Zones” in disadvantaged areas, against its own tall claims to “bridge gaps in access, participation and learning outcomes.” The constitutionally legitimized terms of Scheduled Castes (S.C.), Scheduled Tribes (S.T.), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and religious and linguistic minorities are substituted by “socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs)” or “underrepresented groups,” thereby trivializing the historic oppression and exploitation of the Bahujans over centuries. Reservation has no space in the NEP, in violation of Article 16 and as denial of all gains made through the struggles for social justice since Independence<sup>7</sup>.

### **Value education**

In holistic formation of the young, it has been recognised that value education plays a vital role. Taking due note of multiple religious traditions including subaltern traditions and adhering to the secular character of the Constitution the articulation of value-formation has been, imbibing values propagated by all religions but clearly maintaining equidistance from them. The emphasis has also been on the Constitutional values of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity around citizenship. A close look at NEP 2020 will reveal the promotion of contentious value addition.

Traditional Indian values and all basic human and Constitutional values (such as *seva*, *ahimsa*, *swachchbata*, *satya*, *nishkam karma*, *shanti*, sacrifice, tolerance, diversity, pluralism, righteous conduct, gender sensitivity, respect for elders, respect for all people and their inherent capabilities regardless of background, respect for environment, helpfulness, courtesy, patience, forgiveness, empathy, compassion, patriotism, democratic outlook, integrity, responsibility, justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity) will be developed in all students (p.17).

The new policy not only subtly introduces Brahminic values but also equates them with ethos of 'Hindus', which many Hindus do not agree with, and indirectly supports teaching of one religion, only. There is a genuine fear among many that this scenario will lead to deviation from the foundational principles of the Constitution, especially when it is read with 'Sanskrit as knowledge system'.

### **Three language formula**

Three language formula is not new. Kothari Commission proposed a different formula<sup>8</sup>. The current policy states, "Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language (p.14)." While the policy does not explicitly state Sanskrit as one of the three languages, it does not require in-depth analysis to understand what is being pushed through. Sanskrit is not only seen as a language, but the current policy overemphasises it as one of the 'sources of knowledge and knowledge system'. "Sanskrit will thus be offered at all levels of school and higher education as an important, enriching option for students, including as an option in the three-language formula (p.15). Keeping Urdu out of its purview speaks volumes. In other words, eventually the policy aims at giving improved status to Sanskrit learners. It is also to be noted that while it accords adequate attention to the Brahmanical traditions and sources of knowledge, the non-Brahmanical contribution to knowledge and pedagogy of debate and questioning by Buddha and Mahavira and their challenging the social stratification and hierarchical social order stand ignored. This is a clear indication of an attempt to reinforce *varnashrama dharma*.

NEP document of 2020 also clearly seeks to balance the centre-state orbit and promote 'home schooling' and 'peer tutoring'. But in the context of India, where the dropout rate is soaring, concretizing the vision of 'taking to school' may become more distant and physical schooling will hold no specificity in terms of education.

## **Vocational education**

Undoubtedly, vocational education is important. Learning employable skills and expanding employment opportunities are critical, especially when there is a huge job shrink. However, reducing knowledge to mere skills under the pretext of vocational education from “ECCE to higher education,” despite the repeated claims of “no hard separations between arts and sciences, between curricular and extra-curricular activities, between vocational and academic streams” (p. 6) raises whether vocational education is for the periphery and lower castes and cognitive learning is for the core and high castes.

## **Privatization of education**

A very crucial aspect of the policy on education document of 2020 is the introduction of extended private-public partnership, in the field. NEP seeks to promote the partnership between state, corporate, volunteers and philanthropic institutions into education. In the name of improving quality, private capital and foreign universities are welcomed with open arms paving way for high cost commercialization of education.

While this step may be a lauded one in terms of diversifying the partnership and further the participation of several other actors in society, it can also lead to decreased accountability and responsibility of the state to the people, in terms of being the ‘people’s government’. Growing privatisation of education along with no assurance of quality is placing a huge burden on citizens. In an era, where private investors consider ‘education’ as safe investment-for-profit arena, this would further commercialisation and commodification of education leading to ‘discriminate distance’ between different socio-economic categories of students. Consequently, the rural poor will be the worst affected, with an increase in affordability cost. Linking *ashramas* to tribal-dominated areas seems to be an attempt to denigrate the indigenous communities, which have rich vernacular architectural traditions and skills, and a range of artisan, herbal healthcare and craftsmanship to offer in strengthening Indian indigenous knowledge system. The policy is pretending to be unaware of subaltern and indigenous knowledge systems.

Basically, NEP 2020 ignores the existing crisis in education among the marginalised majority in rural India<sup>9</sup>. It turns a blind eye and fails to recognise distress situation of the rural poor in accessing affordable quality education and ways to ameliorate this scenario. Neither equity nor inclusion in higher education is clearly seen in this policy for the rural poor. Needless to say, that increase in Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education including vocational education from 26.3 per cent (2018) to 50 per cent by 2035 (p.36), as stated in the policy, will remain a mirage for the rural India.

## **Conclusion**

Prof. Jha points out that at best, the NEP 2020 is a collection of some clearly stated measures, several feel-good intents, and a few broad-brush strokes of ideas underlying potential policies, along with selective sprinkling of a few logistical details.<sup>10</sup> As one continues to read NEP 2020 till the end, one is left with anxiety, confusion, helplessness and fear of the future, especially if one's thought pattern is rooted in the philosophy and ideals of the Constitution of India.

As it is a policy document, one has to wait and see how this would get translated into programmatic actions. The 'devil lies in the details' is very apt for this short and crispy policy with blissful rhetoric. All indications are that it is highly unlikely that the expressed vision - achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development will prevail over selective amnesia and hidden agenda of the present government, as warned by acclaimed educationists, who envision education as a tool for social change.

## **Endnotes**

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- 1 <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/lives-upended> (visited on 10 September 2020).
- 2 Kumkum Roy, NEP 2020 Implementation and Timeline Worries, 28 August 2020 (see <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/timeline-worries/article32305885.ece>, visited on 12 September 2020).
- 3 Sandeep K Shukla, Money Cannot Buy Excellence in Education But Jio's 'Eminence' Tag is Worth Crores (See <https://thewire.in/education/reliance-jio-institute-of-eminence-monetised>, visited on 15 September 2020)
- 4 Vasudha Venugopal, The Economic Times, 30 July 2020 (See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/rss-affiliates->



- welcome-the-nep-say-over-60-of-their-suggestions-met/articleshow/77249418.cms?from=mdr, visited on 12 September 2020).
- 5 Nishkama Karma is translated as 'a duty without desire', as 'an action done with no regards to its fruits', as 'disinterested action', and 'selfless action'. Without explicitly bringing in Bhagavat Gita, a Hindu religious text, the policy covertly introduces 'Caste hierarchy'.
  - 6 [http://www.doccentre.net/docsweb/Education/common\\_school\\_system.html](http://www.doccentre.net/docsweb/Education/common_school_system.html) (visited on 15 September 2020).
  - 7 Anil Sadagopal, Decoding the agenda of the new National Education Policy, *Frontline* 28 August 2020 (See <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/decoding-the-agenda/article32306146.ece>, (visited on 17 September 2020).
  - 8 <http://www.edugyan.in/2017/02/education-commission-or-kothari.html> (visited on 19 September 2020)
  - 9 A R Vasavi, India express, 15 September 2020 (visited on 17 September 2020).
  - 10 Praveen Jha and Pooja Parvati, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 55, Issue No. 34, 22 Aug, 2020.