

New Education Policy 2020 – Consolidating changes for a reconstruction to alter the future

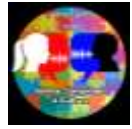
Shikha Mukherjee

INTRODUCTION:

The New Education Policy of 2020 approved by the Government of India on July 29 collects and consolidates the incremental shifts and changes that were introduced by several states in school curriculum revisions through deletions and additions in text books, in the subjects offered to students and in the culture in schools. The process picked up speed after 2014, with the decisive political shift from a policy culture that had been established by the Congress after 1947 to a new policy culture that reflected a different interpretation of historical events on the one hand and the paradigm shift in altering the epistemic on what shall be included as knowledge, on the other.

The incremental changes in the content of education, particularly school education, that various state governments ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party had introduced before 2014, were challenges to the idea of what is knowledge in modern India. Quite apart from the discourse of liberal, enlightened education and modernity and the profound influence of the 1835 Minutes on Public Instruction authored by Thomas Babington Macaulay, on the content of education in India, which prioritized the teaching of English on the one hand and the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories," and argued that funds for public instruction would be entirely wasted if spent on "the revival and promotion of literature, and the encouragement of the learned natives of India," (1), India's Constitution imposed an obligation on citizens, but by implication on the ruling elite that it had a "Fundamental" duty, Article 51 A (h) "to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform;" and in Article 51 a (j)" to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavour and achievement." (2)

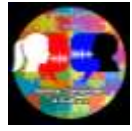
The Constitution is markedly in alignment with Macaulay's conclusions that if money for public instruction were to be invested "for giving artificial encouragement to absurd history, absurd metaphysics, absurd physics, absurd theology-- for raising up a



breed of scholars who find their scholarship an incumbrance and blemish, who live on the public while they are receiving their education, and whose education is so utterly useless to them that, when they have received it, they must either starve or live on the public all the rest of their lives.” And that money spent for “the revival and promotion of literature, and the encouragement of the learned natives of India,” was not a priority. Education policy after 1947 did not spurn the revival and promotion of Arabic and Sanskrit; it indeed incorporated the teaching of Sanskrit and Urdu and Arabic as part of the school curriculum. But Education Policy after 1947 was focused on advancing scientific and technical education on the one hand and promoting the study of literature, including regional literature and the social sciences on the other.

The encouragement to explore and research the past and nurture the present were integral to the policies on education pre 2014 but not on encouraging a reconstruction that was closer to a glorification of invented claims to discovery of the genre of the Elephant headed deity, Ganesha, being an example of ancient India’s knowledge and mastery of plastic surgery or that the Indian Sage Kanad had conducted nuclear tests one lakh years ago. (3) The New Education Policy 2020 certainly does not promote the notion that ancient India had mastered splitting the atom or plastic surgery, but it does unequivocally emphasise that “The rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought has been a guiding light for this Policy.” (4) and that “These rich legacies to world heritage must not only be nurtured and preserved for posterity but also researched, enhanced, and put to new uses through our education system.”

The emphasis is a radical change from education policies of the past. The need to understand the knowledge “preserved for posterity” is a very usual pursuit of academic enquiry globally; what is different is that the aim of the new policy is exactly the same as the policy framers interpretation of ancient Indian knowledge traditions where the outcome was “not just the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for life in this world, or life beyond schooling, but for the complete realization and liberation of the self. World-class institutions of ancient India such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Vallabhi, set the highest standards of multidisciplinary teaching and research.”



And that the policy shall aim to fulfil “The pursuit of knowledge (Jnan), wisdom (Pragyaa), and truth (Satya)” which “was always considered in Indian thought and philosophy as the highest human goal.” The idea of truth and knowledge, received wisdom and belief and the idea of “scientific temper” that is underpinned by the idea of rationality could end up being in opposition and triggering confrontations within academia, between academia and sections of society, between sections of cultural apparatus with entirely different interpretations setting in motion not just a train of dissension but an entire railway system of opposition, which would convert education into a new war front in an increasingly divided polity. There could be concern on the purpose and role of the new Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI) laying significant emphasis on Sanskrit and other Indian languages on the one hand and the proposal to “mainstream” Sanskrit “with strong offerings in school - including as one of the language options in the three-language formula - as well as in higher education” and converting Sanskrit Universities into “large multidisciplinary institutions of higher learning.” (5)

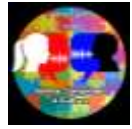
STRUCTURAL CHANGES

Two significant sets of structural changes have been incorporated into NEP 2020. Both sets of changes have far reaching consequences.

The first set is that University Grants Commission and All India Council for Technical Education will be dismantled and replaced by Higher Education Commission of India and the Higher Education Financing Agency.

The second set is the structural changes in school and higher education. The extant 10+2 structure in school education will be modified with a new pedagogical and curricular restructuring of 5+3+3+4 covering ages 3-18. Currently, children in the age group of 3-6 are not covered in the 10+2 structure as Class 1 begins at age 6. In the new 5+3+3+4 structure, a strong base of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from age 3 is also included.

And, the multiple entry and exit options for undergraduate courses, that will be four years in total instead of three, the setting up of an Academic Bank of Credits, reducing



the master's programme to a one-year course, shutting down the M. Phil programme and direct enrolment into Ph.D.

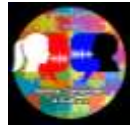
HECI and HEFA

The restructuring of the apex, autonomous bodies that govern higher education in India that oversaw what shall be taught, to how it will be taught and the institutions that will do so, namely the University Grants Commission, All India Council for Technical Education by the setting up of the seriously contentious Higher Education Commission of India and the Higher Education Financing Agency, which is a company constituted by the Government of India and Canara Bank, is so far reaching that it is concerning. The Higher Education Financing Agency is already operational and the proposal for HECI had been so strongly opposed that the change was shelved, till it resurfaced in NEP as a fait accompli.

As part of the restructuring, the Government of India will convert 45,000 colleges into autonomous institutions that effectively removes them from oversight and control by delinking the affiliation to universities on the one hand and financial independence from what is the soon to be replaced UGC.

The barrage of objections to HECI when it was mooted in 2018 by university Vice Chancellors and experts is a measure of how concerning the proposed changes are and the increasing control that the Ministry of Higher Education plans on exerting on colleges and universities, research and teaching. The control has two parts; for the first part, there is a deliberate fudging of how quality will be set and monitored by the soon to be set up HECI, which is not as autonomous as the UGC; in the second part, the centralisation of control with the Ministry of Higher Education will mean that institutions of higher learning will not flourish as free and open spaces for exploring and investigating and critically examining ideas and events. Instead, the centralisation of control will give whichever is the ruling power in New Delhi unprecedented power to pressure higher education institutions into being meek and compliant, submissive to a higher order rather than independent spaces for learning and knowledge.

The centralisation of control and delinking finance through HEFA encroaches on the role of state governments by hollowing out, if not entirely, then to a great extent, the



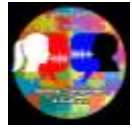
responsibility for supporting and establishing institutions of higher learning. As an area of shared responsibility by virtue of its listing as a Concurrent subject in the Constitution, higher education cannot be controlled through a new set of devices that bypass the state governments and concentrate power over education in New Delhi.

In line with this monolithic system that the policy is proposing is the expansion of a National Testing Agency that will be the one route to admissions for students from across the states and union territories. A single nationwide test would challenge the state-based entrance examinations and the autonomy of states in controlling the school curriculum.

The restructuring of HECI and setting up of HEFA, the autonomy to 45,000 colleges, NTA are means of centralising control and ensuring that the commands of the ruling establishment in the Centre become the standard operating procedures for state universities and affiliated colleges. What this change points to is a one India-one education system model that threatens and endangers the idea of federalism, diversity, freedom and choice.

The heroing of Lok Vidya, by including practitioners of Lok Vidya as part of academic faculties is both admirable and long advocated by experts who are aware that large pools of indigenous knowledge nurtured through practice have been undervalued on the one hand and treated as esoteric on the other. But, NEP could, and this is a serious concern, use the recognition it gives to Lok Vidya as a means of setting up an approved list of what is Lok Vidya and an approved list of practitioners, who would then serve other interests as well as fulfilling their academic obligations as adjunct faculty.

By increasing the centralisation of control exerted on education through NEP and mixing it with a potentially unlimited appetite to do so in detail, the policy could be an unwieldy mechanism for achieving the targets that it hopes to meet by the middle of the century. The policy declares “The gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is required must be bridged through undertaking major reforms that bring the highest quality, equity, and integrity into the system, from early childhood care and education through higher education.”

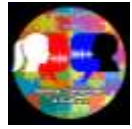


The deadline the policy sets for achieving the outcomes is short; “The aim must be for India to have an education system by 2040 that is second to none, with equitable access to the highest-quality education for all learners regardless of social or economic background.” In order to get there, the declaration it makes is that “This National Education Policy 2020 is the first education policy of the 21st century and aims to address the many growing developmental imperatives of our country. This Policy proposes the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, including its regulation and governance, to create a new system that is aligned with the aspirational goals of 21st century education, including SDG4, while building upon India’s traditions and value systems.”

The “revamping” and “revision” of the education system, including the Curriculum, Research and Development that the policy aims to achieve begins with early childhood education, an area that had been left out of previous education policies. As a change, this is indeed a positive one, as the so-called teaching in an overwhelmingly large number of anganwadis was inadequate, given the obvious constraints of infrastructure and human resources.

The new policy changes the age at which a student enters the schooling system; instead of age six years, the infant at age three years is being inducted into the formal education pipeline. The new pedagogical and curricular restructuring of 5+3+3+4 covering ages 3-18 is meant to create a strong base of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) from age three years.

The need to strengthen the base, ECCE, is urgent and has been so for years. The Annual Status Of Education Report has for years been a depressing statement of underachievement. The 2019 report, yet again, reveals that only a little more than a quarter, that is, 27.2 per cent of students in Class Three were able to read the prescribed text, only 28.1 per cent in the same class could do basic arithmetic like subtraction. The base is undoubtedly weak making it immeasurably difficult for first generation learners, students with various reasons for being weaker than the bright young thing sitting in a well-furnished house with a laptop opened on a table advertised by companies selling expensive learning apps or peddling “Notes” to crack

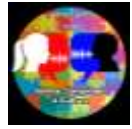


various examinations, to compete against the fewer but better privileged students in the same age cohort.

The fault lies not with the student, or her family, or her teachers. It is the fault of a system of public education that has focused on enrolment as a measure of success in estimating outcomes of the universalisation of the Right to Education. It is the fault of governments, at the Centre and in the states that have been miserly in creating high quality infrastructure, access to educational institutions and high-quality human resources for students to establish a just, equitable and nurturing environment to develop the potential that is otherwise wasted.

One set of barriers is created by the inadequacy in funding a high quality, accessible public education system. Another set of barriers is created by the curriculum that is easier for students from socially, culturally and economically privileged families. Yet another set of barriers is created by the fact that students in publicly funded or privately owned educational establishments cannot do well without the additional and very expensive support offered by lakhs of private teachers at every level of education, from preschool to post graduate. The New Education Policy has nothing to say about the parallel system of learning that has become lucrative business for entrepreneurs with the savvy to entice students and parents to buy the services, on line or off line that have mushroomed in the past several decades, including a city that has grown from obscurity to global fame, like Kota in Rajasthan. The policy does not indicate how this parallel system, that disadvantages the less privileged can be curbed to the point of being unnecessary.

One survey indicates “Of the total expenses incurred on the education of every student over half of the amount is spent on tuition and exam fees – and that excludes course material, books and uniform.” (6). A 2016 report by the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research on Household Expenditure on Higher Education in India found “The average share of expenditure on higher education out of total household expenditure is 15.3 per cent and 18.4 per cent for rural and urban households who participate in higher education.” (7) It also found that for students from the” lower quintiles of the distribution of consumption expenditure are more likely to get fee subsidies or scholarships, indicating that such schemes reach their intended



beneficiaries.” The data can be a route to critically assessing NEP’s strategy and it is possible to argue that NEP should have focused more on providing grant scholarships than subsidies and that HEFA’s achievement in approving Rs 5130 crore as loans for 10 higher education institutions and 44 new Kendriya Vidyalayas. The IGIDR report points out that there appears to be a reliance “on non-institutional source of finance and in particular money lender” and indicates the need to investigate the relationship between credit constraints and employability in pursuing higher education.

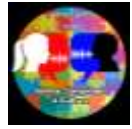
The obvious conclusion is that making structural changes to the existing system is not enough to achieve NEP’s objective of “Providing universal access to quality education is the key to India’s continued ascent, and leadership on the global stage in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, scientific advancement, national integration, and cultural preservation. Universal high-quality education is the best way forward for developing and maximizing our country's rich talents and resources for the good of the individual, the society, the country, and the world. India will have the highest population of young people in the world over the next decade, and our ability to provide high-quality educational opportunities to them will determine the future of our country.”

To achieve “universal access to quality education” tinkering with the education policy is only one mechanism; creating conditions that make the access possible and start the process of levelling the playing field would have been a more real strategy for change.

WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?

There is nothing specific or new about declaring that the New Education Policy aims to provide universal access to quality education. Focusing on holistic education, learning outcomes, lifelong learning, critical thinking and vocational education is standard prescription for any public education policy. Iterating that India has a unique demographic dividend and that the potential needs to be harnessed and made to work for building the country’s future is a worn out statement that must necessarily be included in any policy statement on education.

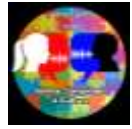
Finding ways of increasing the employability or the capacity of young people to earn and prosper is a tired promise that every government has made as a routine exercise



for reinventing the same wheels of skill training, higher education, inclusive education and now Lok Vidya, which could mean that one of the skills that are taught in schools or in colleges is the art of making exquisitely delicate patterns for jalebis, or garlands or mats because these are all unique Lok Vidyas in India, about which there is neither respect nor high quality academic research.

The newness in NEP is not limited to its emphasis on teaching-learning ancient knowledge and uncovering ancient truths. The newness is the process by which the policy has emerged as the full and final blueprint for accelerating and expanding the changes that were initiated in states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh between 2004-2005 and now. In 2015, Rajasthan's education minister Vasudev Devnani decided that new text books were needed for students starting in Class One all the way up to Class Eight. (8) The focus desired was on Indian culture and a "new contexts and concerns at the state and national level." What happened in Rajasthan is important because it serves to illustrate how the critical assessment and independent learning capabilities could be directed to rewrite, rethink and so reconstruct the narrative on identity, who is the enemy or was a hostile power, who was a leader and when and how he led and so much else about India and its values, its truths and its legacies.

The new text books in Rajasthan heroed the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, that is the sanitisation mission, launched by Narendra Modi as the newly elected Prime Minister, demonetisation as a bold initiative against corruption and terrorism and the Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao campaign that was to empower the girl child. It also foregrounded Veer Savarkar, founder and leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and pushed Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and one of its best-known leaders globally into the background. It also reduced the large presence of Mahatma Gandhi to a smaller icon, regardless of what the rest of the world thought about him and his extraordinary strategy of satyagraha and peaceful resistance to political violence. A news report points out "The Hindutva stamp is not accidental. At the July 2015 meeting, it was suggested that the textbooks could be modelled on "Vidya Bharati books" – a reference to the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan, the education arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the ideological parent of the BJP.



The Sangh's influence even extended to the selection of textbook writers. Most of the 160-odd writers were its associates and supporters, said a member of the RSS.”

The Rajasthan minister was clear about what he wanted the new text books to achieve; that “no one like Kanhaiya Kumar is born,” in Rajasthan in a reference to the then student leader of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi who was charged with sedition and accused as an anti-national, plotting against the security and safety of the country and the newly elected government of 2014. Regardless of who, in fact, won the Battle of Haldighat, Maharana Pratap or the army of Mughal Emperor Akbar, questioning the outcome of a battle waged in 1576 is the freedom and the right of researchers, who may well challenge the accepted version of the event. Such research is both respected and necessary, because it critically re-examines an interpretation of events that was crafted to serve a particular political purpose. To dictate that education policy in Rajasthan must produce citizens who were “no one like Kanhaiya Kumar” is ominous. Though it apparently contradicts the purpose of NEP 2020, that learning must become “increasingly critical that children not only learn, but more importantly learn how to learn. Education thus, must move towards less content, and more towards learning about how to think critically and solve problems, how to be creative and multidisciplinary, and how to innovate, adapt, and absorb new material in novel and changing fields. Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable,” that is an outcome that will emerge over time.

The concern is that NEP 2020 has to deliver outcomes that are aligned to Sustainable Development Goal number 4 “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” on the one hand “while building upon India's traditions and value systems” on the other. The two may not be contradictory as goals, but there is far too much space for multiple interpretations of what are India's traditions and value systems to reduce apprehensions that the push to promote Sanskrit as a language and indigenous knowledge as a resource could shrink the space for independent thinking and freedom to critically explore.