New National Education Policy 2020

Higher Education

Old Wine in a New Bottle

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1. Education:

Education is the most powerful mechanism, with which we can transform the world. It empowers people and builds the nation. Investment in education is essential as it benefits the individual, society and the world as a whole. The sustained economic development of any country is directly determined by its education system. Education is a Nation’s health and wealth. Education is the answer to many socio-economic problems we face today; it creates a cosmic awareness of our responsibilities as citizens of the world. A progressive nation is inevitably an educated nation.

Education is the principal perspective of holistic development of the human family. Jawaharlal Nehru once had declared that if all were well with our educational institutions, all would be well with the nation. Educational institutions are intimately linked with society at large. They are the temples of knowledge. They are the agents of social change and transformation. Therefore, the general condition of our colleges and universities is a matter of great concern to the nation.

The Kothari Commission in 1966 had beautifully said: “The destiny of India is now being shaped in her classrooms. This we believe is no mere rhetoric. In a world based on science and technology it is education that determines the level of prosperity, welfare, development and security of people. On the quality and number of persons coming out of our colleges and universities will depend our success in the great enterprise of national construction whose principal objective is to raise the standard of living of our people”

With a world population of 7.80 billion people, we, as individuals and societies need to live together sustainably and harmoniously. We need to act responsibly based on the understanding that what we do today can have implications on the lives of people and the planet in future. Educational network empowers people to change the way they think and work towards a sustainable and harmonious future.

2. The New National Education Policy 2020:

The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi approved the National Education Policy 2020 on July 29, 2020. This is the third Education Policy in India after independence (1968, 1986 and 2020). The Policy has four parts on: 1. School Education; 2. Higher Education; 3. Other Key Areas like Adult Education, Professional Education, Online Education etc., and 4. Implementation, Financing and Making the Policy function.

The new policy aims to pave the path for major transformational reforms in school and higher education systems in the country. This policy replaces the 34 year old National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986. The Cabinet also approved a proposal to rename the Ministry of Human Resource Development as the Ministry of Education.

It is said that the new policy is futuristic; it is for the 21st century. It is a framework to guide the development of education in the country. It aims to make India the global knowledge superpower ensuring equity, access and inclusion.

3. Highlights of the NEP:

Let me address some of the salient features of the Policy in the Higher Education Sector:

i. New and futuristic Vision:

The policy views Quality Universities and Colleges as part of the New and holistic Vision for India’s Higher Education System. It points out some of the major problems currently faced by the higher education system in India, for example:

(a) A veritably fragmented higher educational ecosystem;

(b) Inadequate emphasis on the development of cognitive skills and learning outcomes;

(c) A rigid separation of disciplines, with early specialization and streaming of students into narrow areas of study;

(d) Limited access particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, with few HEIs that teach in local languages

(e) Limited teacher and institutional autonomy; both academic and administrative;

(f) Inadequate mechanisms for merit-based career management and progression of faculty and institutional leaders;

(g) Compromised emphasis on research at most universities and colleges, and lack of competitive peer-reviewed research funding across disciplines;

(h) Suboptimal governance and leadership of HEIs;

(i) An ineffective regulatory system; and

(j) Large affiliating universities resulting in compromised standards of undergraduate education.

ii. A Complete Overhaul and Re-energization:

This policy envisions a complete overhaul and re-energizing of the higher education system to overcome these challenges and thereby deliver high-quality higher education, with equity, access and inclusion. The following programmes are proposed:

(a) A higher educational system consisting of large, multidisciplinary universities and colleges, with at least one in or near every district, and with more HEIs across India that offer medium of instruction or programmes in local/Indian languages;

(b) A more multidisciplinary undergraduate education with a cafeteria mode;

(c) Faculty and Institutional autonomy;

(d) Overall revamping of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student support for enhanced student experiences;

(e) Reaffirming the integrity of faculty and institutional leadership positions through merit-appointments and career progression based on teaching, research, and service;

(f) Establishment of a National Research Foundation to fund outstanding peer-reviewed research and to actively seed research in universities and colleges;

g) Greater emphasis on Collaborative research with other HEIs, funding agencies and industries;

(g) Governance of HEIs by high qualified independent boards having academic and administrative autonomy;

(h) “Light but tight” regulation by a single regulator for higher education;

(i) Increased access, equity, and inclusion through a range of measures, including greater opportunities for outstanding public education;

j) Scholarships by private/philanthropic universities for disadvantaged and underprivileged students;

k) Online education, and Open Distance Learning (ODL); and all infrastructure and learning materials accessible and available to learners with disabilities.

iii. Institutional Restructuring and Consolidation:

The thrust of the policy is to build vibrant communities of scholars and peers, break down harmful silos, and enable students to become well-rounded across disciplines.

a) It envisages three types of HEI – Research intensive universities, Teaching intensive universities and an Autonomous degree-granting College.

b) The aims is to end the fragmentation of higher education by transforming higher education institutions into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges, and HEI clusters/Knowledge Hubs, each of which will aim to have 3,000 or more students;

c) By 2040, all higher education institutions (HEIs) shall aim to become multidisciplinary institutions and shall be prepared to cater to larger student enrolments preferably in the thousands,

d) The aim will be to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education including vocational education from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035.

e) Academic Bank of Credits to be established to facilitate Transfer of Credits

g) Research Universities (MERUs), at par with IITs, IIMs, to be set up as models.

f) Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) will be set up as a single overarching umbrella body for the entire higher education, excluding medical and legal education with four independent councils for funding, for accreditation, for regulation and standard setting.

g) Affiliation of colleges is to be phased out in 15 years and a stage-wise mechanism is to be established for granting graded autonomy to colleges. Over a period of time, it is envisaged that every college would develop into either an Autonomous degree-granting College, or a constituent college of a university.

iv. Towards a More Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education:

The structure and lengths of degree programmes shall be adjusted accordingly. The policy envisages multiple entry and exit points with appropriate certification. M.Phil has been scrapped; PhD program can be done after a Masters’ degree.

The undergraduate degree will be of either 3 or 4-year duration, with multiple exit options within this period, with appropriate certifications, e.g., a certificate after completing 1 year in a discipline or field including vocational and professional areas, or a diploma after 2 years of study, or a Bachelor’s degree after a 3-year programme.

v. Optimal Learning Environments and Support for Students:

Curriculum, pedagogy, continuous assessment and student support are the cornerstones for quality learning. The policy emphasizes on Internationalization. India will be promoted as a global study destination providing premium education at affordable costs thereby helping to restore its role as a Vishwa Guru.

An International Students Office at each HEI hosting foreign students will be set up to coordinate all matters relating to welcoming and supporting students arriving from abroad. Indian HEIs with exceptional qualitative performance shall be allowed to establish overseas branches.

The policy encourages student Activity and Participation. ‘Students are the prime stakeholders in the education system. Vibrant campus life is essential for high-quality teaching-learning processes. Financial support for students will be extended.’

vi. Motivated, Energized, and Capable Faculty with commendable intellectual resource:

The policy acknowledges that the most important factor in the success of higher education institutions is the quality and engagement of its faculty, so that we can make quality higher education opportunities available to all individuals.

The policy offers freedom to faculty to design their own curricular and pedagogical approaches within the approved framework, including textbook and reading material selections, assignments, and assessments. Empowering the faculty to conduct innovative teaching, research, and service as they see best is a key motivator and enabler for them to do truly outstanding, creative work.

Excellence is further incentivized through appropriate rewards, promotions, recognitions, and movement into institutional leadership. Meanwhile, faculty not delivering on basic norms will be held accountable.

vii. Transforming the Regulatory System of Higher Education:

The regulatory system of higher education will ensure that the distinct functions of regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standard setting will be performed by distinct, independent, and empowered bodies. These four structures will be set up as four independent verticals within one umbrella institution, the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). Multiple mechanisms with checks and balances will combat and stop the commercialization of higher education.

4. Concerns and observations:

One does not understand the hurry-burry manner in which the policy was announced during the Pandemic period while all educational institutions remained closed? Was it an easy way out at this juncture to pass the policy, that too without any discussion in the parliament?

I am of the opinion that the policy is the ‘old wine in a new bottle.’ Most of the ideas programmes and initiatives are either already in practice in many institutions or being discussed among the academics.

Many of the proposed programmes are not time-bound. While on the one hand, the policy has been called visionary, it is also termed as exclusionary – it does not take into account the contributions and implications for minorities in the field of education.

As observed by some critics, the policy recommends the need for better teaching and learning, better training of teachers and more meaningful evaluation system, but it does not provide a realistic way by which private or minority institutions can raise funds to meet their needs in their institutions.

It is ironic to note that the policy, on the one hand, lays the foundation for privatization of higher education, but on the other, claims to provide education for the marginalized and underprivileged groups. India spent 2.9% of its GDP on education in 2018-19. Our economy, going doldrums at the moment, how are we going to fund education? Can we realise the target of 6% as projected in the policy?

Currently, the Indian government’s expenditure on higher education goes extensively towards a small group of centrally funded elite institutions. And a vast majority of the graduates of these institutions end up working and living outside India. The policy seems to favour this class by introducing the 4 year UG degree to ensure that students can easily transfer their degrees and credits to universities abroad.

The policy remains vague on many issues and has several ambiguities and loose ends that are confusing and disturbing. As academics describe, the underlying philosophy of the new policy views education as a commodity rather than as service.

Prime Minister Modi’s tweet said that “the NEP was based on “pillars of access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability” and that “May education brighten our nation and lead it to prosperity.” However, a close look at the policy belies his claim. The policy, aimed at universal quality education, has little to say on the subject affordability.

Education is under the Concurrent List. It is the responsibility of both – Union Government and State Governments. The policy is silent about the role and responsibilities of the States to fulfill the mandate of quality, access and affordability.

While talking about the tribal areas, the policy introduces ‘Ashramshalas – a Sanskrit term. It does not recognize the distinct tribal cultural traditions. Questions are raised whether it is commensurate with ideology of the Sangh Parivar.

We can sense the RSS impact on the NEP. The ideological parent of the BJP has had its influence from the name change of the ministry to emphasis on culture, morals, citizenship and regional languages. For RSS, it is a milestone and a big victory as their voice played a significant role at the policy drafting table.

A close scrutiny of the policy document reveals that the words “secular” or “secularism” are not found anywhere in it. The omission of secular principles in the draft NEP 2019 impoverishes the learning experience of all Indians.

What the NPE 1986 categorically stated and which has been in practice till now is missing in the 2020 policy: “All educational programmes will be carried on in strict conformity with secular values." Among the “social values within which we locate our educational aims", the NCF 2005 affirms, “the first is a commitment to democracy and the values of equality, justice, freedom, concern for others’ well-being, secularism, respect for human dignity and rights."

Education for many years has remained sidelined. Today India is at a tipping point of change where the 600 million brimming youth of this country make up the world's largest cohort of young people. Over 356 million (28%) are between 10-24 age group. Youth is India’s asset. As the golden statement of the NEP says “there is no better investment towards a society’s future than the high-quality education of our young people.” If the policy is effectively implemented and the education system efficiently monitored, India is set to enact global change in life and its lessons to the world.

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