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New Education Policy 2020: Missing the Touch of Reality and Grassroot Level Issues

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ABSTRACT: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, from a birds-eye view, looks promising: The schooling years are divided into several sections with programme outcomes specified for each level. It talks about focus on discovery, preparation, abstract thinking and multidisciplinary learning and that with technology redefining probably everything around us, the concept of education must also be revamped to meet the needs of the learners today.

However, before one jumps to applauding the NEP, one requires a deep dive into the current challenges that India's education system faces at the grassroots level—the issue of bringing kids to school, retaining students (especially girls) in school, enabling teachers to deliver the NEP-imagined curriculums, creating and enabling sufficient technological infrastructure, delivering the committed education budgets and ensuring that every educated Indian is employable.

KEYWORDS-NEP,2020,reality,grassroot,level,students,curriculums,education

I. INTRODUCTION

We need to know about NEP:-

- i) sufficiently addresses the above challenges,
- ii) has a well-defined implementation roadmap and milestones,
- iii) has critical finances for execution of this grand vision,[1,2,3]
- iv) ensures that it will not exacerbate the current educational divide between the marginalised and the privileged, and the rural and the urban children. Moreover, there is a severe dearth of trained personnel in the country. Not to forget the unfortunate situation that the teachers of today are also the products of the current education system—and hence we need a system that equips knowledge facilitators to understand the nuances of this novel ecosystem. Interestingly, the NEP relies upon anganwadi workers, already overburdened with numerous public health and nutrition duties, for delivering quality “Early Childhood Care and Education” (ECCE).

To train them to meet ECCE standards through six-month diploma courses would itself be a Herculean task. Over 10 lakh vacancies are still open at the school level, leave alone the matter of several insufficiently skilled PGTs and TGTs.[5,7,8] Moreover, conditions in anganwadi centres remain abysmally poor. Figures from December 2019 show that over 3 lakh anganwadi centres don't have proper toilets and over 1.5 lakh lack potable drinking water. Can they be expected to meet and deliver the ambitious ECCE quality targets set by the NEP? The provision to provide multidisciplinary study options cannot be implemented in rural schools where the student-teacher ratio is too high.

This has to be facilitated with heavy funds and infrastructure coupled with a large teaching faculty. The ‘good to have’ modern pedagogies, values, skills, and learning methods were already present in the National Curriculum Framework of 2005. The policy also covers alternate curriculum subjects like yoga, Indian philosophy and Adivasi/indigenous ways of learning in the syllabus. But upskilling teachers, who presently struggle even to teach the basic syllabus at the primary level, is not easy.[9,10,11]

The NEP also lays focus on digital and distance learning to increase gross enrolment ratio from 26% to over 50%. However, the primary reasons for dropping out of school such as child marriage and child labour remain unaddressed in the policy. It also lacks clarity about the employability value of the open learning courses. The



absence of digital infrastructure will lead to the further segregation of the poor and disadvantaged, creating a “digital divide” that will grow even stronger due to the absence of or limited internet connectivity/access to technology in rural areas.

As per UDISE+ (Unified District Information on School Education, Department of School Education, Government of India), only 9.85% of government schools have a functional computer and 4.09% have an internet connection. This itself puts into question the overwhelming reliance on online education in NEP 2020. The NEP recommends a spending of 6% of GDP on education. However, spending on education has fallen from 4.14% in 2014-15 to 3.2% in 2020-21 under the BJP regime. Even this amount may get cut down by 40% owing to the coronavirus pandemic in the current year, bringing the education spending to just 2% of the total budget. There is hence no clarity on whether the NEP proposes financing of 6% of GDP to come from public funds or private investments.

The fear is that such unstructured commitments may further privatise, commercialise and overly centralise education, thus taking away the autonomy from well-functioning institutes, and also lead to sudden fee hikes and reduction in employment security of the academic staff. As a nation aiming for a humongous \$5 trillion economy, the NEP has to set the course right in attaining the educational goals. We need to rebuild our universities rather than inviting universities from other countries, improve our own research infrastructure, create a strong ecosystem of learning, unlearning and relearning—coupled with inculcating a culture of critical thinking, innovation and research.[12,13,15]

This should be so systematically executed that it ensures India reclaims its rightful place in the mantle of world education. We should also not miss out on real issues like poor infrastructure, poor research facilities, shortage of teachers, unhealthy government schools and high number of student dropouts. The education policy has to act as a stepping stone towards reclaiming the pedestal India has lost—as a country with thinkers, philosophers, mathematicians, scientists—and not as a distraction to sway people away from the real issues in education.

II. DISCUSSION

One aspect of the Modi government’s National Education Policy (NEP) has caused some consternation and debate. It is the prescription that children hereon should be taught in their mother tongue, regional language, or home language (whatever that means) up to class 5, and preferably until class 8. The critics say this is the RSS agenda of Hindi-isation. The defenders say the children comprehend much better in their native tongues. In any case, they argue that this is only a recommendation and not a compulsion. But, it is the first national education policy being implemented by a government of the nationalist Hindu Right with a full majority. Compulsion wouldn’t have been possible under the current constitutional scheme of things. Education is a concurrent subject. But then, a majority of Indian states, especially some of the most important states, are also being governed by the same party, the BJP.

On balance, the drift is clear. Compulsion or not, the cue is to pivot to domestic languages instead of English. The three-language formula in the NEP also says any three, as long as two are Indian. The implication is that English is foreign. We would have thought that silly definitions like that are employed by sillier Americans, who want their foreign students to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the famed TOEFL. Never mind that they themselves usually can’t even spell right.

English is now an international language, often with distinct versions in different countries. In India, we have variants from north to south, east to west, from King’s English to Singh’s English. If the cue from the Modi government towards Hindi or native-language medium is clear enough, chances are that most state governments will fall in line. Their own schools won’t dare defy this. They might decree something like this for private recognised schools too.

People will again find a way to cut corners: Nobody, not even the strongest state, can fight market forces. And if consumers want something as badly as Indian parents want English-medium for their children, they will get it. You might also then bring back the mystique of the minority institution, the proverbial convent, now so synonymous with English-medium education in most of India that you can find “convents” all over the country, named after numerous non-Christian saints such as Kabir, Tukaram, even Ravidas.[17,18,19]



If you think the Modi government is doing it for political gain, it doesn't pass a fact-check. Because, over the decades, our politicians have known what works and what doesn't. They know their voters want English-medium. So, they might say one thing in public but do the opposite in reality.

III. RESULTS

The quality of higher education is the most crucial factor for deciding the future of any country and necessitates utmost attention and constant assessment to foresee prospective outcomes, especially in a developing nation like India. In global ranking and research metrics of HEIs, Indian HEIs are persistently found to be lagging far behind as compared to other world universities. In the QS Ranking 2020 (Quacquarelli Symonds Rankings 2020), there is no Indian university in the top 100, there are three universities in the top 200, nine universities in the top 500 and twenty-three universities in the top 1000. Almost the same story repeats in the rankings given by the Times Higher Education where no Indian university appears in the top 300, six are in the top 500, and thirty are in the top 1000. This dismal performance of the HEIs in India, which are large in number, about 1000 universities in 40,000 colleges, calls for urgent action on the part of all stakeholders.[20,21,22] Issues such as large number of colleges affiliating to the State universities, inadequate university industry connect, unemployability of the graduates, diminishing resources for higher education, and reduction in number of research publications and awards, call for a major revolution in the education space. School education, which is the base line for higher education, should be seamlessly integrated with higher education. The quality of education at the school level should get a special focus, wherein teaching perspective should shift from being examination-oriented to quality learning, with emphasis on understanding and overall holistic development rather than rote learning. To ensure holistic development of the students at the university/college level, efforts need to be made to reorient the teaching pattern with focus on all types of courses:

- Core courses — in the subject of specialization of the student in his/her UG/PG programme;
- Elective courses — chosen by students from other departments as per their aptitude;
- Supportive courses — in soft skills and life skills including communication and personality development; and
- Social orientation courses — that provide value addition to the students' livelihood, such as courses in Environmental Education, Human Rights Education, Value and Ethics Education, Societal Development, Peace and Conflict Resolution. Focusing on higher education in India, we need to keep in view its alarming deteriorating quality. We have to aim at enhancing employability and prepare graduates for a rewarding career. To set in motion a process of in-depth reforms so as to transform higher education in India at par with global standards, the UGC has framed a Quality Mandate with certain objectives.[23,25,27]

Initiatives To achieve the objectives of QM, the following initiatives shall be undertaken by HEIs: 1. Induction programme for students. 2. Learning Outcome-based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) — revision of curriculum in regular intervals. 3. Adoption of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-based learning tools for an effective teaching-learning process. 4. Imparting Life Skills to students. 5. Social and industry connect for every HEI: Every HEI shall adopt at least five villages for the exchange of knowledge and for the overall social/ economic betterment of the village communities. 6. Evaluation reforms. 7. Tracking of students' progress after completion of the course. 8. Faculty development. 9. Quality research and the creation of new knowledge. 10. Mentoring of non-accredited institutions, so that every institution can get accreditation by 2021.[28,29,30]

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) The Government of India launched Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) in 2014. It was inspired by the vision of transformational change in rural development processes by leveraging knowledge institutions to help build the architecture of an Inclusive India. UBA aims to involve the HEIs of India in the process of indigenous development of self-sufficient and sustainable village clusters. It develops the necessary mechanism for proper



coordination among educational institutions, implementation agencies (District Administration/Panchayati Raj Institutions) and the grass-root level stakeholders. The focus of UBA is:

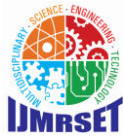
- enable effective intervention at the field level,
- holistic development of rural clusters, and
- reorient the academic curricula and research programmes in HEIs to align them with the development of the local community. To this effect, the UBA engages the faculty and students of HEIs in understanding rural realities, to devise the implementation methods for innovative solutions and leverage the knowledge-base of the institutions to devise processes for the effective implementation of various Government programmes.[31,32,33] The UBA mission is conceptualized as a movement to:
 - enable processes that connect institutes of higher education with local communities,
 - address the development challenges of rural India through participatory processes,
 - appropriate technologies for accelerating sustainable growth,[35,37]
 - create a virtuous cycle between the society and an inclusive university system,
 - provide the knowledge and practices for emerging professions, and
 - upgrade the capabilities of both the public and the private sectors.[38]

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