

Focus 75 – India's New Education Policy in 2020: Antinomies of progress

By **Dr. Chayanika Uniyal Panda**

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Dr. Chayanika Uniyal Panda Assistant Professor, Department of History, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College (for Women), University of Delhi, New Delhi Fellow SADF since 2021. Research Fellow Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (May 2009- May 2011)

Abstract

This paper contains a comprehensive analysis of the New Education Policy of India (2020). For instance, it would be interesting to analyse, compare and understand whether the BJP-ruled Indian government passed the National Educational Policy (NEP; 2020) so as further privatize the nation's educational system. What multidimensional impacts could the New Education Policy (NEP) have on the future of India's educational system? We would also like to investigate how it affects institutional autonomy, premier public universities, cultural dynamics, and intellectual diversity.

This paper investigates how the NEP will reshape education in India. The broad conclusion is that said education is witnessing deep shifts and changes which will not only lead to a deepening of social inequalities and affect learning but will also burden poor and middle-class families with added financial pressure.

Keywords: Education Reform, Curriculum, NEP, Higher Education, Institutional Autonomy, India

Introduction

Education is a dynamic process that is continuously evolving to ensure both continuity and change across time and space. Every country develops an educational system that expresses and promotes the nation's unique socio-cultural identity while also meeting various contemporaneous challenges. However, as Thomas Kuhn reminds us, Paradigm shifts cannot be dictated from above – and the co-existence of various episteme cannot be controlled top-down. Therefore, modernism has been influential in establishing a larger scope for freedom of Knowledge; it has also been the most powerful instrument to establish an egalitarian society. This was the vision that guided the national education policies of previous Indian governments; it would perhaps be best to respect such tradition.

The National Education Policy 2020 (“NEP 2020”) is India's third educational policy; its predecessor held 34 years. The first education policy was announced in 1968 and was based on reports and recommendations by the Kothari Commission. The second education policy was announced in 1986. The NEP 2020 contains a transformative vision of education policy. Its comprehensive scope underscores multi-disciplinary and multi-modal universities, including technology-enabled education. It envisages increased expenditure on education to about 6% of GDP – as was suggested in the NEP 1968. Currently, the Government of India is spending less than 3% of GDP on education. However, questions arise regarding the new NEP's implementation, as well as regards the share of said implementation between central and state governments. The NEP 2020 helps us understand the future of education policy in our country. Not only does it discuss concepts but identifies various innovations aimed at bringing equality to education. The NEP 2020 seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. This aspirational goal remains in stark contrast to India's learning outcomes which as currently stubbornly low.

It was only in the year 2002 that the 86th amendment recognized the right to education as a fundamental right (under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution). The Right to Education Act was implemented in 2009 to support underprivileged children. The Act was a sui generis attempt to bring a new lease of life for such children. Although there is an obligation by the state to secure equality, the implementation of the Act has not been smooth. Unfortunately, our education

system itself solidifies class division because of the different standards of education in private and state-run schools. Thus, there is a requirement on the part of the state to take some additional measures which can support the underprivileged and offer an inclusive classroom education capable of representing the country's true diversity. The Education Policy 2020, according to Government claims, is a silver lining. However, the suggested model has serious implications for the students belonging to backward socio-economic groups. This essay highlights such lacunae and emphasizes upon the will to implement better reforms. It also offers suggestions for further, much needed improvements.

Historical Background

Since independence, the Indian government sponsored various programs to address challenges in the education sector in both rural and urban India. The aim of the 'First Five-year Plan' (Planning Commission, n. d.) was the "re-orientation of the educational system and integration of its different stages and branches" as well as the "consolidation of existing secondary and university education and devising a system of higher education suited to the needs of the rural areas". The target was to establish powerful institutions of knowledge production and dissemination.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, India's first Minister of Education, gave a good start to the formation of new institutions in the Indian education system. The University Education Commission (1948–1949) and the Secondary Education Commission (1952–1953) were established by the Union government to modernize India's education system and develop new proposals. The government of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, adopted a Resolution on Scientific Policy. High-quality scientific educational institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology were sponsored by the Nehru government.

In 1961, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was formed by the Union government as an autonomous organization. The role of NCERT was to advise both Union and state governments on formulating and implementing education policies. In 1968, the first National Policy on Education (NPE) was promulgated by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; the second was promulgated by Rajiv Gandhi in 1986. Through the second NEP (1986), Rajiv

Gandhi emphasized the importance of early childhood care, developing education at the grassroots level, evolving a meaningful system that reduces dependence on degrees for acquiring jobs and expanding scope for self-employment. Additionally, in order to increase educational opportunities for marginalized sections of Indian society - especially for women, [Scheduled Tribes](#) (ST) and the [Scheduled Caste](#) (SC) communities - the policy called for expanding scholarships, adult education, recruiting more teachers from oppressed caste backgrounds, incentivizing poor families to send their children to school, developing new institutions and providing housing and services. The NPE called for a "child-centred approach" in primary education, launched "Operation Blackboard" 'to improve primary schools nationwide and ensured provisions of minimum facilities as well as learning equipment.' (Lok Sabha Debates, 1988)

The NEP's main emphasis in higher education was to end said education as a necessary criterion to acquire jobs. It also sought to execute the 'vocationalisation of courses and targeted to bring 10 percent more students for these courses by 1990 and 25 percent more by the year 1995' (Lok Sabha Debates, 1986). The policy also aimed to set up rural universities throughout the country. This was a relevant step since India is a country of villages - as emphasized multiple times by Shri Mahatma Gandhi, father of the nation. The NEP also clearly stated that the 'University Grant Commission (UGC) should give grants as far as possible to the colleges situated in backward, depressed classes and Adivasi areas and rules should be made liberal in their case' (Lok Sabha Debates, 1986). This is based on Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, which seeks to promote economic and social development at the grassroots level in rural India. The policy promoted a strong [Open University](#) system with the setting up of [Indira Gandhi National Open University \(IGNOU\)](#), established in 1985. The government aimed for a 'decentralized system in education through open universities in every state of Indian Union.' (Lok Sabha Debates, 1986)

The contribution of this education policy to the development of the country can be summarized through the following achievements (India Today, 2015):

- After the launch of the 1986 NPE, literacy rates in India increased to 52.21 per cent in 1991 (from 28.3 percent in 1961).

- The 1986 NPE was keen on placing "special emphasis on the removal of disparities and on equalising educational opportunity". This provided an equal right to education namely for Indian women.
- Scheduled Castes' and Scheduled Tribes' students reaped similar benefits from this policy.
- The 1966 NPE increased scholarship programs and included Operation Blackboard to improve educational infrastructure in primary schools all over India.
- Indira Gandhi's National Open University (IGNOU) was a by-product of the 1986 NEP. The aim was to promote adult education by establishing the varsity.
- Following Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, the policy promoted socio-economic development in the rural areas.
- This policy exposed the dilapidated condition of the Indian education system.
- It continues to inspire new educational policies and is followed by educators all over the country.
- The 1986 NEP's agenda included the setting up of ever more educational institutes for women.

New Education policy of India (2020)

In 1903, Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, introduced a new Universities Bill following a recommendation by the Universities Commission. Commenting on the bill, the great nationalist Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya said that 'the Universities Bill, if passed into law, will have, as recommended in the report of the Universities Commission, the effect of restricting the area of education and completely destroying the independence of the Universities upon which largely depend their efficiency and usefulness, and turning them practically into departments of Government.'(Madras Session, Indian National Congress 1903) While the Universities Bill's stated purpose was to improve the standard of higher education in the country, the bill was ill-intentioned in substance. Over 100 years later, it seems that the BJP-ruled Indian government's National Educational Policy (2020) intends to revive colonial attitudes.

India today is seriously affected by a myriad economic, social, and cultural problems. The role of the educational system is to support access to quality education, at least at the basic level, for all. Unfortunately, the Indian education sector is undergoing constant changes due to the influence of ideological shifts and swift policy changes. Taking a closer look at the challenges experienced by India's educational system today will allow for a clearer view. We can describe the following three major impacts by the New Education Policy of India, 2020:

- **The aim is to convert public universities into departments of government:** the autonomy of universities across the country has laid under severe attack in recent times. Decisions by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) target higher education as the aim is to convert public universities into departments of government. There is a goal to promote a market-oriented, private educational system – one wherein education remains out of reach to the common men. We are facing some of the toughest challenges from anti-citizenship, authoritarian forces. The challenge is directed not only to the larger framework of Higher Education evolved over a long period of time, but also, but also against the inclusive and diverse traditions celebrated in the nation's knowledge production and dissemination. We are witnessing a sharp departure from the framework of education that emerged under the governments from Nehru to Manmohan Singh. In this context, there is a struggle between rights-based and myth-based worldviews - a struggle between inclusive education and a gated education. The way the autonomy of universities is trampled, and Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) is implemented in the new NEP will destroy the very basic idea of university. This system leaves Universities with no choice but to follow a uniform pattern of 'Make in UGC' syllabi, leaving only a 30% space for autonomous teaching. Such a framework is unheard of anywhere in the world except in fascist and totalitarian regimes. Textbooks are distorted: Nehru and other inclusive traditions are removed, the printing of writings and speeches by Ambedkar are ended, and the University Grant Commission (UGC) gazette notifications dated 4th May 2016 etc., is imposed. This constitutes a threat to the very fabric of a culturally diverse nation.

If we look further into the provisions of the NEP 2020, the most destructive and vicious is perhaps the introduction of a Higher Education Commission as the single regulator of university education. Until now the various universities, whether publicly or privately funded, were placed under the control of the University Grant Commission. Similarly, all technical institutions came under the regulatory authority of the ‘All India Council for Technical Education’ (AICTE). Both these institutions were part of MHRD; their main purpose was to regulate higher education in India. The UGC provided funding to colleges and universities; looked after the affiliations of various institutions; issued guidelines to bring uniformity in the syllabus; and acted as main arbitrator in the conflict between university administration, teachers’ association, students, and various stakeholders. Under the NEP, both the UGC and the AICTE are abolished and replaced by the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI; National Education Policy 2020). While the pro-reform lobby has lauded this as a welcome step, there are two fundamental problems with this commission. First, the UGC and AICTE are already over-burdened with the responsibility of supervising lakhs of higher education institutes (colleges, state universities, central universities, engineering colleges, research institutes, policy-think tanks). The lack of proper delegation/decentralisation of authority is the major cause of mismanagement of higher education in India. The obvious problem that arises from this incapacity by the regulator is the flourishing of fake, deemed universities, institutions without affiliations selling degrees in the open market. So, one cannot but wonder: as two regulators faced such challenges, what will come to be with only one? Most probably the centralisation of authority under one regulator such as the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) will only further exacerbate existing mismanagement.

The second fundamental problem with the HEC is the concept of graded autonomy.

The HEC’s mandate, as outlined in the NEP, is to grant graded autonomy to all higher education institutions in the next 5-10 years. In fact, the various stakeholders in the education system are demanding autonomy from government diktats. The debate around institutional autonomy and government

control is the product of unnecessary government intervention in the day-to-day running of institutions, political favouritism in appointment and promotion, curbing the freedom to teach a standard, modern curriculum, and undue bureaucratic interference. It appears that the NEP is a positive statement from the government to loosen its grip over educational institutes. However, this is not the case. Through the NEP, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) government does not offer autonomy to educational institutes from the state; instead, it offers the provision of ‘financial autonomy/self-financing’.

- **Aims to promote a market-oriented private education system:**

Education is part of the public welfare sector and previously governments used to regulate the education budget according to the nation’s needs and priorities. It was recommended by the NEP 1968 that 6% of the central budget should be earmarked for education. This was followed by the NEP 1986 and other steps taken by Rajiv Gandhi. The aim was to increase the education budget in continuous process.

- The previous Central United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government also followed these steps and increased the education budget from 110.62 billion rupees (2004-5; Analysis of Budgeted Expenditure on Education 2002-03 To 2004-05 by GOI) to 794.51 billion rupees (2013-14; Education World Special Report, April 2013). On the other hand, the current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has reduced the higher education budget to 690.74 billion rupees in 2015-16 (Mint, March 2015).

The budget allocation to the UGC has been reduced by the present NDA government from 93.15 billion rupees (2015-16) to 42.86 billion rupees (2016-17; Business Standard, 2016). In 2018, funds to the UGC have in fact been decreased to 47.227 million rupees from the previous year’s revised estimate of 49.22 billion rupees.

In the following years the total allocated budget increased; however, it decreased as a share of GDP. So, if we compare the education budget allocations by the UPA & NDA Governments in terms of GDP percentage, we can see that the expenditure for education under the UPA-2 (by both central and state

governments) was roughly 3.19 %, and that in the five years of NDA government it fell to 2.88% (India Today, January 2020). Even in 2021-22 the education budget has decreased from Rs 993.11 billion rupees (2020-21) to Rs 932.24 billion rupees (2021-22). This corresponds to a roughly cut of 6 per cent (The Economic Times, Feb 2021).

These cuts in the education sector are going to paralyse the higher education system and lead to the scrapping of non- The National Eligibility Test (NET) fellowships. We may well witness the end of fund allocations and even the dissolution of the UGC; the access to free education by only the 1 % - for the so called meritorious and 1 % needy; the liberalization and deregulation of foreign educational institutions (allowing them to grant degrees in India). Other consequences may include the implementation of the Lyngdoh committee recommendations and code of conduct, the implementation of the UGC's circular on safety and security in campus and especially girl students, the increase in Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and National Institute of Technology (NIT) fees, the contractualisation of teaching positions through the UGC- Faculty Recharge Programme (FRP) and The Department of Science and Technology (DST)-INSPIRE, the self-financing of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) Labs and IITs, fund cut for R&D etc. Worse still, all these happenings may only be the tip of the iceberg. Current decisions are entirely anti- teacher & student.

With these budget cuts, the government strategizes to promote a market-oriented, private education system. This is done through the following steps.

- The identification of non-profitable schools and the merger of schools. For example: mergers aimed at making schools more sustainable and economically viable led to the closure of 17,000 Rajasthan Government's schools in December 2013. This affected 10 lakh students and many teachers. A survey conducted by the Bharat Gyan Vidya Samiti (here after BGVS) in 102 schools merged in five districts (BGVS survey report, n. d.) reported that 10 per cent of the students from the schools merged in the Jaipur district had to drop out of school. This was because schools for Dalit students were merged with schools dominated by upper caste or dominant

caste students and consequently Dalit students feared discrimination (BGVS Survey report, n. d.).

Similarly, many girls' schools were merged with co-education schools, forcing the girls to drop out. Minority schools were merged with Hindu majority schools, and in many places the distance between students' houses and the new merged school was over 4 km, which acted as a deterrent (BGVS Survey report, n. d.). In other places, the medium of instruction also changed, forcing students to opt out. Many Urdu and Sindhi medium schools were merged with Hindi medium schools, the survey reported (BGVS Survey report, n. d.) Also, the larger schools — referred to as Adarsh Schools — do not have the adequate infrastructure to accommodate the new students. Some do not even have basic facilities such as desks and chairs. There are no toilets and drinking water is also not available, revealed the survey (BGVS survey report, n. d.). The report quoted was based on a questionnaire sent to over 9,000 students. Yet the government is further reviewing existing autonomous institutions with the goal of either merging or corporatizing them.

The policy of school mergers and closures continues to be being implemented across different states of India.

- Funding was recently proposed to create a 'level'-based categorization of universities in India.
- Preventing the opening of new higher educational institutions. This is reflected in recommendations by the NEP 2020 such as Study Webs of the Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) Regulation 2021 and ABC Regulation 2021, both of which allow students to take up to 40%- 50 % credits either from the SWAYAM repository listed or under the ABC scheme. This will not only reduce the role of institutions and hurt teachers, but it will also lead to employment cuts.

Indian institutions suffer much of scarcity of funds, falling teacher-student ratios, failure to upgrade infrastructure and face digital challenges. In this context, the NEP's provision for self-financing or financial autonomy is a death sentence to many public-funded institutions. This is a clear attempt to further privatize public education and turn it into a profitable business venture. Lakhs of students from

marginalized communities' risk being pushed out of the educational system in the process. In this scheme, premier public universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), University of Delhi (DU), Central University of Hyderabad (HCU), Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD) and Jadavpur University (JU) will be lack funding, whereas private universities will likely flourish. This will not only lead to social inequalities and affect learning; it will also burden poor and middle-class families with extra financial pressure. The day is not far when sub-standard private universities will become a fish market, selling educational degrees to the highest bidder.

- **To impose and strengthen the Rashtriya Sevvamsevak Sangh's (RSS) chauvinist cultural agenda:** As reported in national media, the NEP 2020 is a part of the RSS agenda to impose and strengthen its chauvinist cultural agenda. The imposition of the mother language at primary level is one such provision (National Education Policy, 2020). If the language criteria were introduced to promote Hindi or other regional languages, then they must be made part of curriculum at all levels. But to argue that Hindi or regional languages must replace English is not a good strategy to promote these languages. In India, the trumpet of Hindi has been raised for many decades. However, no serious efforts have been made to promote it. For instance, both in Supreme Court (SC) and High Court (HC), there is no provision for undertaking proceedings in Hindi. Most higher education institutes are exclusively English in medium. All the bureaucratic and official communications are made in English. Is government going to change that? Countries like China, Russia, Turkey, France, etc. – in fact most countries conduct all their official and bureaucratic work in their mother tongue. Even road signboards are written in the nation's mother tongue(s). Thus, if one is serious about promoting Hindi and regional languages, the state needs to make a serious investment in changing the whole structure and attitude of the common citizenry towards regional/national languages. We must promote original writings as well in the translation of classic English writings.

As far as English dominates the everyday life of nation, the promise to promote

Hindi appears as a hollow act. If the BJP is serious about promoting Hindi, then they should adopt it as a language of daily, general transactions. Since the provision of mandatory Hindi/mother tongues will only be applicable to government-funded schools, it will create yet another class divide. The ancient education system was structured on caste-based reservations. The NEP will replace this with a reservation based on class. Private schools and the rich will teach their kids in English medium schools, the language of global competition, and poor kids from government schools will be forced to learn the Hindi/regional language. The BJP government, rather than imposing its agenda, must investigate this matter seriously.

Conclusion:

Education can promote the introduction of a new social order in the country. Until the NEP 86 Rajiv Gandhi, with a great sense of pragmatism, tried to restructure the educational system at all levels, from primary to university. There was great emphasis on social and human values, a sense of national integration, an understanding of the composite Indian culture and a promotion of communal harmony.

However, the present Government's Education Policy equates human beings with human capital and knowledge with a 'knowledge economy' – as mentioned in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Through autonomous colleges/institutions, it is also trying to withdraw state grants and forcing education to play in the hands of market forces at the cost of marginalized sections of society – the first to be deprived of higher education. By subjecting education to international trade rules, we are heading towards a loss of authority by both the national and the state governments to regulate education according to the nation's needs and priorities.

Finally, the present government's education policy counters the dreams of Mahatma Gandhi who tried to achieve a holistic development of India and its masses. As Gandhiji once said, "What cannot be shared with masses is taboo for me." We cannot accept a system in which we have glass houses for a few privileged children and not even pencil and slates for 90% of school children. Under the impact of

ideological shift, the present education policy is trying to control ideas and the space for intellectual diversity.

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19 Avenue des Arts 2nd floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles
Email: info@sadf.eu Web: www.sadf.eu