

Inclusive Education and National Education Policy 2020: A Review

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Abstract: The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), which was approved by the Union Cabinet of India on 29 July 2020, outlines the vision of India's new education system. The new policy replaces the previous National Policy on Education, 1986. The policy is a comprehensive framework for elementary education to higher education as well as vocational training in both rural and urban India. The policy aims to transform India's education system by 2040. Shortly after the release of the policy, the government clarified that no one will be forced to study any particular language and that the medium of instruction will not be shifted from English to any regional language. The language policy in NEP is a broad guideline and advisory in nature; and it is up to the states, institutions, and schools to decide on the implementation. Education in India is a Concurrent List subject.

Key words: Gender equality, inclusive education, NEP and India

INTRODUCTION

The policy aims to bring in radical structural change in the education policy in India. While the policy has been lauded for bringing in some positive change, it has also equally been criticized for legitimizing exclusionary practices and policies. The definition of 'inclusive education' by UNICEF is two-fold. First, it means to have all children in the same schools and classrooms. Second, it goes a step further to mean real learning opportunities for children who have been traditionally excluded. However, the ambit of inclusivity in education as a whole is much broader. It not only deals with receiving an education but also its components, including what is the education about and how effectively is it imparted. Education should ideally be holistic, acknowledging the varied histories and identities of people and adjusted to current times. As a society, our history has been fraught with severe discriminatory and exclusionary practices, thereby making inclusive education the need of the hour in

India. The need for substantive equality has been reiterated time and again, especially with the formation and subsequent enactment of our Constitution. Education and job opportunities started being looked at as important pathways to ameliorate socio-economic hardships and break free from chains of the past. Since the challenge to achieve these goals is multi-layered, education policies cannot be uncomplicated. Therefore, given the Indian context, that reeks of historical discrimination, lack of explicit inclusionary policies would automatically render the education system exclusionary in its approach. However, NEP has in its entirety failed to comprehensively capture contemporary global issues and discriminatory grounds like gender, sex, caste, poverty, physical and learning disabilities, etc. NEP takes a homogenous approach and disregards intersectionality as reality. Further, the futility of asking for inclusive education without an inclusive curriculum is well established. The NEP, thus, is a hit and miss opportunity to bring about social transformation through substantial changes in the education system.

SALIENT FEATURES OF NEP 2020

1. Ensuring Universal Access at All Levels of schooling from pre-primary school to Grade 12;
2. Ensuring quality early childhood care and education for all children between 3-6 years;
3. New Curricular and Pedagogical Structure (5+3+3+4);
4. No hard separations between arts and sciences, between curricular and extra-curricular activities, between vocational and academic streams;
5. Establishing National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy.
6. Emphasis on promoting multilingualism and Indian languages; 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.
7. Assessment reforms - Board Exams on up to two occasions during any given school year, one main examination and one for improvement, if desired;
 8. Setting up of a new National Assessment Centre, PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development);
 9. Equitable and inclusive education - Special emphasis given on Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs);
 10. A separate Gender Inclusion fund and Special Education Zones for disadvantaged regions and groups;
 11. Robust and transparent processes for recruitment of teachers and merit-based performance;
 12. Ensuring availability of all resources through school complexes and clusters;
 13. Setting up of State School Standards Authority (SSSA);
 14. Exposure of vocational education in school and higher education system;
 15. Increasing GER in higher education to 50%;
 16. Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education with multiple entry/exit options;
 17. NTA to offer Common Entrance Exam for Admission to HEIs;
 18. Establishment of Academic Bank of Credit;
 19. Setting up of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs);
 20. Setting up of National Research Foundation (NRF);
 21. 'Light but Tight' regulation;
 22. Single overarching umbrella body for promotion of higher education sector including teacher education and excluding medical and legal education- the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)-with independent bodies for standard setting- the General Education Council; funding-Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC); accreditation- National Accreditation Council (NAC); and regulation- National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC);
 23. Expansion of open and distance learning to increase Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER).
 24. Internationalization of Education
 25. Professional Education will be an integral part of the higher education system. Stand-alone technical universities, health science universities, legal and agricultural universities, or institutions in these or other fields, will aim to become multi-disciplinary institutions.
 26. Teacher Education - 4-year integrated stage-specific, subject- specific Bachelor of Education
 27. Establishing a National Mission for Mentoring.
 28. Creation of an autonomous body, the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) to provide a platform for the free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enhance learning, assessment, planning, administration. Appropriate integration of technology into all levels of education.
 29. Achieving 100% youth and adult literacy.
 30. Multiple mechanisms with checks and balances will combat and stop the commercialization of higher education.
 31. All education institutions will be held to similar standards of audit and disclosure as a 'not for profit' entity.
 32. The Centre and the States will work together to increase the public investment in Education sector to reach 6% of GDP at the earliest.
 33. Strengthening of the Central Advisory Board of Education to ensure coordination to bring overall focus on quality education.
 34. NEP, 2020 aim to increase the GER to 100% in preschool to secondary level by 2030 whereas GER in Higher Education including vocational education from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035.

RECOGNITION OF GENDERED IDENTITIES

The NEP 2020 recognises that female and transgender individuals across all the groups and socio-economic categories are the worst affected people. There are plans to implement schemes of giving out bicycles to form cycling groups and creating walking groups to schools to include community participation and make safety nets for these vulnerable students. Further, recognizing critical needs of education of the girl child, the new policy proposes the creation of a 'Gender-Inclusion Fund' to create better educational spaces for women and transgender individuals. The fund will be accessible to states to create systems that will help the inclusion of these students. The fund will

initiate provisions of sanitation, conditional cash transfers, bicycle distribution schemes, etc. Additionally, funds will also enable states to support and scale up effective community-based interventions that address local context-specific barriers to female and transgender children's access to and participation in education. In this regard, the policy recommends establishment of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas to provide better boarding facilities for students to tackle geographical barriers to education. Despite these innovative ideas and proposals, the NEP is far from addressing core issues of inclusivity and conversations that are missing in the existing schooling systems. Historically, school curriculums have remained silent on discrimination based on sexual identification and orientation of individuals and specific discrimination that transgender individuals face in workplaces. These individuals are not accorded the basic respect that citizens deserve, and even though there has been a judicial abolishment of Article 377, conversations around identity are still considered a taboo and have led to multiple cases of discrimination in the past against these individuals.

INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The policy supports including special needs students in regular educational settings and acknowledges their existence. It substantially complies with The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016's objectives. In order to ensure that instruction is more inclusive and sensitive to children's needs, the strategy also aspires to hire special educators in all school complexes. Children with severe disabilities will be permitted to choose home-schooling and will be given access to qualified home-schooling teachers so they can continue to learn and receive the greatest educational resources. Additionally, teachers will receive training on how to spot learning difficulties in young children and how to support such kids in succeeding academically and taking care of their mental health. National Assessment Centre, PARAKH will be formulated to create equitable systems of assessment for children with learning disabilities. Alternate models for schooling are proposed to advance this objective. However, the NEP appears to be over ambitious and utopian on this front. It fails to recognize the fact that not only most teachers are poorly trained for such special assignments, it also

misses to take into account how most of India's schools are grossly understaffed. The policy also doesn't clarify or elucidate how it plans to create alternative home-schooling mechanisms that are accessible to individuals. For instance, in a recent evaluation undertaken by Delhi Child Rights Commission, as much as 60% of schools reported zero students with disabilities, and another 28 percent reported less than 1 percent. It highlights that people with disabilities are set to experience adverse socio-economic outcomes than persons without disabilities. The new policy fails to specify a roadmap of how it will make sure that education is made accessible to these individuals. It also doesn't specify what the change in the curriculum would be to make sure that children with learning disabilities don't feel excluded in the extremely competitive environments that Indian schools operate in today.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL ZONES

The NEP's advice to establish Special Educational Zones (SEZs) in areas with sizable populations of members of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and in those districts with high aspirations is one of its most notable recommendations. The main goal is to bring education to India's most rural and far-off regions. In order to transform these underdeveloped regions, additional funding will be pumped into numerous Center and state programmes and schemes. The policy hasn't specified what the criterion for these zones would be and how will they be distinguished in urban and rural landscapes, despite the fact that this novel idea has the potential to transform educational access in inaccessible areas of the country (such as urban ghettos with substantial minority population). The policy has no clear indicator of what the determining factors would be.

SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS (SEDGS)

The NEP 2020 acknowledges the glaring underrepresentation of some groups in the current educational systems. The NEP has combined gender identities, sociocultural identities, regional identities, disabilities, and socioeconomic conditions to establish a new social group called SEDGs to specifically address their educational requirements. The majority

of the policy's goals are based on fostering inclusion among these groups. As previously indicated, these groups have higher dropout rates for a variety of reasons, ranging from historical exclusion of communities from educational systems for the socio-cultural identity classification to lack of accessibility for tribal communities (geographic). The NEP 2020 offers a number of policies and programmes that have been proven to boost enrolment and increase representation, including targeted scholarships, conditional financial transfers to encourage parents to attend their children to school, and giving bicycles for transportation.

CONCLUSION

Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities comparable to the IITs and IIMs will be established across the nation, according to the national education policy 2020. These will be organised to introduce transdisciplinary academic. Both public and private academic organisations will be guided by the same set of accreditation and control rules. Colleges will be provided autonomy and phased-out college affiliation. By 2030, in order to work as a teacher, one must possess a four-year B. Ed. degree at the very least. Online education will be promoted more widely in order to better prepare students for potential pandemic circumstances.

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