National Education Policy-2020: A Critical Review

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Abstract

Amidst the profound disruption in the education sector due to the Fourth Industrial Revolution and COVID-19, the Ministry of Education, Government of India came out with National Education Policy – 2020 (NEP-2020), with the approval of the Union Cabinet on 29th July, 2020. The NEP-2020, envisages the vision of India's new education system which circumvents around the motto of self-reliance and perseverance. The NEP-2020 is more students friendly with a lot of flexibility in terms of credit transfers, curriculum, skills, access, and a unique multi-disciplinary approach. This paper analyses several commendable benefits such as structured pre-schooling and an early start to learning, universalization of inclusive education, a paradigm shift from rote to active learning put forward by NEP. Although opportunities offered by NEP-2020 are irrefutable, apprehensions pertaining to its scope and usefulness also exist, questioning the sanguinity shown in the framed policy. Significant challenges such as the implementation of The Three Language Formula, possibilities of amplified inequalities, privatization, and financing concerns have been critically evaluated. While the NEP is undoubtedly a step towards a brighter future, the policy paints an idyllic picture. The greatest task that lies ahead of the government is of carving out the 2D plans onto the 3D world. With the evolving future of work, institutions and policy-makers need to re-think the desired educational outcomes and re-assess the learning systems regularly that are truly relevant for the young generations.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Education Policy; The Three Language Formula; Privatization; Active Learning

1. Introduction

John Dewey, a famous American philosopher, and educational reformer, has aptly stated that 'Education is not the preparation of life; but life itself'. Education is considered to be one of the most essential investments that a country can make in its people and its future. Access to education is not only a vital human right, but it also plays a crucial role in the human, social and economic development of a nation. It acts as a key to eliminating gender inequality, reducing poverty, and creating a sustainable planet. Education changes the world for the better (Duncan et al., 2013). Furthermore, education acts as a new currency and a catalyst by which countries can maintain economic prosperity and global competitiveness.

In today's knowledge-driven world, access to quality education and the chances of national development are two sides of the same coin (Brende, 2015). The role that education plays in our society includes the generation of a skillful and knowledgeable workforce, enables talent cultivation, nurtures rational citizens, promotes innovation, and enhances productivity. It also caters to improving the standard of living of people, inculcates acceptance, respect, and equality amongst the members of society. The power of education is unique in that it allows self-enrichment, broadens horizon, and provides access to new perspectives. The whole purpose of education is to create socially responsible global citizens.

Due to the enormous role that education plays in the development of a nation, eradication of pov-

erty and all our lives in general, bring forward the need for a strong education policy. A robust education policy and the system should encompass universalization of quality education, a means-ends relationship, consistency of educational ideas, and be able to accommodate the change. Hence, an educational framework that all nations need should be relevant, realistic, adaptable, inclusive, enforceable, and endorsed. Looking at the critical role that education plays, it becomes supreme that the policies are ever-evolving and the system is free from loopholes.

Taking into account recent times, the ongoing pandemic due to the widespread of covid-19 has left economies derailed. The enforcement of worldwide lockdown saw millions lose their bread and butter as it brought all activities to a standstill. While various sectors recouped through work from home policies, the education sector was thrown the greatest curveball as more than 1.5 billion students are out of school according to human rights watch. School closures in over 188 countries have left aspiring learners stranded (Karsan, 2020). However, education systems across the globe are slowly adapting to the new normal through online learning platforms, the Indian education system has been stretched beyond its capabilities.

The effects of school closures in India have been multifold. The lockdown has gone a long way to depict the faults and cracks in the education policy of our country by exploiting the over-reliance on classroom learning and assessment methods requiring physical presence. The absence of infrastructure and technical expertise required for alternative online methods reflects the poor fund allocation towards the education sector of the country. This has led to the heightening of the huge contrast between the private and public school systems in our country (Karsan, 2020). A minor population of students who attend these private schools has shifted to online resources and platforms in an attempt to continue the learning process. On the other hand, the major chunk of students who attend public schools are sitting idle at home; staring in the face of deep-rooted social and class differences in our nation (Karsan, 2020). For a country with some of the highest dropout rates, school closures and halting of the education process rings bells of tanking literacy rates and booming child labour percentages, especially in the times of economic scarcity.

In light of the current events and consequences, the government passed the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy is a step towards consistency with global educational standards and methods. It aims at structural, financial, and operational reforms to bring qualitative and quantitative improvements to our current education system.

The first reform in the education system in 34 years, the policy aims to alter various aspects of the prevailing system. The new policy talks of an increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) budget allocation towards education in an effort to bring parity between the public and private school systems as well as building infrastructure for greater enrollment opportunities. It strives to bring a greater ambit of children attaining education across all age groups through the extension of RTE and emphasis on open school programmes and distant learning schemes.

Through procedural and operational reforms, the policy wishes to change how and what is taught to the students. As we are moving into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, domains like artificial intelligence and machine learning are becoming a dominant and significant part of our lives. The policy recognizes the need of merging technology and education and also aims to provide relevant schooling through vocational courses in coding and laying extra stress on research work. Moving away from the days of memory-based assessments and practices, the policy wishes to establish a more hands-on experience of learning through interactive classes, up to date methods, and standardized testing based on conceptual understanding. Put into perspective, the policy speaks of a fresh and modernized stance on education.

Although opportunities offered by NEP 2020 are irrefutable, apprehensions pertaining to its scope and usefulness also exist, questioning the sanguinity shown in the framed policy. With this perspective, the paper attempts to present the importance of NEP, along with its associated opportunities and challenges, which sometimes necessitate a rethink of the policies framed. The present paper has four sections. After this introductory section, Section 2 examines the milestones and opportunities offered by NEP, 2020. Thereafter, in Section 3, critical analysis of the NEP, 2020 is put forward along with the stance of the Indian Education System amongst the world and finally, in Section 4, we conclude from a broad policy perspective.

2. Milestones for the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020

Taking into account that in the coming years, generation-Z youth of India will beat other countries' youth population, the Government of India, Ministry of Education has come out with the NEP-2020 with the approval of the Union Cabinet. The NEP-2020 is more students friendly with a lot of flexibility in terms of credit transfers, curriculum, skills, access, multi-disciplinary approach, and many more. Few significant opportunities offered by NEP is discussed hereby.

2.1. Structured pre-schooling and an early start to learning

Looking at the bright side of the NEP, 2020, the inclusion of formal education for children between the age of three and five years has been lauded by a variety of academicians and schooling experts. The focus on early childhood care and education in the NEP would help toddlers get an early start as it would build a foundation for lifelong learning (Raveendran, 2020). The policy identifies that over 85 percent of a child's brain develops by the age of 6 and stresses the importance of healthy brain development and growth in the early stages of learning (Chanda, 2020). Universalization of early education would help pipeline the activities for proper care and stimulation of a child's brain. Such primary school learning would pave the way for the holistic development of young minds that require appropriate guidance while still in the molding phase. By catering to the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of the children, the focus on early childhood and education would better prepare our leaders of tomorrow (Roy, 2020).

2.2. Universalization of inclusive education

The NEP has also made strides towards a more inclusive education system. According to the new guidelines, mandatory schooling would be provided for children between the ages of three and eighteen years under the RTE Act, 2009. The widening of the ambit from the earlier age bar of 6 to 14 years would go a long way in providing free education and rudimentary skills to those who miss out due to social and economic reasons (Roy, 2020).

To enhance the agenda of strengthening the Gross Enrollment Ratio, the policy talks about developing effective and sufficient infrastructure in the upcoming years for students to procure safe and engaging education. It aims at re-establishing the credibility of government schools by upgrading and upsizing the existing institutions and building new ones in remote areas (Kumar, 2020). All these plans and strategies are in tandem with the idea of ease of access to education across all sections of society.

Emphasis has also been laid on the dropout rates across different age groups. Only 4 in 10 bachelor's students can complete on time, and 2 in 10 do not complete at all (OECD, 2019). Despite the growth in higher education attainment in recent decades, the employment premium enjoyed by graduates has remained steady. On average, about half of 15-29 years old are in education, one-third are not in education but employed, and the others are neither employed nor in education. Nearly one-third of higher education graduates have poorer information processing skills than might be expected. Young doctorate holders in higher education employment find less job security than their predecessors and their peers in other sectors (OECD, 2019). These mind-boggling facts and figures pave the way for universal and quality education.

Clubbed with the extension of Right to Education (RTE), the policy also aims at developing alternative and unique education centres to battle these dropout rates. These centres would cater to children who have been cut off from mainstream education due to migration or dropping out of school due to other reasons. The NEP, with all these propositions and ideas, aspires to motivate children to pursue higher education free of cost.

2.3. Flexible streams: broadening of horizons

A much-awaited change, the new academic set-up would dissolve the streaming barriers allowing students to choose subjects associated with varied disciplines. The strict division of fields into 'Science', 'Arts' and 'Commerce' was condemned by many as it would limit choices and often leave students with subjects that they are not keen to learn. The flexibility in subject choices would not only allow students to choose subjects that they fancy or are particularly strong at but also help them keep a variety of career paths at their disposal. Studying subjects of personal interest and liking, students would be driven to study in-depth and enhance their knowledge as well as their performance. This would

also be beneficial to the education system in general as it would bring it to parity with education systems prevalent in the developed countries across the globe.

2.4. From rote to active learning: a paradigm shift

The NEP-2020 articulates a desire to break away from the current rote-learning based model. The change from 10+2 to 5+3+3+4 is an effort to bring in a curricular and pedagogical structure with emphasis on active learning. It longs to impart education to children in a comprehensive manner with a focus on critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills, and digital literacy. Introduction of vocational courses, internships, and research projects from 6th standard along with the integration of co-curricular subjects in the curriculum would change the perspective related to schooling in our country. The proposed setup would help children gain more hands-on experience in learning and develop a better conceptual understanding (Lal, 2020). The NEP through its framework and propositions envisions a paradigm shift from studying to attain grades to study for personal growth and enrichment.

3. Critical Analysis of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020

Even though the opportunities and milestones offered by NEP 2020 are irrefutable, apprehensions pertaining to its scope and usefulness also exist, questioning the sanguinity shown in the same which is discussed below.

3.1. The Three Language Formula: increased linguistic ambiguities

The NEP encompasses a provision wherein the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction up till class five. This becomes problematic on three levels: first, the state gets complete autonomy in deciding the languages; second, it imposes Hindi and Sanskrit in all Indian states and last, it poses a problem for children of transferable employees. Dealing with the first drawback, the state can choose any two languages as the medium of instruction as long as they are native to India. This provision is not only vague but also poses a challenge for each state which now has to individually decide which language is indigenous for them. These ambiguities become prominent in states like Goa which witness the com-

plex politics of scripts (Ferrao, 2020). Furthermore, such guidelines leave a crucial decision on to the state governments which most of the time fail to have sufficient expertise about the needs of the youth and an ability to look into the need of the hour. What is also alarming is that the NEP does not provide any procedure for checks and balances, making it impossible to take corrective actions quickly.

The second problem of the *Three Language Formula* focuses on mainstreaming and pressuring all states with two languages: Hindi and Sanskrit. The policy promotes these two languages by making them widely available in all schools, while disregarding other vernacular languages. This creates a psychological impact on the students while also forcing them to perceive certain languages as superior (Agarwal, 2020; Ferrao 2020). This strategy has invited widespread criticism, especially from the South, who see this as a move to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking states. This specification is also in direct contravention with a Supreme Court Judgement. The way this formula is laid out is reminiscent of the anti-Hindi agitation in 1965 against the center's intention to make Hindi an official language.

Finally, there is a lack of clarity of education in the mother tongue in the case of students whose parents are transferable. There is a large quantum of inter-state movement in our country in the case of members of the armed forces, government jobs, etc. If every state has its own medium of instruction (given the heterogeneous nature of India) it will be almost impossible for these children to be able to fare well in this education system.

3.2. Divide and Rule: amplified inequalities

Clubbed with the *Three Language Formula* is the caveat of English being optional till grade eight. These two policies perpetuate inequality and impede the progress of the marginalized sections (Agarwal, 2020). This quandary arises especially because English is equated to employability and privilege in our country. If public schools will teach in the native languages and not give an opportunity to the backward and marginalized sections to learn English, they will find themselves in a cycle of disempowerment, exclusion, and alienation. This claim can be substantiated via studies that show that most students from economically weaker sections drop out of private schools due to their inability to communicate in English. On the other hand, there will be less scope

of quality English education available to those who have meagre affordability. Class-based inequality will widen in India as those who are able to afford English education will move ahead of the talent in the hinterland. It is important to give sufficient credit to English for the crucial role it has played in India's economic growth. Hence, it is necessary that everyone just does not have a right to education, but also a right to English medium education.

This policy not only defeats the vision of an equal education which is paramount for an evolving, prosperous, and equitable society but also breeds gender inequality to some extent. Being a patriarchal society, parents prefer their sons to a private school over their girl child. This will increase the gap between the two genders in society, a society in which men consider women as their subordinates. This becomes an issue when the NEP and public schools are not adequately equipped to cater to the needs of the economy and the marginalized in particular.

3.3. Privatization: from affiliation to autonomy

Many academicians, educational experts, and organizations have upbraided the NEP due to the possibility of privatization of higher education which leads to the denial of social justice. Most universities in India follow a system of affiliation to the government which does not give them complete autonomy in their operations. The NEP aims to phase out the system of affiliation to any university in fifteen years. This will not only grant the institutes complete freedom to take decisions regarding the fee structure, functioning, etc., but will also pave a way for privatization (Agarwal, 2020). This proposal to transform the education system will adversely impact the access that students have to higher educational institutes in India.

The consequences of the same will be especially prevalent in villages and other backward areas that will no longer be able to afford college due to high tuition fees. This will become similar to colleges in the United States which are mostly privatized and charge exorbitantly high fees. This causes most American students to take student loans and even to give up on their dream to attend college due to a lack of financial resources. There is a clear parallel that can be drawn for Indians belonging to lower-income households. Thus, in the long run, the NEP instead

of uplifting the poor will instead aid in furthering the gap between the former and the rich, which will in turn act as a hindrance in the growth and development of the country.

3.4. NEP financing: a utopian possibility

The implementation of the policy will require improved as well as expanded infrastructure to make way for vocational courses and choice-based modules in school. The promise of greater hands-on training, incorporation of AI, and teaching coding to students in the school will put a major strain on the country's finances.

Under the NEP-2020, the government has promised that 6% of India's GDP will be spent towards education. This claim seems to be extremely utopian and farfetched as the policy does not have any clear roadmap with respect to how this funding will be achieved (Rozario,2020). Furthermore, the current expenditure on education by the government is less than 1% of the GDP. Adding to the chaos is the pandemic which has sent the economy into doldrums and slowed down growth. All this clearly shows that the vision of NEP finding its finances is far from reality. The policy neither provides any mechanism to hold the government accountable to their promise of funding, nor does it lay out a means to combat corruption. This clause is indeed a promise up for speculation.

3.5. Silence on the RTE Act

Another aspect that drew the attention of many across the nation is that the NEP is absolutely silent about the Right to Education Act. While the act extensively talks about the universalization of education, it fails to make primary and secondary education a legal right. Hence, there is no mandatory mechanism for the central and state governments to make this a reality (Agarwal et al., 2020). In other words, a lack of legal backing due to silence on the RTE highlights the little chance of actual evolution of the education system. This policy fails to solve the challenge of significant dropouts post elementary levels, especially amongst girls, by being silent on the RTE Act.

4. Conclusion and Policy Implications

With the evolving future of work, institutions and policy-makers need to re-think the desired educational outcomes and re-assess the learning systems

that are truly relevant for the young generations. The learning imparted should foster skills (including analytical and digital skills) necessary for innovation. Universities need to churn out students that have resilience, inclination towards flexibility and adaptability, inter-personal emotional intelligence, positive mind-set, creative and critical thinking to face various threats associated with the ongoing and future crisis. New models of engagement such as learning consortiums and coalitions comprising of diverse stakeholders such as governments, institutions, publishers, alumnus, technology providers, corporate professionals, telecom operators need to be established for scalable, sustainable, and inclusive blended education. This is the high time to train students and faculties in evolving digital competencies so that they can become digitally fluent and employ technology responsibly. To utilize the best of both worlds (blended learning), institutions need to rigorously work on producing or procuring the quality content, employing resources effectively and planning concrete tasks systematically so that it is well-aligned with the institutional vision and policies.

Thoughtfully designed systems can enhance the conventional values of higher education. It can help institutions optimize the teaching-learning outcomes by maximizing the returns and mitigating the risks. Higher education is unique in its power to make socially responsible global citizens and COVID-19 has highlighted the significance of inclusive and flexible education systems that can effectively respond to complex and ever-changing needs of the interconnected yet fragile society. Even post the approval of the NEP, there are many inconsistencies that exist between the Indian Education System with that of other countries. Different methods of testing, the absence of research initiatives, limited course options amongst others, highlight the shortcomings of the current policy.

Educational modules in India continue to concentrate more on hypothetical training and largely depend on examinations as a means of evaluation. Large portions of the Indian curriculum relies on past research and obsolete context. Most Indian textbooks like those provided by CBSE (which is the most pertinent board in India) are not updated for years' altogether. Even if alterations are made, they are often implemented very late in the programs of Indian colleges. Furthermore, there is a little option available to the students to switch their major sub-jects in the middle of the course.

On the other hand, foreign institutions and educational programs tend to follow updated, new, and relevant research studies. Regardless of the help offered by the administration, there are limited research supports and centers existing in India. Contrary to this, research in colleges of several developed countries is funded by corporates leading to better processes and results. India has failed to internationalize its education and therefore in attracting students from different nations to pick courses offered by Indian universities.

Even though the NEP-2020 is an attempt to restructure the Indian education system, it is not a fullproof one. The quantum of criticism received by the policy represents its conspicuous shortcomings and underlines the need for measures to cover the same. Some recommendations for NEP could be truncating the overtly regulated mechanism via establishing few agencies for the purpose of educational monitoring. Furthermore, in order to make the utopian promise of financing into reality- a law needs to be passed to ensure that the state and central governments spend 6% of GDP on education. Moreover, a definitive decision has to be made to provide clarity regarding the *Three Language Formula*: what is considered to be the language of instruction in different states, how the provision has to be implemented, etc. To efficiently enforce the curriculum so promised, relevant and dynamic training programs have to be conducted in a manner that the teachers understand pedagogical needs. While the NEP is undoubtedly a step towards a brighter future, the policy paints an idyllic picture. The greatest task that lies ahead of the government is carving out the 2D plans onto the 3D world.

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