



Education Commission for a National Policy of Education

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The Government of India initiated the process of formulating a new national policy of education, on 26th January 2015 with the stated intention of meeting 'the changing dynamics of the population's requirement with regard to quality education, innovation and research aiming to make India a knowledge superpower by equipping its students with the necessary skills and knowledge, and to eliminate shortage of manpower in science, technology, academics and industry.' It further proclaimed polemically, as politicians are fond of doing, that 'For the first time, the government of India is embarking on a time bound grass-root consultation process which will enable the Ministry of HRD to reach out to individuals across the country through over 2.5 lakh direct consultations while also taking input from citizens online'. (MHRD, 2015).

The polemics is continued by critiquing the process followed in formulating the earlier education policies by criticising their 'top-down approach, depending on limited feedback from field workers and the stakeholders on the ground', the consultations being 'thematic-based, with discussions being held in silos' and 'time taken' from '6 months to 3 years'. As against this the claim was that, on this occasion, it was to be policy-making from 'bottom-up', 'time bound' with an "inclusive, participatory and holistic approach". (ibid.)

In a matter like formulating a new education policy, the polemical approach is fundamentally problematic. It expresses an attitude of one-upmanship indicative of a bias against the earlier policies and raises a reasonable apprehension that the purpose behind initiation of the exercise is not a genuine desire to seriously evolve an education policy, taking into account all that ought to be taken into account for a long-term policy, but rather a political motive. This seems to be further reinforced when we examine each of the three polemical claims made above. However, since the polemics is directed against the earlier policies, let us have a brief look at the history of policy-making in independent India, with a special emphasis on the two earlier National Education Policies.

Brief history of policy formulation in India

After Independence and even while the Constituent Assembly was seriously engaged in framing the Constitution, education had drawn the attention of the Government. At that time there was a strong reaction against the recently altered colonial status of the country. It was felt that the economic exploitation of India as only a producer of raw material by the British was possible because of their industrial economy. Therefore, the major emphasis was on self-reliance, for which science and technology and higher education were considered important. Accordingly, the Commission on University Education was constituted in 1948 under the chairmanship of Dr S. Radhakrishnan. It submitted its report in August 1949. While its recommendations were acted upon, no formal education policy on higher education was formulated or issued by the government.

In 1952, another commission under the chairmanship of Dr Lakshmanaswami Mudaliar was set up and submitted its report for the Reorganisation and Improvement of Secondary Education in 1953. Once again, while recommendations were implemented, no formal policy was formulated.

The first comprehensive policy in independent India was formulated in 1968 based on the recommendations of the Education Commission, usually called the Kothari commission. The Commission, constituted in 1964, comprised fifteen members, including experts from abroad, in addition to the chairman Professor D S Kothari, the member secretary JP Naik and an assistant secretary drawn from UNESCO. Twelve task forces were set up, which further working groups and subgroups, including twenty consultants from abroad, to present reports on specific issues. The groups had useful discussions and meetings with a number of educationists, scientists, members of Parliament and State legislatures, industrialists and journalists and, in addition to the President, Vice President and Prime Minister of India, Chief Ministers of States and Secretaries of various Ministries both in the Government of India and the State Governments.

After the Committee submitted its report in 1966, the Government of India published the summary of the report and once again held wide-ranging consultations with stakeholders and Members of Parliament. Following prolonged discussions, the draft was approved by the Cabinet and released in 1968 (Naik, 1997).

An abortive attempt to frame the second policy of education was undertaken during the first non-Congress government formed in 1977. The report, entitled 'Education of Our People', was based on the premise of 'education of the people for the people by the people' and had radical departures from the earlier 1968 policy. A Draft Policy 1979 was prepared but the Janata government had an internal fall out and this initiative did not proceed further.

A different process was followed for preparing the national policy on education 1986. In August 1985, a document entitled 'Challenges of Education' was released in several languages for deliberations and responses. It is noteworthy that the document was very frank about the failures of the government and the huge challenges ahead. But it did not lay the boundaries for deliberations and recommendations. The outcomes of country-wide debates, discussions, deliberations, conferences, seminars and consultations formed the input for the Draft Policy which was presented to the Parliament. The policy was then finalised in 1986, within a year of beginning the process.

This is not the final policy we have before us. Soon after the policy was released, the Congress party was defeated in the general elections and a coalition government under the leadership of VP Singh was formed. The new government appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Acharya Ramamurti to revisit the policy. The recommendations of this committee, if taken seriously, would have called for almost a fresh education policy or at the least implied extensive revision. However, the coalition government fell and a fresh election brought the Congress back as the head of yet another coalition. A committee was appointed under the chairmanship of Mr Veerappa Moily to examine the Acharya Ramamurti Committee report. Since the 1986 policy was

framed by the Congress government, which was back in power, this exercise became a formal ritual, with recommendations of minor changes. These amendments were finally approved by the Parliament in 1992. That is why technically the existing policy is called National Policy on Education 1986 (as amended in 1992).

It is noteworthy that, although both the 1968 and 1986 education policies were approved either by a Parliamentary committee or the Parliament itself, they faced the risk of being replaced by another policy, but narrowly escaped. This highlights the politically volatile nature of education policies.

An examination of the current process of policy formulation

Let us now proceed to examine the claims that the current process is better on three counts: namely being holistic rather than theme-based and in silos, bottom-up and time bound.

The first two claims are contradicted by the approach of outlining 33 themes (thirteen themes on school education and twenty on higher education) for consultations – this implies a thematic consultation as opposed to a holistic approach to consultation. When narrow themes are centrally given to people from the grassroots, thus binding them to responses related to specific aspects, the approach cannot be called bottom-up. Given the extensive consultations preceding earlier policies, as discussed in the earlier section, the claim therefore appears to be more of rhetoric.

Let us now look at the claim of a time bound process. The timeline fixed for the completion of the evolution of the new education policy was the end of 2015. There is no final policy in sight until now, mid-April 2017. Obviously, this claim of the policy formation process being time bound also does not hold good. It is clear that none of the three claims made in respect of the current process being unique or better than the earlier processes of consultation are valid. In addition, there is evidence to demonstrate that the design itself, let alone implementation, of the process of consultation did not stick to the three claims. Let us take a glimpse of the process.

Gram Panchayat level consultations were

regimented and tightly controlled as a result of the formality and ritual of consultation and the importance of time limits. Those who are familiar and have some experience of listening to rural folk, grass-root workers and people's representatives at the levels of village, block and to some extent also the district are aware of the style of their expression, which often start with their own experiences and seemingly irrelevant matters, but gradually and slowly lead to the main substantive issue they want to state and emphasise. This is so because their learnings are usually experiential and therefore they always start from the experience and then follow through with the insight they have derived. Binding them within limited themes and limiting them to a specific number of words for the needs of the technology are not consistent with the claim of consultation without silos and from the bottom.

Regarding the online consultations from 20 January 2015 to 30 April 2015 (the date was later extended), this process of online consultation is, by its very nature, restrictive, since technical know-how and facility are necessary.

A drafting committee for the new education policy was constituted in October 2015, but the nomenclature was changed to 'a committee for evolution of the new education policy'. The Ministry, it is clear, wanted to have its freedom to prepare a draft different from what the committee would recommend. It submitted its report in May 2016 but the government refused to make it public, with strong differences and avoidable controversy between the Chairman and the MHRD Minister coming out in the open. The report has not been officially brought to the public domain although the Chairman has shared it liberally, and it is available on the NUEPA website.

Subsequently, in June 2016, a document was released by the MHRD, still hesitating to call it draft, saying instead 'some inputs for the draft education policy'. Responses and suggestions on this document were invited by the end of September 2016, which deadline was extended by another month. The politics of bureaucrats versus educationists surfaced when the new Minister HRD announced that a committee of educationists will

be constituted to prepare a draft. The committee is yet to be constituted.

The entire course of events during this process provides enough ground to accept the view of Shapiro et al who describe such consultation processes as being 'little more than an exercise in the legitimation of dominant power'. (McConnell, 2010) Even if a new committee of educationists is constituted, it is unlikely to inspire the confidence of the nation because it would look like another step in the same direction.

It is difficult in this scenario to imagine repudiation of the inescapable conclusion that indeed both these documents, shared by the Committee and the Ministry are situated in 'assumptive worlds' as conceptualised by Marshall, Mitchell & Wirt (1991). The authors explain the concept: 'There are distinctive cultures in each state policy-making setting. Policymakers are socialised in these cultures and share understandings about what is right and proper. The idiosyncratic cultures of state policy environments affect the perceptions of the key actors in each state. These perceptions relate to the expected behaviours, rituals, and judgements about feasible policy options. This perceptual screen we term 'the assumptive worlds of policymakers' Young is cited by the authors as describing as the assumptive worlds of policymakers as being 'policy makers' subjective understandings of the environment in which they operate' incorporating 'several intermingled elements of belief, perception, evaluation, and intention as responses to the reality 'out there'''. Any committee appointed by the government – the dominant power – is likely to frame a policy on the basis of their beliefs, perceptions and ideologies, hardly reflecting the national consensus.

This narrative is important because it provides the background for the rumours that a policy is being formulated behind the scenes. The problem does not lie in the government evolving educational policy of its choice. After all, a democratically elected government has not only the right, but also the responsibility, to run the government in accordance with the ideology it had been proclaiming and professing publicly. Adopting this general principle, the current government has

every right to frame education policy consistent with its own ideology, which necessarily includes a futuristic dream Society, so long as they are willing to accept that it will be abandoned in favour of another policy for a different kind of society, as soon as other parties come to power. If they were to do it openly, there could be no criticism of trying to do something surreptitiously. They are, instead, proclaiming to follow an inclusive, participatory, holistic and bottom-up approach because they are aware, and it is universally recognised that education, in multiple ways, is different from any other sector of society and governance. Therefore, education policy formulation needs a different approach.

From the discussion so far, a few conclusions can be safely drawn:

1. Education policy-making is highly politicised. This is problematic since the average politician does not have adequate 'literacy in education' because there is so 'little of a dialogue between politicians and educationists.' (Naik, 1997) This high level of politicisation of education is not confined to India alone; Olssen et al (2004) observe, 'there was a time when educational policy as policy was taken for granted – – –. Clearly that is no longer the case. Today, educational policies are the focus of considerable controversy and public contestation – – . Education policy making has become highly politicised'. (quoted in Bell and Stevenson, 2006)
2. Formulating national policy of education on the basis of a specific ideology is not in the national interest. It must be based on national consensus. The Constitution of India reflects contemporary national consensus. It has therefore to be the guiding principle and compass for a new education policy.

The simple lesson is that formulating a new education policy, by its very nature, is an extremely complex, time-consuming, multidimensional, multilayered, reflective, highly intellectual process with such deep, wide-ranging, social, economic and political implications that they cannot be anticipated. In order to do justice to this gigantic task, there is no option but to constitute an Education Commission comprising persons from

all hues of ideology to credibly reflect the national consensus.

Formulating an education policy for the 21st century

Except during the closing decades of the 20th century, the dominant and competing philosophies which provided the framework for the social, political and economic order, and infused the ideals and aspirations of the world at large can be broadly termed as democratic liberalism, along with its accompanying framework of a welfare state and socialism of different hues. Very broadly and roughly, the Indian Constitution can be located in the tradition of democratic liberalism and a welfare state, along with an attempt to synthesise socialism; a more accurate description would probably be Fabian socialism. It might not be far off the mark to state that the report of the Kothari Commission was largely within this philosophical framework and therefore the 1968 policy flowing from it was embedded therein.

A close study of the 1986 policy and its relationship with the 1968 policy leads to the conclusion that its philosophical and ideological underpinnings are the same, a synthesis of democratic liberalism, the concept of welfare state, and a fair sprinkle of socialism. In many ways, the 1986 policy, at the broader philosophical and theoretical level, can be seen only as revisiting the 1968 policy more for affirmation than any modification.

Towards the close of 20th century, concrete examples of a thriving socialist social, economic and political order had a setback, raising questions and debate about that genre of philosophy – these persist till today. At about the same time, liberalism underwent a transformation to what is now generally called neo-liberalism, accompanied by neo-capitalism and neo-colonialism. The scenario is often described as globalisation accompanied by privatisation and liberalisation.

Most thinkers and perceptive observers agree that the ruling elite in India, irrespective of the political party in power, seems to have embraced wholeheartedly the strategy of embedding the Indian economy in the new world order. There is a sizeable section of intellectuals, aware citizens, social workers and activists as also political leaders

who strongly oppose this trend, but so far their number has not been sizeable enough to influence policy.

Educational policies are not framed in vacuum but are firmly embedded in the national goals, aspirations, needs and dreams. In the current situation where there is such a yawning gap between the proclaimed (through the Constitution) goals and those being pursued in practice through policies and programs, where does education policy emerge from?

Long-range educational policies must be and have always been made in independent India on the basis of recommendations of a Commission. The first policy on higher education, although not formally declared as a national policy, was based on the recommendations of the Dr Radhakrishnan Commission. Its impact can still be felt. Similarly, the long-range policy on, and major restructuring of, secondary education was based on the recommendations of Dr Mudaliar Commission. One reason no formal policies were formulated could be, as observed by Psacharopoulos in 1989, 'education policy is perhaps the contemporary equivalent of what twenty years ago was known as educational planning,' (quoted in Zajda, 2002)

Given the foregoing discussion, the reasons for recommending the constitution of an Education Commission are compelling. Care should be taken that the Commission is deliberately so constituted as to represent diverse points of view in the contemporary highly politicised world, so that its report can claim to be a fair reflection of the national consensus. It should be given adequate time to deliberate, undertake studies, engage in extensive and prolonged consultations and present a report to the nation for further consideration.

The first step for this Commission must be preparation and presentation of a well-reasoned document depicting the present scenario of education, including an objective and comprehensive critique of the 1986 policy, as amended in 1992, the challenges the country and the humanity are facing, the ideal world community and the Indian society that should be our goal, the envisaged role of education and the policy landscape required for the purpose. As Dobinson

suggests, 'education should endeavour to play its proper part in solving the greatest problems that face humanity (quoted in Zajda, 2002). Policy should be aligned to this endeavour.

The most critical and major issues concerning education and society should be thrown open for discussion, debate and inputs. These have been identified in various ways - education and human capital, global citizenship and national identity, autonomy, accountability and choice, or the themes of equality and equity as overriding policy issues. Social inequality has been suggested as another critical issue because of the 'manipulative role of the state in the maintenance of social stratification'. (Bell & Stevenson, 2006) New strategies that take into account changing and expanding learner needs, socio-economic educational disparities and inequalities, educational quality, harmonising education and culture, international cooperation, new approaches to adult education, and so on are some other themes that emerge from a review of literature. (Zajda, 2002) They are certainly very wide-ranging and very crucial in policy formulation.

The reasons to dwell on these become more critical when we consider that the last policy was formulated more than thirty years ago - the first policy on education in the 21st century must be an epoch-making, game-changing policy. Any new education policy has to deal with this scenario full of contradictions contestations and controversies. Without clearly taking a position on these extremely complex and multilayered fundamental issues, no meaningful educational policy can be framed.

Evolving consensus to take a position

Brodbelt suggests that only when 'myth and fact' in a nation's policy goals agree, does it reach 'its ideal system of education.' (quoted in Zajda, 2002) Mitter makes an insightful observation on the impact of globalisation on the culture of various countries, cautioning that 'current trends of economic, technological and scientific globalisation and the counter current revival of the awareness of cultural diversity' have created new imperatives and consequences for education. In terms of present and future 'universalism and cultural pluralism', a fruitful balance must be found 'between the messages of world system theory, and the theories

which regard cultural diversity to be a permanent formation of human history'. (quoted in Zajda, 2002) Both of these Himalayan tasks, of making the myth of the goals and social order mandated by the Constitution and the fact of inconsistent policies being followed by the governments converge, and finding a balance between universalism and cultural diversity, can be achieved by nothing less than a properly empowered Education Commission that comprises eminent persons representing the wide gamut of political ideologies to truly reflect the national consensus.

McConnell (2010) suggests that 'policy outcomes are often somewhere in between' the extremes of success and failure, 'and along a spectrum of success, resilient success, conflicted success, the precarious success and failure'. It is also suggested that evaluation should be 'in order to identify what can be built on and gaps that need to be filled'. With a very interesting and insightful observation that 'Failure is the mirror image of success' the main criterion for judgement is presented, 'A policy fails if it does not achieve the goals' set. Because of political positioning, governments cannot be expected to be objective in such evaluation and analysis. Moreover, there has to be a national consensus also on the critique for which due process of consultation with all the stakeholders is imperative. The situation is made more complex by the fact that the gestational period of education policy is long; to assess the impact of education policy for a cohort of children, a minimum of fourteen years, if we only include pre-primary to secondary education and exclude higher education, are required. If we wish to see the impact on a larger populace, it will mean much longer. Such a task can be achieved only by a broad-based Commission.

McConnell (2010) shares criteria for policy evaluation and cites contemporary writings on the role of and processes for evaluation. Only a full-fledged commission can be expected to take into account all the theoretical and empirical work on policy, for objectively evaluating the earlier policy and framing a more credible one.

Such a critique has to be located in a comprehensive and clear analysis of the current global and national situation and trends on the basis of which different

probable future scenarios that the new education policy will have to face have to be built and, more importantly, outlining a scenario which the proposed policy will contribute to.

Another critical aspect is that scientific evidence, research-based knowledge, empirical studies and lessons from successful experiments, programmes, pilot projects and trials rigorously undertaken must be objectively evaluated and considered for framing a national policy of education in the 21st-century. This can be achieved only if there is a broad-based Commission for collecting, collating, assimilating and drawing policies therefrom.

There is a huge body of knowledge in many disciplines, having far-reaching implications on various aspects of education. Biber (2012) very rightly points out that due to the greater visibility of some disciplines over others, there are blind spots relating to many disciplines that can contribute significantly to policy formulation. Neurosciences, psychology, sociology, socio-biology, and many other disciplines have advanced substantially and offer new insights for the new education paradigm the policy ought to present. Only a properly equipped Education Commission can draw both from these as well as philosophy, ethics, epistemology and the like to scientifically formulate a research and evidence based education policy.

In the contemporary highly competitive world, study of national policies of different countries can offer useful insights. Halpin & Troyna (1995) warn against blind imitation, but also suggest that 'policy borrowing involving the appropriation of identifiable aspects of another country's policy solutions, including ways of implementing and administering them is more likely when there is some synchronicity between the characteristics of different education systems involved and the dominant political ideologies promoting reform within them'. Careful evaluation and adaptation with fine tuning and proper calibration require the time and the agency of an empowered Commission.

Now that the ongoing process is at a standstill, it would be highly advisable that the Government of India seriously considers constituting the first Education Commission in and for the 21st-century comprising all shades of opinions along with some

renowned foreign experts. Education is too vital and overarching a subject to be left only to hard-core educationists or bureaucrats, however eminent.

Conclusion

A broad-based Education Commission is essential to provide the basis for an education policy in the 21st-century to conform with or contest the globalising new economic world order and resultant national order, and in the process, either creatively produce a synthesis of values inherent in the neoliberal philosophy and its concrete manifestation in globalisation and the Constitutional values and goals or reject one of them.

It is my belief that wiser counsel will prevail and there will be no sudden emergence of ideologically biased education policy. In the highly unlikely scenario of this happening, the right to information should be used liberally to ascertain the relationship between the policy and the views expressed by all the stakeholders that the government claims to have obtained. It is almost certain that there would be no or highly tenuous relationship between the two which will enable the people at large to question its divergence from the national consensus and argue for a broad-based Commission for which a powerful case has been attempted above.

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