

Evolution of Education Policy in India and its Impact on Government Initiatives

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Introduction

Formal education has acquired an important place in the consciousness of current societies. There is now clear recognition that education beyond what is available as a part of the community is needed and structures have been set up for creating opportunities for this purpose. The drive and commitment to educate all has been a part of the political commitment of the Independence movement as well as a major agenda of social reformers and activists. The nature and manner of making this available has seen many formats and areas of focus. The policy discourse before Independence and the structures to decide the priorities and work with them are interesting in themselves, but here we look at two major policy statements, the 1968 policy and the 1986 policy, the spirit they display and the programmes of actions they have generated. We then also briefly look at the recent attempts to formulate a new policy statement. This exploration and analysis of the policy holds rich possibilities, but the basic purpose of this article is to provide a background to the public (read Government) efforts, programmes of action and schemes since the 90s. The intense governmental interventions subsequent to the first comprehensive programme of action brought out in 1992 and the semi-government interventions before that have acquired prominence in the minds of people and established frameworks to structure and transform education.

We however, begin with the Kothari commission report of 1966, from which emerged the National policy statement in 1968. This Report is considered to be the first comprehensive overview of education in India and the document to which all subsequent policies and programmes have alluded. We will trace some key aspects indicated in this document through their subsequent formulations and frameworks of action based on that, beginning with the National Policy on Education 1986, which was modified in 1992 and going up to the current process of formulation of a new education policy. The latter has been almost three years in the

making, sporadically seeking inputs and releasing documents and choice of foci in the public domain, but still remaining a policy in the making.

Some Key Elements of the National Policy on Education 1986, modified 1992

Considering that the effort towards constructing an educated citizenry requires a multi-dimensional complex approach, we will focus on some aspects that were considered key to fulfilling the Constitutional commitment of a just, equitable and democratic society. The first comprehensive policy statement of 1968/1992 was based on the report of the Kothari Commission on education and reflected the spirit of that time. It was focussed on educating children as well as adults and helping them evolve as citizens of a democratic country. We pick up four strands that in our view provide the basic framework of the intent of fulfilling this commitment and see how they have been treated and the manner in which they are reflected in the subsequent initiatives undertaken by the government. The areas that we consider are:

1. Purpose of education and notion of a human being and a citizen
1. Teachers - their role, autonomy, respect and identity
2. Science and technology as a means of human development and the improvement in their quality of life, versus only as an end in themselves for industrial and market use
2. Common school and equity along with public responsibility and, within these ideas, the need for a policy of school compensating for inequities at home

This review will also bring up the evolving definitions of some basic elements as reflected in policy discourse: the notion of school, of teacher and of responsibilities. Embedded in this discussion are the nature of governance, management and administration of education, including accountability principles and even the question of who is to take comprehensive and

specific curricular decisions, and guide teachers. How are action plans decided and implemented? The discussion will serve as an overview to the missions, schemes and other pronouncements initiated by the Government since.

The Purpose of Education

The 1968 policy, modified in 1992, considered education as an instrument of change that can reach everyone and help usher in the socialistic pattern imbued with a concern for others without violence. It specifically mentions as goals education for economic and social development as essential in a democratic society for personal growth, but through a social perspective. The person is seen as a citizen, a constituent element of the nation. We quote:

‘In a democracy, the individual is an end in himself and the primary purpose of education is to provide him with the widest opportunity to develop his potentialities to the full. But the path to this goal lies through social reorganisation and emphasis on social perspectives.’

This is amplified by the argument that individual fulfilment is reachable through a collective spirit and not through a narrow pursuit of personal or group interests. It also warns that this is a long term effort requiring hard work and patience. The intent is clearly to recognise the primacy of the individual citizen and also underline the need for the recognition of the benefits of collective spirit.

While the 1986 Policy, as modified in 1992, restated most of the basic statements of the 1966 Report, nuances in the articulation and emphasis betrayed significant shifts. And while it recognised the importance of quality education for all, it was only up to a certain limit and with somewhat narrower purposes. Citizens had become resources for the development of the abstract nation, thus becoming less important in themselves. The tone leaned towards preparation for vocations; from the development of an enriched autonomous person, the focus was on preparing individuals to follow routines and become a part of an efficient production machinery. The movement was away from conceptual development and a more enriched way of life to getting skilled at small jobs and discipline, and contentment being a cog in a large wheel. The notion of talent-based education and expenditure in proportion to the talent became acceptable.. A shift was thus made away from the purpose of uniform equitable access, and away from

the focus on education for a democratic people. As the effort to include everyone in educational enterprise was intensified, simultaneously the urge to stratify it became more and more pronounced. The focus clearly became to develop an ‘efficient and capable’ workforce and a consumer whom market advertisements could reach and attract – a resource for development and a consumer for the market.

With this as an underlying approach, subsequent efforts have leaned more and more towards skilling rather than educating. While, the curricular frameworks continued to emphasise the educative process and equitability, the budgets and schemes did not show the same focus. In 1988, vocational education became a recognised part of the secondary curriculum with differentiated education in schools considered as the appropriate goal. The conversation about preparing children for the economy started moving from the margins to the centre of the statements. The efforts did not become purposeful as vocational education could only work with a transformed economy and a social order that believed in recognising capability and skill. It needed a society that paid reasonably for labour and with fair opportunity for all to aspire to being what they wanted to. The structures, processes and effort needed to make vocational education meaningful and effective were never operationalised as the intent to spend on the education of the poor and the disadvantaged was absent. So while we did talk about skilling and vocations, all that it implied was to legitimise stratified streams.

The recent effort to develop a new education policy only re-emphasises the trend. Discourse around the policy in the public domain does not mention education beyond measurable learning outcomes and has strengthening of vocational education as an important component. **Unless educational process is more ambitious learning is not likely. In the questions for response to yield ideas for developing the NPE 2016, some questions asked focus on measuring of the learning and seeking ways to replace teachers. In these questions clearly but somewhat obliquely the idea of the teacher is put to test.**

The Notion of the Teacher

The 1968 document articulated some important principles when it talked about the teacher. It said that teachers are the most important part of the

educational enterprise and need an honoured place in society. They must have academic freedom to learn, and to grow and to publish. They need to have educational qualifications and be competent. This and the long section on compensation and parity suggests that the understanding was that the teacher would grow as an autonomous educator and a pedagogue and evolve her own processes and strategies. The system would encourage and empower her to do all this. The capacity-building envisaged and indeed the notion of the teacher that emerges from the spirit of the discussion on teacher are far from the formulations that followed.

The 1986 policy mentioned the teacher as being crucial and had this quote embedded in the section on teachers: ‘...it is said that no people can rise above the level of its teachers’. However, in the same paragraph it also stated the bitter truth: ‘The status of the teacher reflects the socio-cultural ethos of a society.’

And it is this socio-cultural ethos that has seen a rapid decline. Therefore, in spite of the statements to the contrary, the notion of the teacher has been under severe stress, and particularly in the last three decades since neo-liberalisation and the education policy of 1986.

The policy proudly stated that ‘the Government and the community should endeavour to create conditions, which will help motivate and inspire teachers on constructive and creative lines.’ It spoke about merit-based and objective selection and a mechanism to determine appropriate wages and remunerations along with an open participative evaluation system. It promised pay and service conditions which would be, we quote, ‘commensurate with their social and professional responsibilities and with the need to attract talent to the profession. Efforts will be made to reach the desirable objectives of uniform emoluments, service conditions and grievance-removal mechanisms for teachers throughout the country.’ The policy also talked about reasonable opportunities for promotion and along with that suggested norms for behaviour to reward and punish. So the teacher was on the path of becoming an employee of the state, but with a caveat. We quote ‘Teachers will continue to play a crucial role in the formulation and implementation of educational programmes.’

There is a remarkable shift here: many promises are made but are not kept. Along with that the idea of the teacher as only an employee takes

shape; terms like ‘better deal’ and ‘accountability’ - without clearly specifying accountability to whom - are introduced. And then come the projects to make education possible to the wider community. Taking note of the reluctance of teachers from outside to stay in the village because of the material conditions and unwilling to make the effort to make the conditions reasonable, the alternative choice of putting in someone from the same village to teach was promoted. It also sounded good as it was cheaper, the person knew the language and the culture of children and could be closer to them.

But, as we have been observing, the State has a remarkable affinity to make choices that suit those in control. The ideas and their manifestations get shorn of the essentiality and become something else as they are converted into steps of convenience. The idea of the teacher suffered terribly in this period of neo-liberal infusion of funds into primary and elementary education to improve quality. The effort was primed at quality, as the belief was that for access much has been done, and, unless quality is made better, participation would not improve as it is now more a question of retention. The state system was defined as non-functional, rigid and systemically non-reformable and so parallel structures were set up. In the beginning these attempted to accelerate the improvement in the public system, but eventually became a part of the clamour to close it and hand everything over to the parallel private system. They are in fact said to be the genesis as well since they allow those running the system to argue that we have done everything, tried everything and nothing works. What is forgotten is that the programs chosen and the manner of their implementation never involves those who are supposed to run them and make them work on ground in making decisions about what and how of the steps proposed. The idea of decentralisation and participation has been reduced to closer monitoring and stronger centralisation as the functionaries on the ground are not expected to bring in ideas and represent the situation on ground in order to help analyse the scenario to find better solutions. They are instead meant to promote the central diktats and ensure compliance and to collect ‘meaningless’ data for central consolidation.

We have digressed but only to emphasise that the teacher recognised as a participant in the educational reform was merely a cog. Her status and stake in the enterprise gradually eroded as

the stratification in the category called teacher increased. In an apparent effort to expand access in a mission mode and for pecuniary reasons the teacher became less paid, more insecure, stratified and vulnerable. The stratification brought into dispute the legitimacy of the regular teacher and the expense incurred on her. That has led to an undue pressure, often unwarranted criticism and the clubbing of all teachers as shirkers, based on the image of the few who were used by the authorities to manage the rest and also enable their rent seeking from other teachers. Whoever be the politicians, and whatever level they may be in the political hierarchy, the teacher was and is at their mercy. In spite of the promise of fair appointments and of capacity building, governments appointed or allowed teachers to be appointed haphazardly for political or rent pay offs, and some governments closed down facilities of teacher preparation or undermined them, claiming that teachers did not need training.

The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) started in-service capacity building but very soon the DPEP became a mission (abhiyan) - the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). It is not that all DPEP efforts were much better, but the efforts under SSA promoted a deep cynicism and boredom. It demotivated the teaching community as it happened along with the stratification of teachers, treating teachers as lower rung paid employee, the tag of shirkers and 'imbeciles' who could be trained (or not trained as they were not ready to change and learn) by anyone to the stage where the State itself hesitates to talk about training. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) was created with much pomp and show to improve teacher education. In about two decades, it has made teacher education a certification drama. The essentiality of the training degree and the uninhibited licensing of the colleges of teacher education has led to a deep disrespect for the entire teacher education system.

The Justice Verma Commission as well as numerous other committees, new curricula and the increase in the duration of the B Ed and M Ed programmes notwithstanding, the task of recovering teacher education seems impossible. There have been a lot of discussions on the DIET, the SCERTs, the CTEs, the IASEs and the NCTE (or the NCERT etc) as well. In all these, one important point has come up. And that point is that these need to be free of bureaucratic control and have as leaders good academicians

and administrators who have some independence in function. They also must have adequate person power and budget that can enable them to fulfil their roles. The irony is that while we talk about educational reforms and vitalising the educational process using these very institutions, they are starved of person-power, reasonable funds and autonomy.

The recent effort towards the new education policy clearly pitch education as not something that the public funds can do and so the private sector and corporates come in. This is not inconsistent with the attempt to get the corporates to make policy suggestions on education. Like bureaucrats, business magnates are the new experts who know all about how to fix the problem of education. As for the teachers the biased view that the teachers need to be watched, evaluated and monitored and governed through rewards and punishment – the idea of teacher accountability without teacher capacity and autonomy – finds currency. There is heavy leaning towards control and better ways of monitoring and no questions concerning motivational factors asked. Nor are alternative causes for de-motivation considered. So, models based on a different analysis to address this question are yet to evolve. The claim is that competence of teachers and their motivation is crucial for improving the quality of education. Further claims are made that initiatives are being taken to address teacher shortages, improving pre-service and in-service teachers' professional development and to enhance the status of teaching as a profession, improving teachers' motivation. The only disruptive factor that is recognised is transfer and even the remedy for that is sought to be made devoid of any choice or human interaction. Apparently the management must be totally mechanical and objective! There is no other suggestion or issue considered worth considering or being administered better.

Science and technology

The 1968 policy emphasised science and technology with the perspective of building an alternative world view and understanding to move ahead of some of the archaic beliefs that were embedded in society. It also spoke about these for the purpose of economic development. The focus in this was, however, clearly towards building an India on principles of rational and scientific thinking. The emphasis was more on science and understanding.

This gradually shifted in the 1986 policy in which the social element of science was reduced. The focus now was to develop abilities and values such as the spirit of inquiry, creativity, objectivity, the courage to question, and an aesthetic sensibility and to relate science to the health, agriculture and daily life. So while this may seem to be a wide arena, the significant part is the dropping of the social and rational view emphasised earlier.

The 1992 Action Plan showed this even more clearly by emphasising the technology part even more – it had a whole section on this aspect. The shift is clear, it is from science and the method linked to science, although equally present in other subjects, to technology and its use for economic development. Rather than a view informing education and sensibility, the focus is now on it being a tool for swifter dissemination of other ideas.

The new policy formulation does not even mention science, or any other subject, as an area of relevance for discussion and inputs. It is only the pedagogies that are of importance besides the technological devices and communication systems. The shift in the 2015 formulation is clear - it assumes that vocational education is what we must move towards and the only matter of discussion is to what extent. The only question allowed is should it be separate or part of the main subjects and how do we make it more interesting. It clearly says that education must prepare people for vocations. The shift from being the constitutional citizen to being the economic resource for the nation and also for the employer is plainly stated. The stress in this is clear - let everyone reach a minimum level of learning so that the benefits of development and progress can be best harnessed. And people are no longer constituent citizens of the democratic nation but are a resource for the engine of development much like the raw materials used in the factories and furnaces. The notion of a citizen and the framework of education and everything else associated with it changed ever so clearly over time, not just in policy and its manifestation, but also in the rhetoric so as to make today the abstract nation and indeed also now the employer superior to the constituent citizen. They must fit in to the slots on offer and be adequately skilled such as to modify themselves as the slots change.

4. The Common school system

The common school system was emphasised in the 1968 document as essential to democratic

citizenship. It pointed out that the education system in which private schools also functioned was bound to be iniquitous. It said that the rich are able to buy the best education for their children while the poor have to go to the substandard schools. The position is thus undemocratic and inconsistent with the ideal of an egalitarian society. This also brings to question the idea of what is recognised as merit based selections. The 1968 policy brings this out poignantly: ‘sometimes even the ablest among them (the poor) are unable to find access to such good schools as exist, while the economically privileged parents are able to ‘buy’ good education for their children. This is bad not only for the children of the poor but also for the children from rich and privileged groups.’ It thus emphasised that schools should be such that they should allow access to all children irrespective of their social and cultural backgrounds and their economic means.

The 1986 policy and the action plan of the 1992 had no mention of the common school and concern for equitability. Instead it had a plan to make available to the majority a minimum structure and facilities. For those poor who could beat the system and be selected in so called ‘talent hunts’ there were Navodayas. To be fair to the policy, while it gave up the attempt for the common school as impractical, it did make some concrete plans to provide something and pledged public commitment to the education of a certain quality available to all children. The effort towards this action plan worked in fits and starts and without conviction. Those responsible for making it happen had no faith in its working and did not think of it as important or worth doing. They had no stakes and interest as the effort carried out in mission mode did not involve them and did not expect them to closely communicate with the people their efforts were to address. Coupled with the pressure of considering the education of all children as a personal rather than a public good, the pressure to equate the private system with the public school and with a lens that appeared to always show the public school in an inferior light, had a big toll on the public school system. The process for evolving the new education policy therefore understandably sought responses on school management. The significant point is that the reference to the education of the deprived sections is in terms of including them in education. The principle of equity has been forgotten and the lack of conviction in educating all with equity becomes obvious.

Current Trends and the CCE

The action steps are moving on. The Central minister decided at one go that the NCERT syllabus is too much and must be cut down by 50%. He needed to ask no one why the syllabus was the way it was and what battles had been fought to reduce it to the current levels. He did not ask why the content in the State government books and the private school books and syllabi was so much more in comparison with the NCERT books, and should it not be the former that should be addressed first.

The Delhi government decided that the best way of ensuring success is to separate the children into those who would learn more and those who would learn less. The rationale for doing this was not shared and the possible implications of doing this were not considered fully. The academic issues of the age, stage, its relationship with the National curricular frameworks, the Constitution and even pedagogies did not even occur in the document that the Government brought out. The rationale given was very wishy-washy and disturbing. It is important to think about these questions and then take decisions. It is not good for the system to implement things and remove them even before they have been implemented properly, understood and adapted. Continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) is an example of this.

The debates concerning assessment and CCE are focussed on filtering, comparing and ranking. It is not about helping children learn by understanding what they or what an individual is doing- whether what she is doing is right or where is her error, but about why CCE did not work. The questions on CCE pre-suppose that the initiative has totally failed and has shown no gains. Thus the critique does not include answers on questions to do with how they think CCE can help and what in their view have been the benefits of CCE. There is no effort to ask views of people on the ground on how assessment systems can become more nuanced and reward children for thinking and innovation. This exclusion has long-term implications not only for current learners but the very fabric of our society.

Summary

As is clear, the trend in Government initiatives has been of constantly diluting and sometimes even discarding some key ideas of equity and inclusion.

The initiatives seem to show a progressive lack of a broad and consistent vision of education aligned with Constitutional values. There seems to be no faith in the importance and possibility of equitable education that includes all, as even the policy documents show a gradual moving away from these ideas. The issues included in policy have remained unaddressed in the implementation on the ground and the budgetary allocations are, at best, only a small portion of what was committed. The sporadic peaks of interventions have a haphazard and poorly visualised design and lack a clear and consistent vision of education that is understood by those in the school system.

The peaks of activity were part of the increasing desire for quick-fix solutions and directed at small components of the system for brief periods. These activities, some based on contradictory principles, could run on parallel lines in the same school and focus on the same element and urge the same teacher to move in opposite directions. In this fragmented approach, the system was not even aware of all the interventions being made and the teachers and the schools who were to implement them were not sure why they were to do what they were being told to do. A lot of these initiatives were from independent private players not talking to each other and were being handled by independent departments within the state.

As the clamour for measuring and monitoring increases, the responsibility of the failure is yet of the teacher. This taking away of the pedagogic and curricular agency and autonomy of the school and the teacher has also been accompanied by increasing instrumental and narrow articulation of education. The system administrators and the protagonists of new methods and techniques for piecemeal goals have decided that the teachers do not work and they cannot think, so they must follow directions. There is no concern and effort put into understanding the work of the teacher and the challenges she has as the system moves from one set of failed ideas and experts to another set without recognising that the only way of quality universal education can be through an empowered and 'autonomously' (not arbitrarily) functioning teacher supported by an enabling eco-system of governance and administration.

Resources:

- 1 Kothari Commission report 1966 and the National Policy Of Education 1968
- 2 National Policy Of Education 1986 and the Programme of action 1992
- 3 National framework for Elementary and Secondary education 1988 - National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)
- 4 Dewan Hriday Kant, New education policy fails to address issues of equity <https://www.villagesquare.in/2016/12/05/new-education-policy-fails-address-issues-equity/>
- 5 Some terms used
 - DPEP- District Primary School Program
 - NCTE- National council of Teacher Education
 - NCERT- National Council of Educational Research and Training
 - SCERT -National Council of Educational Research and Training
 - DIET – District Institute of Education and Training
 - CTE – College of Teacher Education
 - IASE- Institute of advanced studies in education
 - SSA – Sarva Shiksha abhiyan
 - NPE – National Policy of Education
 - NCF – National Curricular Framework

I am thankful to Nimrat Kaur of the Azim Premji Foundation for the inputs of ideas and organisation of this article

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