



Whither Indian Education Policy

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Introduction

The suspended 2016 Draft Education Policy of India reinforces status quo through its tacit acceptance of stratified education, the intense focus on regimented outcomes and competition, and its inability to decentralise and empower teachers.

Background

There is widespread realisation that government schools, particularly in rural India, are not performing and their learning outcomes are poor. Although there are anecdotal stories about extremely well-run schools and devoted teachers, they are sadly in a minority. At the same time, we know of the mushrooming of low, medium and high fee private schools. These are touted as English medium and many aspirational rural parents are paying fees to send their children to these schools. Many think these private schools are more disciplined, more regular, that teachers pay more attention, give homework and assess more. They neglect to point out that these are not accessible to those who cannot pay the fees. It is important to think about this as there is also an apparently plausible argument made that private schools are low cost but still manage to ensure children learn. But given the scenario that even those who are in supposedly good schools and showing good results in exams seem to be ill-equipped to handle conceptual tasks or questions, the realities in village schools and in the schools for the poor, has to be recognised while evaluating the new Education Policy, 2016 and the still up in the air 2017 policy.

The Policy discourse

In order to assess the policy and the way it is formulated, it would be useful to build an idea of why we need policies on education. After all, schools have been functioning since many centuries and the question why we needed a policy is important so that we can consider the current attempt against that yardstick. Instead of going back to the pre-independence period where there may have not been a coherent pan-Indian understanding about education and struggling with a comparative framework including the situation today, we can start by looking at the first comprehensive policy

document for Indian education and the way it was formulated.

The policy document considered the state of affairs in the nation, the imperatives before the country and the role education could play in it. It then went on to describe the existing situation, the prevalent challenges and then after that it laid out the broad goals. The document then addressed possible challenges and suggested possible ways to reach these goals. The 1986 policy document followed the same structure and reviewed major goals, concerns and hopes articulated by the 1968 policy. with sections on the mechanisms to reach some of the goals and initiated thinking about curricular processes and led to many subsequent curricular formulations at the national level.

The relationship of education to the goals of nation building and their role in the polity of the democratic state was much more visible in the 1968 policy document. Even though the document was embedded in the framework of enlightenment of the Indian non-elite, it did have concern for equality by considering all people as constituent parts of the nation. The 1986 policy for the first time brought in, among many other changes from the 1968 policy, the ideas of the minimum levels of learning and of people as being resources in nation-building, rather than just citizens.

The policy shift from the Constitution assembly debates and the preamble to these policy had gradually got narrowed in its scope, meaning and purpose. The pre-independence debate initiated by the proponents of Gandhiji's Nai Talim had put forward some concerns. While the underlying purposes and implications of these may perhaps be disputed, what was important is that they argued for an education policy as universal, and was more complete than the one eventually adopted and practised on the ground. The 1968 policy did emphasise the some aspects of Nai Talim, as did some of the subsequent documents, but the major thrust was towards recognising and sustaining the changed position of the citizen from a constituent to a resource.

The policy also spells out the resources to be

made available and the expected and desirable governance and executive attitude to the key stake-holders. It also hints at the structure and has embedded guidelines about the functioning mechanisms of the whole structure. These have been part of the review, but unlike in the NCF 2005 in which the expectations from the policy and the commitments needed from the Government were clearly spelt out, the policies remained non-committal on the precise steps that would be taken and the resources that would be committed. It is interesting to remember that the Nai Talim movement, while recognising the need for Government participation in education, focussed on the need for community as an important stakeholder in contributing to the functioning as well as financing of the schools in their neighbourhood. They were also arguing for disclosure of the source of the money disbursed on education to ensure that the funds came from legitimate sources and not from sale of liquor and other such products that were not examples of proper ethical and moral behaviour. The statements of Elphinstone in third decade of the nineteenth century, though strikingly different from the ideology of Nai Talim, also suggested the need for community ownership,

The expectation from the 2016 policy was therefore substantial. It came on the heels of the NCF 2005, the position papers linked to it and in particular the position paper on systemic reforms and it was hoped that the gaps in the policy discourse and its implementation would be addressed. Then again, the NCF 2005 had been appended as a base document to the RCFTE 2009 with the expectation that the two would bridge the glaring gaps. The run up to the policy did none of that. There was no review of the previous policy and no status report prepared on the current status and challenges. There was not even an adequate collation of the aspirational perspectives of the people and the nation. Instead, it was a collation of an arbitrary set of questions around which discussions were held without valid mechanisms in place to make them meaningful and participative. The exercise thus remained around appeasing the hue and cry around some of the measures in the RtE. It is against this background that we shall analyse the main points of the RtE 2009

The Right to Education Act 2009

The RtE was only a show of good intentions though in one sense it can be said certainly tried to make education the right of all children. The equity principle and the idea of common school was, however, diluted considerably. A provision for reserving 25 per cent seats in private schools for economically disadvantaged children meant that the stratified system of schooling was accepted in principle.

Apart from this tacit acceptance and legitimisation, there were two important lacunas that were stark. One the fact that the reimbursement to the schools was not according to the fees that the school charged but an arbitrary amount fixed by the government. The second that there was no additional support available to these children to succeed in the highly competitive private school environment. In addition, the backlash of better-off parents and the kids from elite backgrounds acting disdainfully towards these children was also not considered and taken into account and still is not foregrounded as most elite private schools treat these quota children differentially.

Financial gap

The other major gap in RTE was the absence of any financial commitment to make its goals possible. There were no punitive or corrective steps for the bureaucrats who run the education system. The only persons held accountable for learning were parents, children and teachers. The others had to only provide the infrastructure and teachers of whatever quality and generate data that met the requirements. Teachers could be directed, given non-teaching tasks during school hours without accountability. Ironically, the judgments of culpability and fixation of guilt were also left to the local or state government departments, as being appropriate authority.

Overbearing monitoring

In the years subsequent to the RtE, while the bureaucratic machinery functions to do patchwork on the supply conditions at the schools and generates figures that include half-truths, it allows no space on autonomy to the school and the teachers, who have no agency left. Years of overbearing monitoring and tyrannical guidance

have left them unconfident and de-motivated. The nature of teacher education has also been bureaucratised and, hence, soaked in so much corruption that they do not even feel competent to teach with confidence. The entire teacher education system is geared towards certification. What was said in the RtE and by these monitoring mechanism was contrary to the spirit of no detention, which aimed at giving children more time and support. The interpretation of this was that by some miracle children should be learning content and abilities of any given class, regardless of their backgrounds. The result was that schools and children were flooded with a lot of testing pressure and external evaluations by unsympathetic experts, who themselves had never taught in such classrooms and had no background understanding of the children in these schools.

Given this situation, the major challenges before the new education 2016 policy were twofold: first, clarifying the purpose of education and, second, the governance and implementation of education. There was an intense need both to make community central to this process and simultaneously transform the attitude of the education system. This included having the voice of the rural disadvantaged heard in schools and the school system as a whole to respect persons of disadvantaged backgrounds.

Policy disappointment

The policy formulation in the 2016 exercise was seriously disappointing in all these aspects. To begin with, the process itself was flawed. The new policy is still being developed and it is unclear how much of the current policy direction and suggestions might remain. Then again, the framework is still speculative, with little clarity regarding the process, the terms and the team. The Subramanian Committee report was preceded by a policy statement articulated by the MHRD. Despite being purportedly based on the extensive consultations held across the country there are three. This process had three major deficiencies, each of great significance. The first is that the process did not begin with a comprehensive assessment of the previous policy document, its implementation status and the challenges. This was particularly needed due to the intervening National Curriculum

Framework documents and the position papers linked to NCF 2005. These had made observations on the functioning of the system that had policy implications. In the absence of such an analysis, the consultation was based on an assorted set of leading questions that overlooked the fundamental commitments as well as a meaningful sense and purpose of education.

The second deficiency was the manner the consultations were held and the inadequate recording and documentation of the proceedings.

The third was that even what was collected and collated was perhaps only skimmed through. No effort appears to have been made to go beyond the narrow perspective. The issues that policy must address are: the relationship of education to the life of the people, to the state and the government, the role and purpose of education, its ownership and financing. It needed to spell out if the basic tenets of NCF 2005 would be renewed and indicate the nature of shift. Instead, the policy had made some covert assumptions. It was not clear which steps emanating from the policy consultations would be taken up.

The result is that the inequities of stratification have been accepted, rather than challenged. The underlying belief is that education is fuel to the economy and that there are some children who are more meritorious than others who need to be identified and nurtured right from the beginning. There seems to be the view that most children will not end up in academic or administrative jobs and therefore have no significant need for education. They would only require basic mechanical skills to be able to perform cheap labour intelligently and be consumers of the advertised market. There is no need for a common enriched classroom or expectations for them. The focus should be on training them for some low status role in the economy.

Thus, instead of questioning the failure of the system to arrive at the goal of equitable quality education for all the policy the policy accepted this as its role. That the human being was considered a capital to be harnessed for the benefit of the nation rather than as a citizen with rights and duties stood out clearly.

Purpose of education

It was also evident that education was being interpreted as a skill development and training programme. This directly accepts that the major purpose of education is to find a job. The idea of universal education as essential to enrich the experience and joy of life was and is ignored. The way it was defined and has moved forward, it does not make any case for the rural poor to invest in the education of their children.

One of the main challenges for education today is the cost to run schools. The expectation was that the policy would be forthright in acknowledging the need for a greater investment on education and correct the steps that had been left hanging so far. The tilt of the policy, however, is in the other direction. There is a cut back in spirit and in reality on the resources available and utilised. It does not articulate the need to make for the school and the teacher the most critical answerability to the children, their parents and the community. It does not state the need to rediscover the purpose of education with the community as a participant and bring them in to the dialogue and in implementation. Instead, the clear takeaways from the draft are that children could be differentially treated and most children should be given skills training.

Question of governance

The policy fails to address the question of governance and administration, which has been recognised as one of the major bottlenecks in the ability of the system to make quality education possible to all. The need for a fair and supportive system that respects, supports and encourages teachers, children and the community and moves towards reduced centralisation, gives up on over-governance as well as oppressive and vacuous monitoring, has been forgotten.

This requirement has been underlined in the position paper on systemic reform as far back as in 2005. This theme has recurred in many places where programs and structures have been reviewed. The policy framework did not have that in its design. The recommendations therefore are towards more monitoring, more testing and more pressure on the schools and the teachers. It strengthens the tacit recognition that some children are only meant to

receive limited education and that government structures and systems would not function and, hence, privatise at all levels.

Focus on shackling teachers

The new policy does not examine the ideas of making teachers central and empowered to make choices or whether they are allowed to develop and explore their ideas along with the children. It does not look at the sources of their demotivation and alienation. The policy and the discourse around it has given up the effort to construct pragmatic mechanisms for decentralisation, autonomy and shared responsibility.

It has not questioned the myths of standards and outcomes and the excessive competition and anxiety that is linked to it and is set to have elements that would exacerbate it. There is no recognition of the diversity of the background and the patience towards building equitable opportunities with celebration of the learning. Rather it is homogenisation and imposing the hegemony of elite learning purposes and expectations with no empathy for the need of patience for children from different backgrounds.

Exacerbating stratification and widening social divides

The building of consensus around equity raises questions about the inequity between the rural and the urban and even more in the context of the stratification in village society. Economic growth has created an aspirational space in rural India, where the consumption of urban goods and investment in urban infrastructure and education system seems to be the appropriate thing. This will worsen as the pressure on land and the economy increases.

The educational policy has ignored this and has strengthened the interests of the dominant and powerful. There were some hopes but more fears from the new policy, given the nature of the discourse. The conversations are around greater pressures and early specialisation, discarding the ideas of holistic, plural and inclusive education. There seems to be a pushback to providing support and promised resources for the public system of education.

The steps for systemic reforms seem to make the

teacher and the school furthermore at the beck and command of administration. The limited purpose of education as a filter and as an instrument to produce citizens who are useful for ably using the market seems to draw the maximum attention.

While the policy has been shelved for the time being, the increasing interference of the government, directed assessment and monitoring effort seems to indicate the direction the operative policy is taking. There seems to be an overarching consensus to make education focused on narrow measurable outcomes. With uniform milestones for all kinds of institutions and the entire diversity of school going children, not only are the educational objectives but the entire education of the children from disadvantaged backgrounds maybe at risk. The mushrooming private schools and perhaps well intentional educational organisations outside the government framework are all focused on developing programmes and materials that reduce the school curricular expectation to what is to be tested. In this process and otherwise also change the teacher to a store keeper whose task is to distribute and collect back materials. The ideas that education is a continuing dialogue between both among the children and with the teacher, keeping in mind the context and ambience of children and the school, is being replaced by what may euphemistically be called an input–output process. Given the reduction in the meaning of the school there is no hesitation in the educational system to segregate children in the categories of ‘weak students’ and ‘good students’. The tacit agreement to shelve some of the most crucial constitutive principles of the National Curriculum

Framework 2005 that tried to come close to the constitutional commitment of the preamble is reflected in the areas, questions and the sorting categories identified for the education policy. What is also worrying is the apparent opaqueness about the policy development. There is no sharing about the steps that are being thought of and if the policy development process has been shelved or is continuing.

(Adapted from Dewan H.K., <http://www.villagesquare.in/2016/12/05/new-education-policy-fails-address-issues-equity/>)

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