

Towards a New Education Policy

Directions and Considerations

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There is a New Education Policy which is now being formulated by the Government of India. A discussion of these efforts in the context of past efforts at policy formulation, the continuities and discontinuities over time and then a presentation of a set of practical recommendations for current attempts at policy reform.

The efforts to formulate the New Education Policy comes at a time of introspection for the government, teachers and citizens on the status of education in the country. This needs to be foregrounded in the context of the policy formulation efforts made since the mid-1960s and the implications for the current education scenario.

In this article, we first examine the earlier processes of policy formulation, discuss the continuities and discontinuities in terms of the key provisions and then conclude with a set of practical recommendations for current policy reform efforts.

Policy Processes

Since independence, India has formulated and revised the National Policy on Education thrice. The first National Policy on Education adopted in 1968 was informed by a comprehensive review of the prevailing education conditions and issues, through the recommendations of the Indian Education Commission (the Kothari Commission, 1964–66) in their report *Education and National Development*. This voluminous report drew upon the assistance of 20 international experts, 19 task forces and working groups, 21 subgroups, hearing 9,000 interviews and 2,400 memorandums from educators and researchers. The Kothari Commission recommendations went through a process of political deliberation and informed the final policy pronouncement.¹

Despite the breadth and depth of the recommendations, the 1968 policy was itself skeletal dealing primarily with the establishment of a national system of education. One key reason for this rather limited scope despite the significant foundation offered by the Kothari Commission Report was that education was then a state subject. The state governments were consequently not so concerned about the policy proposals coming from the central government. It was only in 1976

that education became a concurrent subject through the 42nd Constitution Amendment. Even after this shift of education to the concurrent list,² the overall implementation of the policy remained very weak. No review of the policy was made during this period although the policy itself had indicated that there would be a review after five years so as to inform the government about the progress made and help lay “guidelines for future development.” In sum, the 1968 policy, although based on Kothari Commission recommendations, was neither implemented nor reviewed for over 15 years.

In the mid-1980s, the instrumental value of education in building human resources began to get recognised and this informed the approach to education policy. The then Ministry of Education with the assistance of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration prepared a status paper that highlighted the challenges confronting the education system and policy directions that could be taken.

In August 1985, the “Challenge of Education—A Policy Perspective” was tabled in the Lok Sabha. In its Foreword, the report mentioned “this document is not meant to be a final statement of policy. It aims to provide the basis for a nationwide debate which would facilitate the formulation of new education policy.” This 117-page document admitted that education in India, from primary to the postgraduate level, was in an “unholy mess” and listed various policy options.³ This exercise of preparing the background document was a centrally-driven bureaucratic exercise. It certainly did not adopt any strategy of constituting either expert working groups or holding wide-ranging consultations akin to the Kothari Commission exercise. It is this report which provided broad policy directions and the foundation for preparing “The National Policy on Education, 1986.” The policy was adopted by Parliament in May 1986, and an elaborate Programme of Action was adopted in August 1986.

The 1986 policy also had provision for a five-year review, and within a period of four years in 1990, the central government constituted the National Policy on Education Review Committee (NPERC) consisting of a team of experts headed by Acharya

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Ramamurti to review the 1986 policy and provide recommendations for its revisions. In 1991, the report of the Acharya Ramamurti Committee was examined by a CABE (Central Advisory Board of Education)-appointed committee chaired by Janardhan Reddy. This committee which consisted primarily of state education ministers rejected most of the critical recommendations made by the Acharya Ramamurti Committee.

The education scenario in India has seen considerable activity since 1992. It has been dotted with large-scale mission mode programmes such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) followed by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), the Constitution (Eighty-sixth) Amendment Act (2002) and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (2009), acceptance of external aid for education programmes in the early 1990s and the mobilisation of additional domestic finances through the levy of an education cess, restructuring of teacher education programmes, and expansion of both government and private education institutions at all levels of education. The education system in India then has been in a huge flux in the past two decades. Although the National Policy on Education (1986) with the revised formulations of 1992 suggested a review after five years of implementation, this has not taken place. The steps taken to improve the system and the processes have been knee-jerk responses and without a systematic review of the situation. We do not have a comprehensive document which reviews what worked, what did not, why, and possible key issues that require a policy response in the light of constitutional goals, to plan and allocate resources more effectively and have workable action plans.

Even though the process for the revised policy formulations of 1992 followed by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) was sketchy and hurried, much can be learnt from the process of formulating the National Curriculum Framework 2005. An elaborate and deep exercise with 21 focus group position papers prepared by experts, educators and academics guided and informed the

new National Curriculum Framework. After the Kothari Commission exercise, this was the first time wherein groups of experts were called to prepare background material that informed a policy framework. This engagement of diverse experts, preparation of extensive background material, in-between sharing of insights is not being witnessed in the latest effort that is under way.

Continuities and Discontinuities

National policies on education have been shaped by the political and economic contexts within which they were formulated and these in turn defined the espousal of specific policy goals. In 1968, when education was still a state subject, the primary objective of the National Education Policy brought in by the central government was to establish a national system of education meant to serve national goals. It held, "The educational system must produce young men and women of character and ability committed to national service and development. Only then will education be able to play its vital role in promoting national progress, creating a sense of common citizenship and culture, and strengthening the national integration" (para 3). The 1986 policy aimed to build human resources so as to promote economic and technological development. It said, "In Indian way of thinking, human being is a positive asset and a precious resource that needs to be cherished, nurtured and developed with tenderness and care, coupled with dynamism." In order to do this, it emphasised vocationalisation in a variety of ways, including for neoliterate youth. The policy suggested vocationalisation from secondary school and encouragement to technical, computer and management education. The focus was to be on innovation, research and development, and on promoting efficiency and effectiveness at all levels, through modernisation and industry-linkage. The policy emphasised population control, apparently grounded in an economic theory where available resources and technological advances were considered to be offset by demographic growth.

The 1968 policy emphasised free and compulsory education up to 14 which

included without explication the early childhood period before six years as well. In fact, the provision on universalisation of education up to 14 years has been reiterated in all the three policy documents, except changes being made to the time frame within which the goal would be achieved. The commitment to the Common School System has also been made in all policy documents, with a reference that it would be implemented as recommended in the Kothari Commission Report. Yet there is no official review as to why both these long-standing policy commitments remained unimplemented.

The financial commitment of allocating 6% of national income to education that was expressed in 1968 policy was revised in 1992 to a commitment that would exceed 6% of national income. But this was accompanied by a clause indicating that the burden on the state resources would be reduced by mobilising funds from the community (para 11.2). The policy recognised the shortfall in resources and hence suggested mobilisation through local donations and through cost-cutting measures. It proposed cheaper schools and hostels to widen access while containing cost by surreptitiously cutting expense on the human element, including on teachers. This was further intensified with an economic domination of educational discourse where investments and returns had to be counted in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) growth. The repeated statements that 85%–90% of the expenditure in education was on teachers' salaries, leaving no money for anything else, has led to a demonstration of derision of teachers' efforts and a consequent lack of purpose and motivation.

Another area of policy emphasis has been on equalising educational opportunity through more educational facilities in rural and other backward areas. It has argued for girl education to ensure social justice and to accelerate social transformation. The national system of education as promised under the 1986 policy was meant to provide education of "comparable quality" to all children. The statements on inclusion and equal opportunity do not specify its meaning or implication. The confusion is exemplified by the idea of a Common School System

interspersed with Navodaya schools, merit admission and differentiated learning opportunities for the talented including meagre scholarships to a few poor children.

The status, recruitment and education of teachers was considered crucial. And there was to be an honoured status, satisfactory enrichments and service conditions for teachers including reasonable entitlements, a fair administration, and academic freedom. The 1992 policy, while recognising the respect and status of teachers, had additional clauses to bring in accountability of teachers through incentives and disincentives. The scheme following the policy provisions has created a hierarchy of differentiated emoluments and service conditions negating the core of policy intent. The statement “no society can rise above the level of its teachers” has thus remained a rhetoric and a slogan. The effort to control and direct everything that the teacher does is increasing. The use of technology in management and also in education is not empowering and enriching the teacher but working towards monitoring, controlling, guiding and indeed making her redundant.

The 1968 policy was concerned about books, stressing the need for improved high quality low-cost books without frequently changing them. This has never been followed in spirit as books have become textbooks and have also become contested. The evaluation system advocated examinations as a continuous process to improve achievement levels rather than certification. This was reaffirmed in the 1986 and 1992 revisions which suggested examination reforms as well as Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation of scholastic and non-scholastic areas.

One of the key departures of the 1986 policy was building on the concurrent responsibility and a stress on strengthening national institutions, building a National Curriculum Framework with common core areas that include India’s freedom movement, constitutional obligations, nurturing a natural identity, cultural heritage, egalitarianism, democracy, secularism, equality of sexes, protection of the environment, removal of social barriers, scientific temper and professional ethics. Drawing on this, efforts were made to standardise curriculum

across the country. While it laid down that minimum learning levels should be achieved by all children across the country, it also recommended a child-centred approach, necessitating taking in to account the diversity and the context of each child.

Analysis and Implications

While the aims of the new policy formulation now under way have not been publicly shared, the MHRD website describing the consultative processes states that it is aiming to make “India a knowledge superpower by equipping its students with the necessary skills and knowledge and to eliminate the shortage of manpower in science, technology, academics and industry.” Thus, the aims of education as expressed in policies have been aligned with the larger political and economic compulsions and thrusts of the times. While these shifts are understandable given the dynamic climate and the role of education, it is imperative that the aims of education do not lose sight of the constitutional goals that the education system is meant to strive towards.

While the 1986 policy found that the 1968 policy was not properly implemented, it also said that the problems of access, quality, utility and financial outlay have accumulated and become massive. These observations and claims are not supported by any shared evidence or analysis. The two policy documents were very differently prepared, the first, an extensive academic and research effort and, the second, a largely bureaucratic and political effort that made it narrow. The action steps evolving from the policy were not completely aligned to the recommendations. For example, quality standards were sought to be standardised across the country for facilities, ambience as well as functioning. The programmes and schemes were thus bureaucratised and centralised at the national and the state capitals particularly after the DPEP and more so after SSA. The District Institutes of Education and Training, caught between the conflicting requirements of having their own agenda and standardised funding, fund sanction, release and reporting patterns have become a shadow of what they were to be. The other attempts at decentralisation were also without

conviction and a lack of faith in the institutions, including in the school as a unit or in its teachers. The 1992 documents included commitments to invest in many areas of infrastructure, for schools, colleges (including autonomous colleges) and universities. This commitment has seen inadequate allocation, and with rising wages, it has consequently led to contract appointment and vacancies particularly among the academic staff.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The official website of the MHRD suggests an extensive consultative process is informing the policymaking exercise on the New Education Policy. It has suggested 13 themes under school education and 20 themes under higher education as a broad thematic framework for the consultations. As on 3 November 2015, over 29,000 submissions were received through the online forum created for this purpose. About 2.75 lakh consultations are being held through the year, with panchayats, urban local bodies, block, district, state and national levels. Such a large consultative process is bound to generate numerous ideas, solutions and policy options. The National University of Educational Planning and Administration is providing administrative support and receiving all recommendations/submissions sent to it by the Policy Division of the MHRD. The National Council of Educational Research and Training has also been asked to participate in analysis and also do some consultations. But as of early November, there is no evidence that these inputs have been collated, synthesised and incorporated into an approach paper with specific policy options that are likely to be included.

The MHRD has constituted a drafting committee under the chairpersonship of T S R Subramanian, consisting primarily of retired civil servants. The committee is expected to “examine the outcome documents, recommendations and suggestions received and formulate a Draft National Education Policy as well as Framework of Action” and submit its report no later than 31 December 2015. It must be expected that the draft policy would be kept open for comments and specific consultations with a diverse set of sector experts

and those who are acting in this domain, particularly because the consultative process so far has been open-ended.

The consultative themes identified under the New Education Policy 2015 process are primarily focused on agendas that would help improve efficiency of the system, ensure accountability, enable students to fit into the global markets, and improve quality. While these are necessary, the themes relevant to reforming education so as to further the constitutional goals of social justice, equity, and protection of Fundamental Rights receive very little attention. These are limited to inclusion of disadvantaged categories (Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, girls, minorities and children with special needs) in the case of school education and the removal of regional, gender and social disparities in the case of higher education. The primary concern of these themes is that of access and participation. The assumption is that physical expansion will automatically result in improved participation without considering the economic, social, and cultural barriers that exclude various groups. The tension between balancing “the local and the global” requires to be addressed by the New Education Policy.⁴ If not, there is a risk of skewing the education system in favour of the global at the cost of the local, thereby increasing existing inequalities. It also appears that the current themes are activity and action-seeking, rather than moving towards a framework and principles that can be discussed and would over time guide the action programmes.

Considerations for the New Education Policy

Given what has been already committed in the two policies of the past and the multiple schemes (including with external funding and targeted support) that have emerged, we need to ask what is it that we should do differently and what should we take as carry-over and unfinished tasks, requiring perhaps an altered strategy.

Economic liberalisation has brought in its wake an astronomical increase in the extent, nature and the number of strata in society. The competition and anxiety is almost primordial. This also has led to an increased intolerance and pressure

for homogenisation, objectivity and efficient use of resources in an immediate sense. The patience required for transforming a society and building the liberal, inclusive spirit of the Constitution has been worn thin. It would be wise to construct the future of the country through an education policy that takes cognisance of these trends and has provisions and action steps that can counter them and avoid the temptation of responding only to the immediate and the short-term scenario. It would have been useful to carefully consider the process and the current situation before the exercise but it can still be a follow-up of the current consultative process. The elements need to be carefully woven in to include elements of equity and ensuring aspirational awareness and opportunities more equitably.

It needs to take lessons from past experience including in vocationalising. The thrust on technology, vocationalisation, human beings as resources for nation building, greater mention of value education, bringing technology and computers into education and conversion of pedagogical processes to short cuts and methods, has not been successful in moving education in the desired direction. The current effort of vocationalisation is of limited use due to the misalignment of these with the economy. The absence of market linkage and exposure to its challenges makes the education and training lack teeth and purpose. Students do not get professional experience of interacting with the market and the faculty are not able to be up-to-date with the changing and developing vocations. Having narrower educational programmes reduces flexibility, without adding substantially to job opportunity or any other form of economic opportunity.

Challenges

We are at a stage in our development with a large and young population, a group that has a lot of aspirations and expectations. These are educational as well as economic and social matters. Some of the challenges that will need to be addressed in the new policy are:

(i) Building a consensus around equality of opportunity and the road towards the goal. And then building structures and

capability to meet this goal and putting all this into our differentiated economy, society and culture.

(ii) Need to have a fair and supportive system that respects, supports and encourages teachers and for administration to overcome the temptation of centralisation, over-governance, and oppressive monitoring.

(iii) Create systems that give governance of the school to the teacher, making her central and empowering her for that responsibility.

(iv) Building faith in and construct pragmatic mechanisms for decentralisation, autonomy and shared responsibility. There is also a need to question the myths of standards and achievables, and the excessive competition and anxiety that are linked to it.

(v) Building confidence in teachers, children and other people that all children can learn, and correspondingly abandon myths about gifted and slow children.

There are many hopes, fears and expectations from the New Education Policy. We hope that the effort will clearly spell out support and the promised resources for the public system of education. That it will take concrete steps for systemic reforms that would make the teacher and the school responsive to the need and expectations of the children and parents, and not be at the beck and call of the administration.

NOTES

- 1 For further discussion on this, see Naik (1997).
- 2 Concurrent list of the Seventh Schedule under Article 246 of the Constitution of India.
- 3 The report was divided into four chapters: (i) Education, Society and Development, (ii) An Overview of Educational Development, (iii) A Critical Appraisal, and (iv) An Approach to Educational Reorientation. For further discussion on the report, see Dinesh Mohan (1985) and Satya Deva (1985).
- 4 See International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century and Delors (1996).

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