

National Education Assembly
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Declaration

The Union Government's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP), brought in supposedly to modernise and reform India's education system, and is being vigorously implemented across the country in diverse phases and at different speeds. Currently, nearing the second quarter of the 21st century, when India has become the most populated country in the world and is expecting a youth dividend, India certainly needs a modern and equitable education system, with adequate financial allocations to enable universal quality school education and higher education oriented to the needs of the knowledge age.

Earlier efforts since Independence, albeit backed by numerous studies and policies, had mixed results, with islands of excellence in the midst of an ocean of deprivation. After much struggle, the Right to Education Act 2009 (RtE) was enacted by Parliament, giving effect to the 86th Constitution Amendment via Article 21A, assuring free and compulsory education for all children in the 6-14 years age group. Of course, many problems still remained in the education sector, such as low public expenditure, low teacher-student ratio, poor quality of education, sluggish enrolment and high drop-out rates in school especially impacting girls, SC/ST and poor rural students. Low enrolment in higher education institutions (HEI), poor quality in much of the sector, and mismatch between education and employment or employability prevailed.

Regrettably NEP has not addressed any of these issues. On the contrary, its roll-out has confirmed all the initial apprehensions about the Policy expressed by educators, organizations of teachers, students, parents and women, and popular movements such as the Peoples Science Movement (PSM). Implementation of NEP is rapidly pushing the country's education system in retrograde directions with serious consequences not only for education, but also for equitable development and progress, and for the future of India's children and youth.

What is worse, NEP is being imposed by the Union Government without being placed before or passed by Parliament, despite numerous contradictions with the legislated RtE Act. NEP also infringes the jurisdiction of States, which have joint responsibility for education under the Concurrent List but have not even been consulted, and instead forces an unprecedented extent of centralization. The adverse impacts of NEP are already being felt sharply across all sectors of education, especially by women, the poor notably in rural areas, and by women, dalits, tribals and minorities.

Under NEP, extending a NITI Aayog policy to "rationalize" infrastructure and expenditures, thousands of schools have been closed or merged all over the country, with many thousands more to come. This will undoubtedly reduce access to schooling, especially in rural areas since many students will have to travel even greater distances than at present, and would increase drop-out rates, particularly among girls, as already being witnessed. Many government schools are being privatized outright or handed over to private management, both with higher fees, further impacting access and exacerbating inequity. In a country desperately crying out for increased public expenditure on education, currently languishing at under 3

percent of GDP, which is much lower than comparable developing countries and “emerging economies,” further reduction of public expenditure cannot be the answer. This National Assembly calls for strengthening the public education system rather than reducing public investment and encouraging privatization in different ways.

NEP puts enormous and undue emphasis on distance, on-line, informal, home- and volunteer-based education, especially in school years. This shows the government’s intent to further withdraw from its responsibility to provide quality education, and gives government a convenient alibi for low enrolment and drop-outs, especially of girls and disadvantaged sections. Experience during the Covid pandemic, including through numerous surveys, clearly showed that the vast majority of students, especially from rural and poor backgrounds, could not access or effectively utilize on-line classes due to the lack of adequate smart phones in families, and poor connectivity among other things. Teaching-learning suffered from lack of socialization among peer groups and other benefits of inter-personal interaction. On the other hand, online education, in both school and higher education, hugely benefits large corporate entities which have emerged as a major profit-driven force in education, and further promotes the culture of coaching centres and tuitions, again favouring the better-off. On-line education can at best supplement, but cannot substitute for, in-person teaching-learning.

Higher education is being even more opened up to commercialization and privatization under NEP. In recent years, most of the rise in enrolment in higher education has been in the private sector, exposing the serious under-investment by the Government. NEP further encourages new private HEIs, despite the well-known poor track record, notably of private engineering colleges or universities, in which hundreds of institutions have closed, leaving numerous students in the lurch. Colleges are being encouraged to become “autonomous” self-financing degree-awarding institutions, with high fees obviously a consequence. Even public universities and colleges have started offering short-term courses with high fees of several lakhs annually, out of the reach of poorer students, while HEIs in general placing greater emphasis on profit-oriented courses compared to other educational services. In the re-structured Universities and autonomous colleges envisaged in NEP, the academic community finds no role in management which is visualized along the lines of corporate Governing Boards. The National Assembly rejects this commercialization and corporatization of higher education.

Higher education is being exposed to large uncertainties at a time when effective and well-conceived measures are required to update and improve it to meet demands of the knowledge era. A controversial new “multi-disciplinary” 4-year Bachelor’s Degree has been introduced under NEP with multiple entry and exit points, and Academic Bank of Credits, supposedly providing flexibility and vocational orientation. No studies have been conducted on the value of or demand for such courses, or the employability of those leaving University with 1-2 year arbitrary slices of undergraduate education in a mixed bag of subjects with diplomas or certificates, at a time when advertisements for even low-ranking non-specialist government jobs receive lakhs of applications including from unemployed PhD and Masters’ Degree holders! Serious fears have been expressed by students and educators about such restructured bits-and-pieces UG, PG and even professional education leaving students with weak core competencies. Faculty and academics have been largely left out of the process of formulating these educational “reforms.” The entire NEP structure of undergraduate education is therefore a huge experiment with uncertain outcomes, with students of our country as guinea-pigs.

In the latest move, foreign universities are being invited to set up campuses in India with full autonomy on admissions, fees, faculty recruitment including foreign faculty, and no obligation for reservation. Higher education in India, especially in professional subjects such as medicine and engineering, is already suffering due to shortage of seats in premier institutions, high fees and indifferent quality in a large number of HEIs. This has also led to mass migration of Indian students to Universities abroad, not only to the US, Europe or other advanced Western countries, but also to East European and East Asian countries including China, with enormous outflow of funds from India. Foreign Universities in India, inevitably with high fees, will create an “internal brain drain,” and intensify existing inequalities in education and employment.

A new system doing away with affiliating universities, with many colleges under it serving rural areas and Tier-2 or Tier-3 cities, is around the corner. Instead, large campus-based universities will come up, further reducing access of rural and under-privileged students to higher education.

Research funding is also being over-centralized with a reliance in NEP on private funding which has never been forthcoming.

Numerous undesirable changes are also being introduced in curricula, pedagogy and testing in both school and higher education.

In schools, educators almost unanimously agree that children should not be overburdened with rote-based exam-oriented studies, as emphasized in RtE and as formerly by the CBSE. However, NEP calls for centralized national-level, not even State-level, exams after 3rd, 8th, 10th and 12th classes! Admissions to higher education institutions are also based on yet another exam, the CUET (Common University Entrance Test) which is being deeply resented by students as an unnecessary imposition. Admissions to Medical Education Institutions anywhere in India, even in Institutions run by State Governments, have come under compulsory centralized NEET exams. All these exams will be conducted by a central National Testing Agency, by-passing and undermining all State-level Boards or other structures. The National Curriculum Framework for all States is being framed centrally unlike before when States had leeway based on central guidelines. NCERT textbooks which are used not only by CBSE schools but by many States too, are being prepared centrally, despite educators emphasizing the benefits of curricula and text books framed around local cultures and contexts. The more that importance is given to centralized examinations, the more students will come under severe pressure, and the more prominence coaching centres will gain, again putting under-privileged students at a disadvantage as is already happening with IIT/JEE, UPSC etc.

It is no surprise that this centralization is being used to impose the ruling dispensation’s one-culture one-language concept of nationhood on the very diverse languages, cultures and ethnicities that together make up the united Indian nation. Even though NEP promises education in the mother tongue, its text books and curricula directly or indirectly push the idea that all culture, knowledge, history in India originates and is built around Vedic-Sanskritic systems and takes little or no note of the contributions of other cultures within India, and the contributions of non-Indian civilizations in both ancient and medieval times who participated in a vibrant two-way exchange of knowledge and culture across the centuries.

In recent times, the country has been shocked by the blatant communal and ideologically-driven distortion of Indian history, post-Independence politics and developmental paths in “rationalized” NCERT textbooks, which have deleted whole chapters on Mughal rule, and have even blacked out environmental issues, the role of popular movements in women’s rights, anti-caste struggles and many other spheres. Science too has been manipulated, with Darwin and evolutionary biology

being dropped till class 12 and even the industrial revolution marginalized, so that the door is opened for the propaganda that all global knowledge was known in India much earlier than elsewhere and that ancient Indian (read Hindu) knowledge was superior to all. This is not education, this is brainwashing! The National Assembly condemns these changes which will seriously disadvantage Indian students in their knowledge, higher education, critical thinking and in life in general.

NEP has brought in a new emphasis on Early Childhood Care and education (ECCE) for ages 3-6 which is supposed to provide nutrition support and other care for the growing child. However, ECCE is sought to be given an erroneous focus on preparation for school and being integrated into the school system, whose staff is already over-burdened with many extra-curricular responsibilities. This legitimizes the commercialized private pre-school system, and undermines the Integrated Child Development (ICDS) being assiduously implemented despite many handicaps by Anganwadis, which are the logical and preferred locations for ECCE since they already look after infants, nutrition, and mother-and-child care. However, Anganwadis and all the valuable services they provide have been denied the additional training and infrastructure promised under the NEP. Opening of "Balvatikas" in schools for 5-year olds further undermines Anganwadis and opens the door for dismantling of the neighbourhood Anganwadi system. This National Assembly calls for a major restructuring and strengthening of ECCE in upgraded Anganwadis, and also for the long-awaited regularization of employment and enhanced wages in them.

All these changes are being thrust down the throats of States. Central institutions such as the UGC, NCERT, Education Ministry, the bureaucracy and financial pressures, are all being used to push opposing and even reluctant State Governments into implementing NEP.

Various State Governments, unions and organizations of teachers, students and non-teaching staff, other peoples movements and NGOs, educators and experts, are strongly protesting against NEP and demanding that it be scrapped. In many States, popular protests have forced withdrawal or modification of text books and curricula, or continuation of existing ones. Widespread movements are needed by students and their parents or guardians, especially those from the working class, farmers, agricultural workers, SC/ST/OBC and other toiling people, who will be the worst affected by the "reforms" under the NEP. This National Education Assembly calls for an alternative pro-people education policy, built around public education, accessible to all sections, and advancing the capacities of the mass of the Indian people in a modern, culturally diverse, equitable and self-reliant economy and society. This Assembly further seeks the cooperation and support of State Governments to reverse the NEP and its undesirable features, and in working towards a progressive pro-people public education system.

SAVE EDUCATION! SAVE THE NATION!!