DISSECTING THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY, 2020 FOR SCHOOL AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

India's education system had been in dire need of an overhaul for a long time, with its last policy on education being crafted in 1986 and modified in 1992. No wonder, with time, the 1985-policy had become archaic and irrelevant, and called for reforms that would make the Indian education system fall in sync with international best practices. To exemplify, the erstwhile policy laid tremendous emphasis on rote learning, and performed abysmally when it came to practical implementation of the theory. What's more, there was little importance given to research, which resulted in Indian Universities performing rather alarmingly in international university rankings. The overall system was also extremely rigid, and failed to offer students the freedom to take up their desired field for studies as well as to opt out in the middle. All of the aforesaid, inter alia, constituted reasons as to why big-ticket educational reforms were needed. Finally, resting years of anticipation, the Union Cabinet gave its nod to the National Education Policy, 2020 on July 28, with which India now stands on the cusp of a major educational revolution. The new policy attempts to completely revamp a broken system by way of introducing novel and unprecedented measures. However, as is nature's supreme law, perfection is a myth. Even as the new policy introduces major reforms that have been long awaited, there are various areas that the policy has either not covered or if it has- called for amends and further deliberation. This paper studies the National Education Policy in great detail and dissects the hits and misses thereof. In conclusion, some suggestions are also proposed to address the problems identified in the new policy. The author relied on secondary sources for research..

Key words: National Education Policy, 2020; Education Policy of 1985; education; Right to Education or RTE; School education; Higher Education

Introduction

July 28, 2020 marked a historic occasion for India as the Union Cabinet of Ministers approved the much anticipated National Education Policy (hereinafter referred to as **"The Policy"**). Prepared over a period of more than four years that included consultations and workshops with experts and after taking valuable feedback from over 2.5 lakh village-level stakeholders and two national Parliamentary committees, the Policy departs in all possible ways from its predecessor, the National Policy on Education launched no less than 34 years ago under the leadership of the then Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi and modified 6 years thereafter. The Policy, which has been hailed as revolutionary by many, seems to be a well-coordinated and well-thought attempt at aligning the Indian Education System with international best practices observed in other parts of the world.

In order to undertake such alignment as aforementioned, it is tacit that the new policy introduces some sweeping changes in the various levels of the education system in India. To exemplify, the Higher Education System will see the dismantling of the numerous regulators, such as AICTE, the UGC, the NCTE, etc. It will also see the return of the four year undergraduate programme. Likewise, insofar as school education system is concerned, there seems to be a palpable shift from rote learning that has otherwise been the norm in India to skill-based and experience-based learning that the Policy endeavours to achieve.

Indubitably, the changes that the Policy seeks to introduce and effectuate including the aforesaid are backed with the noble intention of elevating the standards of the Indian Education System to match those of the best in the world. However, as with any major change ever introduced, there are bound to be some hits and misses and reflecting thereupon makes way for improvements. In this article, the author aims to do precisely that.

There are two important reasons that warrant a review of the present nature.

One, even though it is not possible to predict the exact magnitude of the socio-economic impact of the Policy, one can still extrapolate that it is going to be huge. A wary analysis of the Policy is accordingly warranted so that this impact could be assessed as closely as possible, and anything capable of casting a negative shadow be addressed well in advance.

Two, as stated above, even as the intention behind the Policy is perforce noble, there are several aspects that the Policy seems to have missed. Discussing them will allow us to understand such aspects, and introduce them if need be, so that the magnitude and scale of the positive impact is pushed even higher.

Accordingly, this paper will break the Policy down so as to understand its positive and negative aspects as well as to see if there are areas for potential additions.

Objectives of the study

The instant research has been conducted, compiled and is being presented with the following two objectives:

To analyse and ascertain the promising areas of the Policy as well as the areas where there is scope for improvement.

To ascertain the areas and subjects which are not duly addressed in the Policy but warrant attention and inclusion in view of international trends in other developing and developed countries.

Research Methodology used for the study

The instant paper is an exploratory endeavour that attempts a descriptive analysis. The paper relies on primary and secondary sources. The primary source used for the present paper is the National Education Policy released by the Government of India on July 28, 2020. The secondary sources include articles, research papers, and reports from newspapers both from India and abroad. Data was also sourced from the various websites of the Government of India as well as those of other countries. The online editions of various newspapers and media organisations, and the information available on the Archive of these papers assisted in the work.

The author has also relied on the report of the World Bank on the specific aspect of sex and sexuality education. The World Bank data on the number of teen births per thousand people has been used to build a case around the dire need for sex and sexuality education in the country. A video report from Seeker, an online platform has further been used to understand this data.

Analysis of the Policy

Thus far, the present research has taken into account the germane literature on the issue at hand and the general background of the study. The research has also entailed a graphic study of the opinions of experts published in leading newspapers of the country, both on the online and the offline mode. The collected data is hereby analysed with the aim of achieving the objectives of the instant paper.

For sake of ease and simplicity, the author has analysed the policy for various levels of education. In each of the sections, the author first discusses what the Policy provides for. The same will not be exhaustive by any means. Only broad provisions will be discussed so as to set the groundwork for the subsequent section, wherein comments will be made on the provisions.

An analysis of the Policy at the school level

Sweeping changes have been introduced by the Policy at the school level. The new system is not even remotely similar to what the erstwhile policy provided. In subsequent sections, the author first discusses in brief the changes being made and then expresses his view thereupon.

Changes introduced by the Policy at the School level

i. Of all the major changes introduced by the Policy for school-going children, one of the foremost changes is the extension of the scope of the Right to Education Act (hereinafter referred to as "RTE"). Whereas the previous policy covered in the ambit of the RTE children between the ages of 6 and 14 years, the new Policy extends the ambit for children between 3 and 18 years of age.

ii. Further, more investments are proposed in infrastructure for little children, such as play equipments, children-friendly buildings, etc aimed at making learning a joyful experience.

iii. The policy further provides that the 10+2 structure of school curricula shall now be replaced with a new 5+3+3+4 structure.

iv. In a major first, the Policy provides that the mother tongue or local dialect, so to speak, be used as the medium of instruction up until the 5th grade, preferably even until the 8th grade.

v. Board Examinations shall now be kept at low stakes, and will be designed in a way so as to test the actual knowledge and core competencies of a student as opposed to the erstwhile system that focussed on rote learning. Additionally, it is also provided that the examinations can be taken twice in the year, one being the main examination and the other being an improvement examination.

vi. The Policy also gives students greater freedom of choice as well as more flexibility with regard to the subjects. As per the Policy, a student can now choose a mix-match of subjects, as opposed to the compulsory selection of subjects under the erstwhile policy.

vii. Furthermore, the Policy also pushes for Vocational Education. The Policy provides that Vocational Education will be integrated into all schools and higher education institutions over the next decade.

viii. The Policy provides for the development of a comprehensive and holistic progress report card for students and parents. The report card could be accessed by the parents through AI-based software for periodically tracking the growth of their issues.

ix. A Gender Inclusion fund has been envisaged that shall be used to support female and transgender students get access to education by driving state-level-inclusion-activities, targeted boarding as well as by developing sufficient safety infrastructure.

x. Moreover, the Policy also commits to achieving a 100 percent Gross Enrolment Ratio (hereinafter referred to as "GER") for all levels.

xi. The policy further recommends a preparatory course for students running into three months' time. This course will be dedicated to teaching students how to access digital content through energised textbooks, or ETB-DIKSHA. It shall also focus on community tutoring, student-led peer learning, etc with the objective of achieving 100 percent of foundational learning by the year 2025.

a.   **The Loopholes and areas for potential improvement**

i. The Policy, much like its predecessor, continues to envisage a structure wherein the curriculum falls under a different ministry but implementation thereof falls with three others. The Policy contemplates a Joint Task Force

for the ministries to operate in symbiosis, however, the same did not quite work out well in the previous regime and the chances for the same this time around are also bleak.

ii. The Policy is ambiguous on the language aspect. To exemplify, it is stated that local languages could be used as a medium of instruction "wherever possible". Use of such terminology, as is tacit, leaves room for institutions to continue with the erstwhile three-language formula. Additionally, the issue of having instruction in the child's mother tongue could be problematic for children whose parents have inter-state transferrable employments, adivasi children and migrants. The same goes unaddressed in the Policy.

iii. The Policy talks about lowering the stakes of Board examinations. At the same time, it also talks about "gifted students" and focussing on Olympiads etc at the school level that would enable students to prepare for prestigious examinations like JEE, NEET, etc. This is a problematic paradox. Once again, the emphasis will bounce back on the same old thing, and examinations will be rendered high-stake yet again. Additionally, poorer families do not have the kind of money to pay for their children's Olympiad preparation or such other things. The Policy remains silent on the glaring economic divide. Furthermore, this will also lead to teachers and schools teaching for these exams, instead of the growth of students.

Another issue with this specific provision is the continuation of the coaching culture. Even as the policy itself discusses about endeavouring to discourage this culture, repeated emphasis on examinations as discussed above may take us back to square one. The coaching culture has caused tremendous damage to the Indian academic scene. A roadmap to scuttle further proliferation of this culture is missing from the said policy.

iv. Even though the Policy envisages a Gender Inclusion Fund, which is a welcome move, it once again misses out on the quintessential subject of sex and sexuality education. It is common knowledge that schools generally gives sex education a miss in India and there is little to no practical understanding that is given to students in this regard. There are tremendous impacts of sexuality education that the Policy has failed to see. To exemplify, it helps students understand and improve their attitudes related to sexual and reproductive health and behaviour. In addition thereto, if students are taught about sexuality, sexual orientation, etc from an early age, they are highly likely to be more accepting towards sexually-diverse individuals which in turn contribute to a more tolerant society.

Data available also work to buttress the author's case in this regard. As per a World Bank Report that collated data on the number of teenage births per thousand, India ranks rather high. The number of teenage births per thousand in India in the year 2018 was marked at 12.07, a number which is higher than several other countries, even if it is not the worst. Although the factor of child marriages could not be ignored in this discussion so far as India is concerned, sex and sexuality education will contribute to children learning from an early age about protective and safe sex, which is highly likely to affect a reduction in number stated above.

To further strengthen the author's case in favour of the sex and sexuality education in India, it is befitting to discuss how the subject is addressed in parts of the world, primarily the more developed economies. Surprising as it may come to many, the United States of America, arguably the most developed country on Earth does not have a robust sex education system. The same can be understood from the fact that the number of teenage births per thousand there stood at 19. Experts have time and again attributed this to the repressive approach adopted by the US towards sex education, especially in the southern states. Students are given abstinence-only sex education, which, as studies argue, is not the best way since it prevents students from learning about unwanted pregnancies and Sexually Transmitted Disease.

Per contra, in European countries, the number of teenage births per thousand is much lesser. Countries such as Italy, Germany, Switzerland, etc have rates between 04 to 06 births per thousand. Experts are of the view that these countries have generally progressive approach toward sexual education. The same goes for countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, and Belgium. All of these countries reported between 5 and 6

teen births per thousand people. Teachers here tend to emphasise lesser on the dangers of sex. On the contrary, they gear the curriculum to teach sex as a normal, healthy, positive act.

v.   The Policy discusses about AI-based progress tracker, but it ignores the tremendous digital divide that exists in India. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the gaping economic divide that mars the Indian society. With millions not even having access to a smart phone, let alone internet connectivity, it only seems to be a far cry today that an AI-based system that tracks a child's progress could be made effective. A more detailed discussion on bridging this dramatic digital divide and a roadmap for the same would have been very welcome.

vi.   Lastly, the policy suggests the setting up of two new agencies- NTA, which is National Testing Agency and PARAKH, which is Performance Assessment Review Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development. One of the issues that the author identifies with such agencies is the centralisation, and in all likelihood, over-testing of children at state as well as national levels.

An analysis of the Policy for Higher Education

The Higher Education scene in India has also been sought to be dramatically reformed by the Policy. Of course, there are some loopholes that will be discussed as herein under.

a.   Changes introduced by the Policy

(i)   The most defining change that the Policy introduced is the structure of the higher education courses. As per the Policy, any undergraduate degree will now be 3 or 4 years of duration, along with many options to exit en route. A student will have the option to exit a course after one year of study with a Diploma and with an Advanced Diploma after two years. At the end of three years, the student can leave with a Bachelor's degree whereas at the end of the fourth, with a Bachelor's degree with research. Moreover, undertaking a Ph.D shall require either a Master's degree or a 4-year Bachelor's degree with Research. The M.Phil. programme shall be discontinued.

(ii)   The Policy further proposes to set up the Higher Education Commission of India (hereinafter referred to as **"HECI"**). The HECI is envisaged to be a single body for higher education, with the only exceptions being medical and legal education. HECI shall have four verticals independent of one another; one, National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) for regulation, two, the General Education Council (GEC) for standard-setting, three, the Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) for funding, and four, the National Accreditation Council (NAC) for accreditation.

(iii)   The Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education (including vocational education) shall be endeavoured to be increased from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2030.

(iv)   The Policy further says that the practice of setting up stand-alone professional educational institutions including legal universities shall be discouraged and that all such existing institutions will have to become multi-disciplinary institutions by 2030. It focuses on the issue of delay in justice delivery system and hence suggests to make the legal education bilingual (English and in the language of the State in which the law programme is situated).

(v)   The NEP also provides that Public Private Partnership (PPP) models will be promoted in higher education.

b.   Scrutiny of the Policy for higher education

As stated above, the policy makes remarkable strides into the domain of higher education in India. As stated in the policy itself, it is intended to "overhaul" the higher education scene in India. The policy also states that it aims to "build the edifice of an entirely new ecosystem of independent self-governing institutions with

considerable autonomy for teachers from the debris of a "fragmented ecosystem" of "low standard teaching," "lesser emphasis on research," "suboptimal governance and leadership" and "ineffective regulatory system"".

However, what the policy fails to provide is an effective strategy to achieve the aforesaid objectives. One of the major problems the author identifies in the Policy is that there is little to no discussion about the factors that led to the decline of the state of higher education in India. Such a discussion would have resulted into more work towards ensuring that such factors do not surface again and should they do, they are adequately addressed.

Yet another aspect within the policy that warrants criticism is the extreme centralisation that it seems to be proposing. In fact, as Shyam Menon writes in the Indian Express, the entire exercise of having this Policy is "imposing uniformity and standardisation along a single axis of control and power". As the author further notes, this is paradoxical given "India's size, population, diversity and constitutional federalism".

Further, it is also aptly taken up various authors who have commented on the Policy that what has been envisaged therein is all noble and great; however, achieving the same is a distant dream of the future because of two reasons. One, the existing state of affairs is such that it renders the expectations of the Policy a tad too difficult to achieve. It must be understood that we are not building an educational policy from nothing; instead, there are pre-existing structures that we have all been a part of. To depart from the system and to magically get used to a new one will not be an easy segueing. Two, the Policy cannot be viewed in isolation. Surrounding socio-economic, legal and anthropological realities are bound to have an effect on the implementation on the Policy at hand. Accordingly, a better and clearer roadmap would have made the policy "complete" in true sense.

Conclusion and Suggestions

A thorough perusal of the policy and the analysis undertaken thereof lead the author to the broad conclusion that there are areas in the Policy that deserve to be mulled over and improved. As stated in the objectives of the paper, the goal of this research was to ascertain what such areas might be as well as to determine the areas that the policy did not cover but must have.

In very broad terms, both at the school level and the Higher Education level, there is tremendous scope for improvement. Insofar as the school level is concerned, the implementation of the ambiguity with regard to the medium of instruction must be carefully addressed and it should be made clear in no uncertain terms as to where the policy stands vis-à-vis the use of mother tongue. Additionally, the plight of migrants, adivasis and those in transferrable jobs must be thoroughly addressed too. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'gifted kids' and focus on Olympiads etc should be crafted and organised in a way that the marginalised sections of the society, economically speaking, do not stay deprived of learning. In addition thereto, the coaching culture that the country so desperately needs to depart from has not been adequately addressed, and could in fact bounce back, thanks to the sporadic but important reference to the aforesaid exams, Olympiads, etc.

It is further stated with vehemence that the policy must consider sex and sexuality education and effective steps be taken to ensure that such concepts are not treated frivolously, but are dealt with utmost seriousness and responsibility. The author has given ample explanation as to why sexuality education is the need of the hour.

AI based progress tracker should be reconsidered and the system must instead provide for something that could be afforded by the poorest of the poor too. Whereas the idea behind, as for most things, is noble, the policy fails to answer any questions as to the need for a mechanism that bridges the glaring digital divide afflicting India.

As goes Higher education, in the author's view, instead of centralising everything, there should be more focus on delegating and decentralising. Whereas a singular supervisor is welcome, given India's diversity, there must be local levels of oversight too. Implementation of the Policy for the higher education level will be nothing short of a challenge, but effective measures with an unwavering commitment on the part of the Executive should be ensured, so that the Policy comes to life in spirit and not just letter.

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