

TEXT OF EDUCATION POLICY ARTFULLY NAVIGATES SEVERAL THICKETS. FEARS ABOUT DOCUMENT COME FROM CONTEXT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The New Education Policy, for the most part, provides a forward-looking framework for transforming Indian education. If the government does little else but implement most of the recommendations on school education and empower India's school children, the future will belong to India. But we should also be under no illusion that the accumulated weight of betrayals in education also threaten to make this promising document just that: Another document.

India's political economy has simply not made quality education a top priority. What has changed in the last couple of decades is the explosion of aspiration and demand for education. But that demand has yet to be channelised into institutional change. A large part of the betrayal has come, not from politicians, but educators. Our resistance to fair change has been monumental.

There is another context for scepticism as well. The emphasis in the document on critical thinking and free inquiry is entirely well placed. But it is difficult to read those words in a context, where as we speak, universities are being intimidated into political and cultural conformity. A free education system cannot flourish without a free society; reason cannot be sovereign in the face of identity politics. So the work of ensuring that freedom and critical thinking are not mere words in a power point, constrained by realities of power, will be doubly harder.

It is a cliché to say that it all depends on implementation. It is hard to disagree with many proposals unless one sees their operationalisation. The document lays down objectives; the strategy has yet to come. There is yet another promise of a new regulator, a new research foundation. A lot will depend upon norms that get embedded in these institutions. This government's record on regulation is not inspiring. So the critical question will, less, be: Does one agree with the document? It has to shift to a different question: What are the conditions that will make some of its most promising ideas work?

So fears of the document come from the context rather than the text. The text itself is for the most part admirable. It does an artful job of navigating several thickets. On the language issue, it is nicely ambiguous. It prefers the long-standing recommendation of primary education in the mother tongue, but does not categorically recommend curbing language choice for English. On the basic architecture of delivery, the document has an agnosticism on the issue of public versus private education both in school and higher education. Whether or not public education succeeds will not be determined by this document; it will be determined by what the government does with its expenditure and priorities. So, criticising the document on this count is misplaced. The repeated emphasis on engagement with Indian civilisational history is unexceptionable, but if that engagement can be honest, it will inspire more confidence. The reductive dishonesty of some past curriculum should not be replaced by the new dishonesty of pride.

The most promising parts of the documents are on school education: The focus on early child development, learning outcomes, different forms of assessment, holistic education, and, most importantly, recognising the centrality of teacher and teacher education. This part of the document will get the least attention but is the most important. The document recognises that "the very highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational numeracy and literacy." The rest of the policy will be irrelevant if this basic requirement is not

achieved. The suggestions for school education are ambitious, centred on the students, cater to their pedagogical diversity, and take on board the world of knowledge as it is now emerging. The document drops the word multidisciplinary a bit too much, without explicating what it means. One way of thinking about this is not in terms of multiple subjects. It is reorienting education from disciplinary content to modes of inquiry that allow students to access a wide variety of disciplines.

But there are two worrying tensions. The document talks about flexibility, choice, experimentation. In higher education, the document recognises that there is a diversity of pedagogical needs. Students might need different exit options. But it is unclear if the document is recommending that the diploma or early exit options all be made available within a single institution, or different institutions offer different kinds of degrees. If it is a mandated option within single institutions, this will be a disaster, since structuring a curriculum for a classroom that has both one-year diploma students and four-year degree students takes away from the identity of the institution. There is also a risk that without adequate financial support, the exercising of exit options will be determined by the financial circumstances of the student.

But the document betrays itself most by recommending that all higher education institutions become multidisciplinary. This betrays the principle that different institutions have different identities, different comparative advantages, different pedagogical philosophies and a different mission. Some will be narrow and specialised, some broad-based. A healthy education system will comprise of a diversity of institutions, not a forced multi-disciplinarity. Students should have a choice for different kinds of institutions. The policy risks creating a new kind of institutional isomorphism mandated from the Centre.

The second tension is in terms of exams. The document rightly emphasises that focus needs to shift from exams to learning. But it contradicts itself. Exams are neurotic experiences because of competition; the consequences of a slight slip in performance are huge in terms of opportunities. So the answer to the exam conundrum lies in the structure of opportunity. This will require a less unequal society both in terms of access to quality institutions, and income differentials consequent upon access to those institutions. India is far from that condition. Exams are also necessary because in a low trust system people want objective measures of commensuration. So the document reinstates exams back into the picture by recommending a national aptitude test. But the idea that this will reduce coaching is wishful thinking, as all the evidence from the US and [China](#) is showing. So, in the tyranny of exams, the more we change things the more they will appear the same.

But we should be grateful to an admirable document for focussing on the right questions. There is much to discuss. But the hope is that with this our education policy can be transformed into a treat, not another trick in a long line of betrayals.

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