

NEP: PERFECTION CAN BE THE ENEMY OF THE GOOD

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

NEP 2020 leans towards learning and away from the present bias towards rote

Last week, the Union government unveiled the long-awaited National Education Policy (NEP), only the third such effort since India gained independence. It is by all counts a remarkable document that sets out a very bold and radical vision to reset the education landscape in the country. Almost no one can quarrel (except for the constant critics) with the objectives and milestones of change set out in the document. One can only wish that this had happened when we were students.

Ironically, if indeed there is one flaw in the NEP it is that it is just too perfect. My fear is that perfection can end up being the enemy of the good. Don't get me wrong. This is not to suggest that we should not aim high. Absolutely we should. It is just that we should be realistic. Perfection can be elusive, while making something good is eminently achievable. It is also a good strategy to promise less and deliver more, particularly in dealing with trenchant critics who will judge you by holding you to your promise.

Especially in a country like ours where the public delivery system is broken and has been used to amass pelf.

Take for example, the decision to use Aadhaar, the 12-digit unique identity, as proof of identity for university teachers. Doubt if anyone was prepared to discover that out of 1.4 million teachers in colleges and universities about 130,000 were ghost teachers!

Similarly, every year, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) details the abysmal standards of learning in our schools. Add to this, the burden of teacher absenteeism. Some estimates claim that a quarter of teachers do not turn up. Are we then surprised that seven decades after independence, one in four Indians are illiterate and that the legions of engineers hired by our top information technology (IT) companies have to be retooled, forcing them to invest in setting up big campuses.

Having pointed out my apprehension and ignoring the manufactured controversy over language, it is clear that the NEP 2020 is a brilliant blueprint to create a new future for education in India. It is driven by two simple but powerful mantras: "Children not only learn, but more importantly learn how to learn" and "One size does not fit all".

Accordingly, it makes out a case for an entirely new education architecture that leans towards learning and away from the present bias towards rote. "Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable," it says.

That is exactly why it de-emphasizes rote and redraws the schooling system on a 5+3+3+4 formula, junking the current 10+2 model. My personal favourite: it incorporates sports and vocational courses as part of the school curriculum (at present, they are considered extra-curricular activities). Surely many of us will remember being given monikers (actually a pejorative) like "sports-case" for showing a greater inclination to excel in sport or "vocational" for preferring a vocational course.

In the case of higher level education, the NEP makes it imperative for institutions to embrace

multidisciplinary courses so as to deliver on holistic education. It also proposes a four-year degree with the option for a student to opt out earlier (or even return at a later date) and settle for a diploma.

Most importantly, NEP 2020 makes teachers central to the transformative agenda. Excellent thinking, particularly if you look back and see how good teachers deeply influenced so many of us.

"The new education policy must help re-establish teachers, at all levels, as the most respected and essential members of our society, because they truly shape our next generation of citizens. It must do everything to empower teachers and help them do their job as effectively as possible," the NEP document says.

Now, that the architecture is in place, the country can get down to building the new edifice. Let us not fret about perfection. Like Gretchen Rubin wrote in her book, *The Happiness Project*, "Many things worth doing are worth doing badly." So, let perfection be the inspiration for this transformative project and not the metric to measure success.

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