

# EDUCATING INDIA

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

The National Education Policy, an ambitious and complex document, laying down a road map for the next two decades, has been adopted in the midst of a [pandemic](#) and a lockdown, which renders discussion and debate difficult. Nevertheless, it requires closer scrutiny, in terms of its implications for the marginalised, disciplinary spaces, autonomy, and constitutional values, among other things.

What are its implications for the majority of those covered under the acronym SEDGs (Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups) in the text? Absent in the document, as far as I could see, is any mention of the term “caste”, apart from a fleeting reference to Scheduled Castes. Also absent is any mention of reservation in academic institutions, whether for students, teachers, or other employees. Reservation, necessary but not sufficient, is the bare minimum required in terms of affirmative action in the highly differentiated socio-economic milieu in which we exist. The silence of the document on this issue is troubling, to say the least.

Equally disturbing is the passing reference to educational institutions in tribal areas, designated as ashramshalas (NEP 1.8) and envisaged as part of the Early Childhood Children Education programme. What, one wonders, will be transacted in these institutions. While there are sections of the document (for instance, NEP 14.4) that describe ways in which SEDGs are supposed to gain access to higher education institutions, there is no time-frame that is specified. This is particularly crucial as the document visualises increased “benign” privatisation of education, attempting to distinguish this from commercialisation. In a situation of growing privatisation and the near collapse of public institutions of higher education, how these policies will be implemented is a matter of concern.

One of the buzz words in the document is multi-disciplinarity — an apparently attractive and flexible proposition, allowing learners to experiment with a variety of options. We learn (NEP 11.7) that “Departments in Languages, Literature, Music, Philosophy, Indology, Art, Dance, Theatre, Education, Mathematics, Statistics, Pure and Applied Sciences, Sociology, Economics, Sports, and other such subjects needed for a multidisciplinary, stimulating Indian education and environment will be established and strengthened at HEIs across the country.” While the list is unexceptionable, it is worth flagging what is missed out — fields of studies such as Women’s Studies or Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Dalit Studies, Studies of Discrimination and Exclusion, Environmental Studies and Development Studies, all of which have developed over the last three or four decades. Many of these have engaged with multi-disciplinarity/inter-disciplinarity in exciting and disturbing ways, bringing to the fore issues of diversity, difference and identity. That these developments are ignored in what purports to be a forward-looking document is intriguing.

While there is a running refrain of autonomy and choice in the document, this is circumscribed at crucial junctures. For instance, the selection of vocational subjects in middle school is described as a fun choice. At the same time, it is to be exercised “as decided by States and local communities and as mapped by local skilling needs” (NEP 4.8).

Further up in the scheme of things is the National Testing Agency (NEP 4.38) which, we learn “will serve as a premier, expert, autonomous testing organisation to conduct entrance examinations... in higher educational institutions.” This is expected to be a means of “drastically reducing the burden on students, universities and colleges, and the entire education system.” That instead of an overarching centralised agency, an innovative educational policy would

attempt to create space for context-specific and diverse modes of evaluation for different fields of learning is a possibility that remains unexplored.

Overall, HEIs will now be run by a Board of Governors (NEP 19.2), backed by legislative changes where required. Further centralisation is envisaged through the setting up of “the National Higher Education Regulatory Authority (NHERA)... to regulate in a ‘light but tight’ and facilitative manner, meaning that a few important matters — particularly financial probity, good governance, and full online and offline public disclosure of all finances, procedures, faculty/staff, courses, and educational outcomes — will be very effectively regulated, while leaving the rest to the judgment of the HEIs (NEP 20.4).” What, one wonders, remains in “the rest”.

While we have been hearing a great deal about the benefits of being atma-nirbhar, the policy explicitly facilitates the presence of foreign universities within higher education. Also, and perhaps more intriguing, these universities are held up as ideals to be emulated. So “MERUs (Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities) will be set up and will aim to reach the global status of, e.g., the Ivy League Universities in the US.” (NEP 11.10)

Several universities and HEIs have evolved and sustained democratic mechanisms, including academic and executive councils. These formulate, discuss, and implement policies, courses and other institutional matters. What has made them vibrant institutions is the presence of faculty and students, elected, as well as on the basis of seniority and rotation. Jettisoning these structures, norms and practices for a linear top-down mode of administration, as envisaged, will deprive members of HEIs of an opportunity to engage with the challenges of democratic functioning.

Also worrisome is what happens with the Constitution — while an assortment of values are identified as constitutional, including “knowledge and practice of human and constitutional values (such as patriotism, sacrifice, non-violence, truth, honesty, peace, righteous conduct, forgiveness, tolerance, mercy, sympathy, helpfulness, cleanliness, courtesy, integrity, pluralism, responsibility, justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity)” (NEP 4.23), and there is an occasional mention of fundamental duties, one searches in vain for any allusion to fundamental rights. Are these to be erased from the memories of future generations?

It is to be hoped that beyond the immediate excitement that the announcement of the implementation of the NEP has generated, there will be opportunities to examine its long-term implications, and, if necessary, revisit it, before it is actually implemented.

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