

# A FLEXIBLE EDUCATION SYSTEM UNDER NEP 2020 WILL OPEN OUR MINDS TO EXCELLENCE: K KASTURIRANGAN

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After more than three decades, India has a new National Education Policy, and it seems quite radical—among the changes are a new school structure, vocational education from the age of 12, four-year degrees, flexible exam systems, a merger of UGC and AICTE. Dr K Kasturirangan, head of the panel for NEP 2020, told Mint in an exclusive interview on Thursday that transforming India's education system is crucial to helping the country's youth compete globally. The 79-year-old eminent scientist and educationist spelt out the logic behind the two-year effort to overhaul school and university education. Excerpts:

## **What were the main objectives of a revamp of the entire structure after 34 years?**

This is the time for transformation and drastic changes everywhere. We need to take another look at everything we do. In my view, the first should be education. Transforming and creating a dynamic education system is fundamental for the progress of any country. India is no different. Technological advancement has had far-reaching and important implications on every aspect of our lives today. It is imperative that this transformation reflects in our classrooms. Above all, it has been three decades since the National Education Policy was framed. It was time we looked at it.

## **You have said we need to have an open-minded approach to education. Could you explain?**

Education cannot be in watertight compartments anymore. A chartered accountant cannot just study finance. There needs to be diversity because today there are so many opportunities. One of the critical characters of NEP 2020 is flexibility. It is integrated yet flexible. The panel felt that the various aspects and stages in a child's education must be interconnected, like school to college to university education. There must be coherence for holistic learning. We can no more afford to be straight-jacketed.

## **A major recommendation is to allow foreign universities set up campuses in India. Will the powerful private college/university lobby allow it to be implemented?**

In the new world, we must do everything to enrich ourselves. We cannot remain short-sighted. We are not talking about opening investments in India from any foreign university. We are looking at the top 100 and world-class Ivy League institutions that may be allowed to come and invest here. The idea is to open our minds to excellence. We cannot and should not be closed to such initiatives anymore.

## **More than three lakh students go abroad every year from India. Was the decision to make the degree four years aimed at making this easier?**

No. The four-year degree is aimed at making the students more job worthy and make graduate course more holistic. Today we seem to have a restricted view on the subjects that a child can

choose. That's why we have recommended major and minor subjects like Physics with Music. We felt the course will appear more relevant to the student to make the final choices for his/her profession. To make it flexible, the NEP has also introduced the entry-exit policy so that learning and specialisations for a student are more enjoyable. We need to loosen up.

**The number of seats in premier institutions like the IITs/National Law Schools are too few for an aspirational country like India. Do you believe that more seats may dilute quality?**

There is no doubt that quantity must be enhanced along with quality. But that needs to be done holistically. Today higher education in India is fragmented. We have over 900 universities under the University Grants Commission. What we need to do and have recommended is to re-configure the entire system. Broaden the base and have focus areas like research. We have recommended that the IITs become multi-disciplinary. Once we re-configure, the seats can go up to even 20,000 for a university. So the goal should be to re-structure and not just increase the intake.

**NEP has emphasised mother tongue/local language as medium of instruction up to class 5 or even class 8. Won't Indian children will be at a disadvantage in a globalised world due to lack of English?**

Many studies have indicated that the ability to grasp in mother tongue is more in the formative years of a child's life, and that the brain responds to the mother tongue better. But the panel, during its various brainstorming sessions, suggested that we look at the issue practically and keep the decision open. If someone wants to learn English in the three-language formula, so be it. The new policy is all about flexibility. Removing all rigidity is the first step to a dynamic education system.

**Teachers are the pillars of an education system. How has NEP 2020 addressed the teacher shortage, a problem India has been struggling with for many decades?**

We must first ask what kind of teachers we want into the system today. Teachers can no more be trained in the grand old Teachers' Training Institutes. We have recommended a separate cadre within the university system. There must be departments of education in the higher educational institutions and teacher training be made a part of the entire system. We have recommended a National Professional Standards for Teachers so that we are able to draw the best and bright teachers into the fold.

**Rote learning and outdated evaluation seem to be the bane of our school and college education system. How do you think can we de-stress children and make education enjoyable?**

It is imperative we move away from the system where children are assessed by what they do during the three-hour end-of-year examination. The panel debated a lot on this and decided that there will be through-the-year assessment and report cards will be a reflection of the student's skills and capabilities and not the ability to memorise lessons.

**How do you think can we get our colleges/universities to do world-class research which will eventually be benefit society?**

At present, research in our universities is highly unsatisfactory. I must say it is dismal. It is a cycle. When you are in the frontiers of research, you get good teachers. Need of the hour is to nurture research. The NEP has recommended the establishment of a National Research Foundation which will be the nodal agency for all research work by our universities.

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