

TREATING EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD

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It is not surprising that Jiddu Krishnamurti, arguably the greatest Indian thinker on education in the 20th century, does not find a mention in the most recent iteration of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2019. Krishnamurthi's ideas on education and freedom — learning in a non-competitive and non-hierarchical ecosystem and discovering one's true passion without any sense of fear — may have been too heterodox for a government report. Nonetheless, there are elements of contemporary global thinking that do inform the NEP *en passant* — the emphasis on creativity and critical thinking and the ability to communicate and collaborate across cultural differences, which are part of the global common sense.

The near-final NEP, despite its lacunae, is a vast improvement over its earlier, almost-unreadable avatar. The report's 55-page brevity is matched by a reader-friendly organisational structure: four chapters focussing on school education; higher education; other key areas like adult education, technology and promotion of arts and culture; and a section on making it happen by establishing an apex body and the financial aspects to make quality education affordable for all. While the commitment to double the government expenditure on education from about 10% to 20% over a 10-year period is still insufficient, given the enormity of the challenge, it is an unprecedented commitment to the sector.

Education, for most of us, is a necessary public good central to the task of nation building and, like fresh air, is necessary to make our communities come alive; it should not be driven solely by market demand for certain skills, or be distracted by the admittedly disruptive impact, for instance, of Artificial Intelligence. This form of education should be unshackled from the chains of deprivation, and “affordable” education, for instance in JNU, is vital to ensure access to even the most marginalised sections of our country. Education policy, in essence, must aim to produce sensitive, creative and upright citizens who are willing to take the less-travelled path and whose professional “skills” will endure revolutions in thinking and technology.

A menu of choices provided by the private sector, which reduces education to the status of a commodity and views our youthful demography as human capital, is being doled out as panacea by instant India specialists to our educational challenges. This is a fallacy. We have to be conscious and deeply aware that there is no developed country where the public sector was *not* in the vanguard of school and higher education expansion, in ensuring its inclusiveness, and in setting standards. Even the *sui generis* Ivy League universities, created because of generous philanthropic endowments, function more like public institutions today. It was, therefore, essential for the government to produce a blueprint for reforms after widespread consultation; whether the present NEP report can deliver on this challenge is debatable.

As an academic, I am of course delighted that the NEP's stated goal is to “reinststate” teachers as the “most respected members of our society.” Empowerment of teachers remains a key mantra of the policy, and it is understood that this can only be achieved by ensuring their “livelihood, respect, dignity and autonomy”, while ensuring quality and accountability. If the NEP stems the rot in most institutions of learning — which leads to the erosion of autonomy of teachers even on academic forums — it would have achieved a major breakthrough. Indeed, such is the intolerant dictatorial attitude of many of our current university leaders that the act of intervening in academic debates itself seems like treason.

Equally laudable is the emphasis on early childhood care and schooling more generally. The *anganwadis* remain the backbone of an early childhood care system but have suffered on multiple grounds, including lack of facilities and proper training. This, as the report recognises, needs to change; but the incremental and rather ad hoc changes proposed (in stand-alone *anganwadis*, or *anganwadis* co-located with primary schools, etc.) may not deliver. The idea of volunteer teachers, peer tutoring, rationalisation of the system of schools and sharing of resources does sound ominous. It is also not clear what strategies will be adopted, nor what resources will be committed, to strengthen the public sector, including the Kendriya Vidyalayas, the State government-run institutions and the municipal schools.

Much has to be learnt here from examples even in the non-commercial private sector. The best example I know of holistic childhood education is that of Mirambika, a free-progress, experimental school inspired by the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

The NEP wisely recognises that a comprehensive liberal arts education will help to “develop all capacities of human beings — intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral — in an integrated manner.” India’s past, and its unique, culturally diverse matrix provide a rich framework, but delivering on a holistic liberal education programme requires much more than just proclamations.

The proposal to establish a National Research Foundation, with an “overarching goal... to enable a culture of research to permeate through our universities” needs to be applauded and widely supported. But the creation of a National Testing Agency (NTA) has understandably generated scepticism. While, on paper, the NTA “will serve as a premier, expert, autonomous testing organisation to conduct entrance examinations for admissions and fellowships in higher educational institutions,” in reality, universities and departments may lose autonomy over admissions, even of research students. This is not an empty fear; the initial signs of this change are already visible in universities.

Equally serious is the concern about the division between research-intensive ‘premier’ universities; teaching universities; and colleges. The NEP suggests, “three ‘types’ of institutions are not in any natural way a sharp, exclusionary categorisation, but are along a continuum”. But the advantage of these divisions, per se, is neither intuitively nor analytically clear, given that high quality teaching and cutting-edge research comfortably coexist in most universities of excellence.

The NEP draft will now be placed before the Cabinet; one hopes that many of the concerns raised are addressed before an official policy is finally announced, recognising also the enormous pressure from global educational “service providers” to capture the Indian education market.

In 2003, I had the opportunity, as Vice Chancellor of the University of Jammu, to invite the then-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief K.S. Sudarshan for breakfast at home. Also invited were my colleagues in the university, K.L. Bhatia and Nirmal Singh. Addressing the issue of a section of Jammu chauvinists campaigning against my appointment (as a Kashmiri) to the Vice Chancellorship, Sudarshan said: “This is a *vishvavidyalaya* (university) — an academic universe, a global sanctuary of ideas which we can never be reduced to a space for narrow bigotry. We have to uphold the highest principles here, not let academic positions or programmes be traded or let education become yet another business.” Given that the RSS is an important stakeholder in the NEP, it is critical that it guards against consumerist, neoliberal ideas of education “taking over” through the backdoor, while an apparent vigil of cultural nationalism is maintained in the front.

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