

EDUCATION, THE NATION AND THE STATES

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

Towards the end of a recent webinar on the [National Education Policy 2020](#), a retired civil servant asked a question. Referring to Centre-State relations and roles in education, he asked whether the new policy gives the Centre a predatory role. The use of the word 'predatory' felt a bit sharp in the context of education, but the intention obviously was to ascertain whether the new policy observes federal courtesy. Even the 1986 policy didn't fully acknowledge the variety prevailing in provincial practices and the legacies those practices are rooted in. The trend has been to assume that a national system will evolve and iron out provincial variations. That is a strange assumption. For education to fulfil its social role, it must respond to the specific milieu in which the young are growing up. India has sufficient experience of attempts made from the national level to influence systemic realities on the ground. There is a considerable history of strong recommendations made by national commissions and of provincial recalcitrance. States have their own social worlds to deal with, and they often prefer to carry on with the ways they became familiar with in colonial days. A prime example is the continuation of intermediate or junior colleges in several States more than half a century after the Kothari Commission gave its much acclaimed report.

Historically, the system of education evolved in the provinces. One hundred years ago, the Central Advisory Board of Education was created to co-ordinate regional responses to common issues. The 'advisory' character of this administrative mechanism meant that the Board served mainly as a discussion forum. The Constitution, in its original draft, treated the States as the appropriate sphere for dealing with education. But unlike some other federal countries, India chose to have a Ministry of Education at the Centre. Its role was not merely decorative or confined to coordination among differing State perspectives and practices; rather, the Centre was expected to articulate aims and standards, or to pave the road to nation-building and development. Soon after independence, a more substantial sphere of the Centre's activities in education emerged in the shape of advanced institutions in professional fields and schools specifically meant for the children of civil servants transferable across India. Such institutions received higher investment than the States could afford. The same can be said for national-level resource institutions which guided policy and encouraged new practices.

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Thus, concurrency was already a reality before the 1976 amendment formally included it in the Constitution. What it might mean after the Emergency was an open question. A decade later, when the national policy was drafted under a youthful leader, it emphasised national concerns and perspective without specifically referring to provincial practices that indicated strong divergence. Engagement with the States remained a function of the Planning Commission. In the meantime, a burgeoning private sector had begun to push both public policy and popular perceptions of education. The force of this push can be measured from the difference between the 1986 policy and its own action programme published six years later. Throughout the 1990s, those in charge of education remained hesitant to explain publicly how exactly liberalisation would apply to this traditionally public responsibility. The rapidly expanding and globalising urban middle class had already begun to secede from the public system, posing the awkward question of why education cannot be sold if there are willing buyers. Systemic chaos grew, leaving the policy behind.

India now has three systems. To call them sectors would be an understatement. There is a

Central system, running an exam board that has an all-India reach through affiliation with English-medium private schools catering to regional elites. Two school chains run by the Centre are part of this system. The Central system also includes advanced professional institutes and universities that have access to greater per capita funding than what their counterparts run by the States can afford. These latter ones belong to the second system which also features provincial secondary boards affiliating schools teaching in State languages. The third system is based on purely private investment. Internationally accredited school boards and globally connected private universities are part of this third system. These institutions represent a new level of freedom from state norms.

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An explicit attempt was made under the Right to Education (RTE) Act to bridge the first two systems. The RTE is a parliamentary law, providing a set of standards for elementary education and a call to private schools to provide for social justice via the quota route. In higher education, such an attempt to balance private autonomy with an obligation to provide social justice is yet to be made in any palpable sense. Accreditation norms and recognition procedures create a semblance of public accountability. Coordination among the three systems has proved unmanageable, even in purely functional terms. The least we might expect would be a reliable mechanism to reconcile the marking standards of different Boards and universities. Far harder is the coordination required in adherence to social responsibilities in a period of rapid economic change. Inequalities have become sharper with the rise in overall prosperity. Education must mediate between different social strata divided by caste and economic status. The recent attempt made by Tamil Nadu to create a modest quota in NEET for students who attended government schools points towards an endemic problem exacerbated by centralisation.

The new policy document underestimates the problem of reconciling the three systems. The architect of many of our national-level institutions, the late J.P. Naik, used to say that we must ask what kind of human being and society we want before we draft a policy in education. Apart from that philosophical question, we also need a systemic vision: both for recovery from institutional decay and for future progress. Functional uniformity is unlikely to offer any real solution. That is what the new policy seems to favour. In higher education, it proposes nationally codified and administered measures to oversee institutional transformation across State capitals and district towns. The assumption is that old structures will melt like wax under the heat of an empowered vision. The idea of a monolithic regulatory architecture to control a system that is privatising at a rapid pace suggests a tempting impulse rather than a considered plan. Sufficient indication has existed for many years now that economic policy favours greater private enterprise in higher education. How to reconcile this push with the necessity of equitable public education is a nagging question. Similar is the question of autonomy; it cannot be interpreted in financial terms alone. The many different ways in which the States have maintained their colleges and universities cannot all be regarded as signs of a dysfunctional or failing system. If failure is the criterion for choice of remedy, gradations of failure will have to be determined first and their causes studied before remedial steps are contemplated. To accept that one size does not fit all, and then to push every foot into a chosen shoe takes self-contradictory parlance to a new level.

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At the school level too, the new policy proposes a post-RTE structural shift, ignoring the fact that the RTE itself has not yet been fully implemented. It is useful to recall that the RTE was drafted with prolonged involvement with the States, not mere consultation. The consensus for such a law was no less difficult to create than the formulation of its content. A vital role was played by

the highest judiciary in pushing the polity towards recognising children's right to be at school rather than at work. This was a historic social turn towards greater parity between sharply unequal strata. It might not have been accomplished if the Centre had not played an assertive role. Further progress of this role called for continued financial support for the implementation of RTE and policy guidance for the proper use of this support so that regional disparities diminish.

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