

# EDUCATION AND THE TOWN-COUNTRY DIVIDE

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*(Written by P V Krishna Bhat and G Krishna Kumar)*

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has said that the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) will lay a strong foundation for “Naya Bharat”. This is the first education policy after 34 years — that’s too long a wait and the present system was not meeting the society’s changing needs.

More than a century ago, Maharishi Aurobindo said, “It is an education proper to the Indian soul and need and temperament and culture that we are in quest of; not indeed something faithful merely to the past but to the developing soul of India to her future need to the greatness of her coming self-creation to her eternal spirit”.

The Kothari Commission Report (1964-1966), a fine piece of work that was never implemented properly, suggested that India’s expenditure on education should be increased to 6 per cent of GDP. Isn’t it intriguing that even in 2020, we are aspiring to spend 6 per cent of GDP on education?

The Kothari commission report had suggested, “the strengthening of centres of advanced study and the setting up of a small number of major universities which would aim to achieve the highest international standards”. This is relevant even today. Sample this: We have 993 universities and 39,991 colleges in the country. But none of them figures among the world’s top-ranked universities. It is beyond doubt that there is a need to improve all the universities and colleges in the country. But improving all of them at one go is likely to be an impossible task. The government should identify a select few universities and provide them with all the support to see that they develop as centres of excellence comparable with the best universities in the world. A time-bound road-map to this effect will be required.

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Considering the transformation that the NEP aims to achieve, the government must embark on a large scale re-orientation programme for teachers. The teachers need to accept and assimilate the transformation for effective implementation of the policy. The transformation of education in Germany is an apt example. After the unification, the teaching faculty in East Germany was put on a six months re-orientation programme in order to assimilate the democratic values of the government.

Notwithstanding the current COVID19 crisis that has led to reverse migration from cities to the rural hinterland, we have a serious issue on migration from rural to urban areas. India’s urban population was 27.81 per cent in 2001, it had crossed 34 per cent in 2019 and is expected to be 38 per cent in 2020. For this trend of urban migration to be arrested, we need a renewed focus on agriculture, farming and allied sectors – while also concentrating on jobs and education.

In the present system, students with a rural background who pursue higher education end up migrating to cities for jobs. They find themselves alienated from the rural surroundings despite having a rural background. It is only appropriate that such students and youth from rural areas are provided with leadership training that will enable them to remain in the rural areas and contribute towards the overall development and economic growth of rural areas. Such leaders can make a big impact on allied industries as well.

The Kothari commission report stated that “Education for agriculture and research in agriculture and allied sciences should be given a high priority in the scheme of educational reconstruction. Energetic and imaginative steps are required to draw a reasonable proportion of talent to go in for advanced study and research in the agricultural sciences”. NEP 2020 emphasises knowledge systems, including tribal knowledge, and thereby brings back focus on the agriculture sector.

The National Research Foundation (NRF) is expected to support research in agriculture by coordinating between researchers and other stakeholders. We should learn from countries like Australia and New Zealand, which have attained high productivity in agriculture and allied sectors mainly due to increased funding on research initiatives for improving agricultural productivity. No wonder Australia counts on agriculture as the fastest-growing industry — at over 16 per cent annually. Australia envisions its agriculture sector to be worth \$100 billion by 2030. Can we have a target for India as well?

A recent report states that of the 13.77 lakh anganwadi centres, over 3.6 lakh do not have toilets and 1.59 lakh do not have drinking water facilities. Over 1.75 lakh positions are vacant in anganwadis. The government should fix these issues on a war footing.

It is heartening that NEP 2020 aims to support teachers and students in rural areas. However, bringing the rural students on par with the urban students in terms of teaching facilities and infrastructure will be a challenge considering the wide disparities in the socioeconomic and infrastructural facilities available to students.

In order to provide a level playing field for the students from rural and tribal backgrounds, necessary bridge infrastructure must be put in place. The 1,000/day target set by the PM Modi for equipping all villages with fibre optic connectivity is a step in the right direction.

Considering that the target for Bharat net implementation has been continuously delayed, let's hope the revised target is met. In addition to the digital infrastructure, we must have localised content available for teachers and students. It is equally important that physical infrastructure, be it roads or un-interrupted electricity, be made available in the rural hinterland.

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