

Nep – Challenges and Issues

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Introduction

In 2020, India unveiled its first and most comprehensive education policy of the 21st century. As the first omnibus policy since 1986, the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has the onerous task of addressing multiple crises facing India's education system. Addressing the completion of one year of the NEP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi remarked, "We are entering the 75th year of Independence. In a way, implementation of NEP has become a vital part of this occasion. This will play a key role in creating a new India and future-ready youth". The Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, called NEP 2020 a visionary education policy for the 21st century through which India is harnessing the capabilities of each student, universalising education, building capacities, and transforming the learning landscape in the country. He stressed that the NEP would make education holistic, affordable, accessible, and equitable. What has been the progress so far? Is the NEP roll-out on track? What are the major challenges facing this mega education policy in the coming decades?

Major milestones

In the last 16 months since its eventful launch, the NEP has moved some ground in terms of meeting key milestones, notwithstanding the challenges from the global health pandemic. To begin with, the government has done well in terms of building awareness and interests amongst diverse stakeholders on the mission and vision of the NEP. This was marked in a 10-day long Shikshak Parv that saw a series of national-level events featuring the Prime Minister and other key officials. Further, to make the intent more pronounced, the government has renamed the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) to Ministry of Education. Significantly, this key ministry has been infused with doses of energy and dynamisms by bringing in Dharmendra Pradhan, the man who brought major transformations in the critical energy ministry. Mr Pradhan's proven implementation ability and his diplomatic negotiating skills will come in handy in pushing the mega initiatives that would likely face opposition in Opposition-ruled states.

In terms of roll-out of key NEP activities, the school curriculum has been changed to include artificial intelligence (AI) and financial literacy. Given that the mother tongue or regional language received primacy in the NEP, the same has been introduced in several states, albeit on a pilot basis. Further, the ministry has launched the much-talked-about Academic Bank of Credit—a programme that will provide multiple entry and exit options for students in higher education. These apart, a number of key initiatives, such as NIPUN Bharat Mission—improving children's learning competencies in reading, writing, and numeracy by the end of Grade III; Vidya Pravesh—a three-month school preparation module for Grade I children; DIKSHA—a teaching-learning repository of e-content; and NISHTHA—teachers training programme for the secondary-level teachers. As far as roll-out amongst the states are concerned, only a handful of states, mainly under the ruling party have launched the programme. Karnataka became the first state to implement NEP on 24 August. Recently, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh launched a series of NEP initiatives giving a much needed push to this mega policy. On the whole, NEP has started gathering pace.

Five major challenges

While the NEP has begun gathering a fair degree of momentum, the road to its realisation is filled with endless potholes. First, the sheer size and diversity of India's education sector makes implementation an uphill task. For example, sample the size of the school education system alone. With more than 15 lakh schools, 25 crore students, and 89 lakh teachers, India remains the second largest education system in the world. The size of the higher education system is massive too. As per the AISHE 2019 report, India's higher education sector consists of 3.74 crore students in nearly 1,000 universities, 39,931 colleges, and 10,725

stand-alone institutions. Thus, a countrywide implementation of this mega education policy is going to be a mammoth exercise involving multiple stakeholders at the state, district, sub-district, and block levels. Creating a shared responsibility and ownership amongst key stakeholders, including the private sector, at the state and district levels that have extraordinary diversity is going to be a major challenge for the education leadership.

Second, the NEP's eventual realisation is critically linked to state capacity. As rightly pointed out by the NEP Drafting Committee led by K. Kasturirangan, India's education system is underfunded, heavily bureaucratized, and lacks capacity for innovation and scale up. The internal capacities within the education ministries (centre and states) and other regulatory bodies are grossly inadequate to steer the magnitude of transformations envisaged in the NEP. For instance, moving away from a rigid content-driven rote learning system to experiential learning and critical thinking would require nothing short of a revolutionary change in the attitudes of the people running the education system, let alone the attitudinal changes amongst the teachers, students, and parents.

This means that thousands of schools and colleges would need capacity building and reorientation with regards to the operational aspects of implementing a mega programme with many experiential goals. In short, the existing organisational structure of the ministry and its ecosystems will have to undergo a massive overhaul. While it is heartening is that the NEP document has laid out a comprehensive roadmap for overhauling the existing regulatory system, and the education ministry is in the process of bringing out a legislation that would facilitate the setting up of a Higher Education Commission of India (in the place of existing regulatory bodies, mainly the UGC, AICTE, and National Council for Teachers Education), one has to wait for the new institutional architecture emerging out of legislative initiatives.

Third, the NEP would largely hinge on the extent of cooperation between the Centre and states. While the NEP has been drafted by the Union government (with inputs from multiple stakeholders including the state governments), its implementation largely depends on the active cooperation of the states. This is because most services-related education are performed by the state governments. In short, the Centre has to skilfully navigate the principles of cooperative federalism and decentralisation while rolling out key initiatives. And this is not an easy act to perform given the sharpening of political polarisation in the recent years and visible breakdown of trust between the Centre and states. A number of Opposition-ruled states have been raising strong objections to several key provisions of the NEP and the manner in which they are being rolled out. The more worrying development is that the Tamil Nadu government's recent decision to not implement the NEP can encourage other Opposition-ruled states to follow a similar path. Thus, managing federal math is critical to the realisation of the NEP.

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Fourth, the role of the private sector, particularly in dealing with the higher education system, is extremely critical for translating the inclusionary vision of the NEP. It may be noted that as much as 70 percent of higher education institutions (colleges and universities) are run by the private sector. Significantly, roughly 65-70 percent students are currently enrolled in private higher education institutions. This apart, the private sector brings much needed financial resources and innovation. Therefore, it is imperative for the government and regulatory bodies to create workable institutional mechanisms that would harness the contribution of the private sector and recognise them as equal partner in the NEP process.

Finally, the successful execution of key initiatives requires availability of adequate financial resources for decades. In this regard, the NEP has stated that to realise the goals of the new policy, the country has to raise public spending on education to 6 percent of GDP. This is a daunting task if one considers the past promises and their actual realisation. For instance, the 1968 National Education policy had recommended 6 percent of GDP be allocated towards education. However, in all these decades, the public spending on education has not gone beyond 3 percent. Ironically, the union budget allocation for education in the NEP launching year has taken a dip. The education budget was reduced by 6 percent from INR 99,311 crore in 2020-21 to INR 93,224 crore in 2021-22. While this is understandable given the government's priorities are divided in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic distress that large

sections of populations are facing, there is no clear roadmap yet how such enormous sums of financial resources can be augmented.

To sum up, the NEP 2020 is truly a pathbreaking document in every sense. The policy, amongst others, aims to address pedagogical issues, structural inequities, broadening of access apart from making the learners future ready while meeting the demands of a 21st century India. Simultaneously, the NEP has the most challenging task of addressing multiple crises in the education system. Its effective implementation is critical if India wants to reap the demographic dividends and capitalise the opportunities from a rapidly growing knowledge economy. Given its transformative potentials, the Centre has shown urgency and a sense of purpose by launching a series of initiatives in the recent months notwithstanding the challenges of the pandemic. A number of states have officially launched the policy and many others are in the process to do the same. Yet, there is a long road ahead of the NEP. Given its scale and the kind of complexity involved in its execution, particularly securing coordination and cooperation amongst diverse stakeholders at state, district, private sector amongst others, makes it a daunting exercise. Apart from this, one has to deal with weak state capacity, availability of financial resources and, most importantly, the education ecosystem that acts as a drag on new ideas and innovation. Yet, the most critical challenge before NEP is building consensus and getting states to own the first omnibus programme after 1986. In short, the success of the NEP largely hinges on cooperative federalism and states taking ownership of the reforms.

Issues with the NEP- 2020

The new policy has tried to please all, and the layers are clearly visible in the document. It says all the right things and tries to cover all bases, often slipping off keel.

Lack of integration:

In both the thinking, and in the document, there are lags, such as the integration of technology and pedagogy. There are big gaps such as lifelong learning, which should have been a key element of upgrading to emerging sciences.

Language barrier:

There is much in the document ripe for debate – such as language. The NEP seeks to enable home language learning up to class five, in order to improve learning outcomes. Sure, early comprehension of concepts is better in the home language and is critical for future progress. If the foundations are not sound, learning suffers, even with the best of teaching and infrastructure. But it is also true that a core goal of education is social and economic mobility, and the language of mobility in India is English.

Multilingualism debate:

Home language succeeds in places where the ecosystem extends all the way through higher education and into employment. Without such an ecosystem in place, this may not be good enough. The NEP speaks of multilingualism and that must be emphasised. Most classes in India are de facto bilingual. Some states are blissfully considering this policy as a futile attempt to impose Hindi.

Lack of funds:

According to Economic Survey 2019-2020, the public spending (by the Centre and the State) on education was 3.1% of the GDP. A shift in the cost structure of education is inevitable. While funding at 6% of GDP remains doubtful, it is possible that parts of the transformation are achievable at a lower cost for greater scale.

A move in haste: The country is grappled with months of COVID-induced lockdowns. The policy had to have parliamentary discussions; it should have undergone a decent parliamentary debate and deliberations considering diverse opinions.

Overambitious:

All aforesaid policy moves require enormous resources. An ambitious target of public spending at 6% of GDP has been set. This is certainly a tall order, given the current tax-to-GDP ratio and competing

claims on the national exchequer of healthcare, national security and other key sectors. The exchequer itself is choked meeting the current expenditure.

Pedagogical limitations:

The document talks about flexibility, choice, experimentation. In higher education, the document recognizes that there is a diversity of pedagogical needs. If it is a mandated option within single institutions, this will be a disaster, since structuring a curriculum for a classroom that has both one-year diploma students and four-year degree students' takes away from the identity of the institution.

Institutional limitations:

A healthy education system will comprise of a diversity of institutions, not a forced multi-disciplinarily one. Students should have a choice for different kinds of institutions. The policy risks creating a new kind of institutional isomorphism mandated from the Centre.

Issues with examinations:

Exams are neurotic experiences because of competition; the consequences of a slight slip in performance are huge in terms of opportunities. So the answer to the exam conundrum lies in the structure of opportunity. India is far from that condition. This will require a less unequal society both in terms of access to quality institutions, and income differentials consequent upon access to those institutions.

There is a persistent mismatch between the knowledge & skills imparted and the jobs available. This has been one of the main challenges that have affected the Indian education system since Independence. NEP 2020 failed to check this, as it is silent on education related to emerging technological fields like artificial intelligence, cyberspace, nanotech, etc.

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The policy has also been criticised due to the legal complexities surrounding the applicability of two operative policies namely The Right to Education Act, 2009 and the New Education Policy, 2020. Certain provisions such as the age of starting schooling will need to be deliberated upon, in order to resolve any conundrum between the statute and the recently introduced policy in the longer run.

It is pertinent to note that past attempts at parliamentary legislations under the erstwhile regulatory set up have not been successful. The failure can be attributed to the role of regulators and the intended legislative changes being out of alignment, as in the case of Foreign Educational Institutions (Regulation of Entry and Operations) Bill, 2010, which lapsed; and the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (Repeal of University Grants Commission Act) Act, 2018 which remained did not reach the Parliament.

While the Universities Grants Commission and the All India Council for Technical Education have played a major role, questions pertaining to the role of the UGC and AICTE remain unanswered under the new policy.

Doubling the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education by 2035 which is one of the stated goals of the policy will mean that we must open one new university every week, for the next 15 years.

In higher education, the National Education Policy 2020's focus on inter-disciplinary learning is a very welcome step. Universities, especially in India, have for decades been very silo-ed and departmentalized.

Conclusion

Education is elemental for realizing full human potential, developing an impartial and unbiased society and advancing national development. Providing comprehensive access to quality education is the key to India's continued rise and command on the global stage in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, scientific progress, national integration, and cultural safeguarding. The new National Educational Policy 2020 introduced on 29 July 2020, solicits to introduce and implement a sea of changes across all levels of education in India, including the basic apprehension of education in the country. Among additional aspects, the NEP has rechristened the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) as the Ministry of Education, Government of India a pointer of the country's changing the centre of attention on education.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his views as “The policy is based on the pillars of “access, equity, quality, affordability, accountability” and will transform India into a “vibrant knowledge hub”, soon after it was unveiled. The world is undergoing swift changes in the awareness landscape. With diverse dramatic scientific and technological advances, like the increase of machine learning, AI and big data, many unskilled jobs worldwide could also be appropriate by machines, while the necessity for a knowledgeable workforce, particularly involving mathematics, data science and computer science in conjunction with multidisciplinary abilities across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, are going to be increasingly in significant demand. Education must build character, enable learners to be ethical, rational, compassionate, and caring, while at the same time prepare them for gainful, fulfilling employment. The gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is required must be bridged through undertaking major reforms that bring the highest quality, equity, and integrity into the system, from early childhood care and education through higher education. The target must be for India to have an education system by 2040 that is second to none, with equitable access to the highest-quality education for all learners regardless of social or economic background. This National Education Policy 2020 is the first education policy of the 21st century and aims to deal with the various growing developmental imperatives of our country. This Policy proposes the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, including its regulation and governance, to make a replace a new system that’s aligned with the aspirational goals of 21st century education, including SDG4, while building upon India’s traditions and value systems.

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