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POLICY SHIFTS IN SCHOOL EDUCATION: WHERE DO WE STAND?

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POLICY SHIFTS IN SCHOOL EDUCATION: WHERE DO WE STAND?

JYOTI RAINA*

Abstract

School education has the potential to be a potent instrument for combating prevailing systemic inequities through policies aimed at creating an inclusive society. Has the Indian state done what it could to actualise the possibilities for building such a society? Is our elementary education system equitable? If not, is course correction with specific policy measures and policy solutions possible now? This article undertakes an analysis of educational policy shifts in post-independent India that accentuated differentiation, inequality and exclusion in the Indian school education system— leading to its structural distortion into multi-layered hierarchies of access. It divides the policy shifts into three distinct phases. The first phase is from independence till 1986 which follows the constitutional framework of egalitarianism. The second phase begins with the announcement of the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, characterised by a state's cumulative withdrawal from provisioning for social infrastructure public goods like elementary education. The direction of policy change was rooted in the ideology of neoliberalism that was dominant in shaping political and economic practices during this second phase. The third phase from 2016 essentialises the neoliberal common sense framing a new policy context in an economistic frame. Each of these phases has identifiable policy thrusts that have shaped school education practices irrevocably. The worrying outcome of policy shifts is that the social differences of class are firming up through this overlap with hierarchies of school education, exacerbating not just existing social differences, but leading to further social divisions in our already stratified society.

Keywords: common school system, elementary education policy, systemic inequities, structural distortion.

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I. Introduction

Elementary education in India was envisioned as a leveller to combat the prevailing systemic inequities through policies aimed at inclusive development of our stratified society. The constitutional provisions of equitable elementary education direct the Indian state to provide free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years (Article 45, Part IV). The companion Article 46 directed the state to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other weaker sections of society. These provisions were enablers of social justice, inclusivity, and educational development in our national imagination.

Has the Indian state attempted to actualise the possibilities of inclusive development through an equitable system of schooling? Could the modern Indian state have fared better? What does faring better imply? Is our elementary education system just, inclusive and equitable; one that plays an enabling role in democratising society? What would such a system look like, in a basic normative sense? If not, is course correction with specific policy solutions possible now?

This article is a commentary on these posers. An analysis of school education policy shifts in post-independent India is undertaken to show how the shifts have continued to exacerbate inequity in the school system. The stance of the state has not mitigated systemic differentiation, differential arrangements for schools and exclusion, resulting in a structural distortion of the school system into multi-layered hierarchies of access. A highly differentiated schooling system is currently institutionalised in Indian society for children belonging to different sections of society. Each of these differential arrangements mirrors the hierarchical socio-economic divisions of our stratified society. The educational arrangements consist of nine different types of schools, ranging from exclusionary high-fee charging international schools affiliated to overseas certification boards, elite private schools, low-fee private schools, special government schools like Kendriya Vidyalayas, tribal region Ashramshals for Adivasis, to state/ local body government schools with intra-access layers (Vasavi, 2019: 2) among others. The Indian state has perhaps not been just in designing public policy for inclusive development to diffuse these differentials, but has undertaken

cumulative policy shifts in the opposite direction. The shifts have exacerbated inequality in school education in the wider context of socio-economic hierarchies of our stratified society.

This article divides the policy analysis into three phases. The first phase is from independence till 1986. This phase was located in the constitutional framework of policy-making that was followed by a 'just' state, which looked at school education as a public good. The second phase begins with the announcement of the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, extending into the economic reforms of 1991, characterised by dilution of policy thrust on providing social infrastructure public goods like elementary education. The direction of policy change was rooted in an economistic framework derived from the ideology of neoliberalism that was dominant in shaping economic practices. The third phase from 2016 onwards marks not just an intensification of neoliberalisation of school education , but essentialises the neoliberal-common sense. This is a completely altered policy context that is framing the wider socio-political process of policy development in contemporary India.

Each of these phases has shaped school education practices irrevocably. The changes in policy direction have resulted in the worrying outcome of legitimising the structural distortion that characterises school education today. The policy shifts have supported, reinforced and further entrenched not simply a binary between the public and the private school education system, but also a deeply embedded multi-layered graded hierarchy within both of them. The former is widely perceived as embodying dysfunctionality to the extent that its very legitimacy is suspect (Velaskar, 2016: 251). In a systemic differentiation it has been abandoned by any student in a position to attend a fee-paying school. The enrolment in state schools is mainly from disadvantaged social groups like SCs, STs, Dalits and minorities (Sadgopal, 2016: 18) and is 'turning state schools into a colony of the underprivileged' (Raina, 2020b: 68). Any student who can afford quality education undertakes an 'exit' from government schools. Also the socio-economically marginalised poor who remain left behind are devoid of 'voice' and therefore fail to have any impact on the dysfunctional government school system. The emaciated government system has thus become '*schools of the last resort*' (Mukhopadhyay and Sarangapani, 2018:12, emphasis original). Each type of differentiated school system is being attended by children belonging to a certain socio-economic section of Indian society. The social differences of class are firming up through this

overlap with school education exacerbating not just existing social differences, but leading to further social divisions in our already stratified society.

II. Three Phases of Policy Shifts

As mentioned, education policy in India is demarcated into two phases of policy shifts: the first beginning with the introduction of NPE 1986 and the second with the international donor agency-led structural adjustment programmes (SAP) following the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 (Velaskar, 2010: 70). At the beginning of phase two, the donor organisations pointed out that India's adult literacy rate (calculated for persons over 7 years of age) was a mere 52 per cent. This was of course some progress from phase one since at the time of independence the literacy rate was 15 per cent. Even our counterparts in East Asia—Thailand and South Korea—with literacy rates at 68 and 71 per cent, respectively, in 1961 fared substantially better (World Bank, 1997:15). We were rather closer in this regard to sub-Saharan Africa's literacy rate of 50.3 per cent (Grindle, 2004: 29). By 1991 we were home to large numbers of illiterates: 127 million males and 197 million females (World Bank ,1997:16). Also, educational development was very uneven with caste, gender and class-based overlapping inequities, with some variations across states. It is therefore not surprising that policy analysts have highlighted that by the early 1990s, India's school education 'was in dire need of a new direction with respect to both policy and operational programmes' (Priyam, 2016: 160). This period of ferment also coincides with the launch of SAP which arguably constitutes a separate phase of policy change.

This article, however, divides the policy change phases into three divisions. The first phase is shaped by the policy wisdom of the constitutional framework of early post-independent India. Equality of opportunity, social justice and direct delivery by the state were the values framing school education policies, practices and programmes. This continued till NPE 1986 was announced. The second phase, from 1986 onwards, heralds a policy trend of non-state stake holding, marking the beginning of neoliberal restructuring of education. The third, post-2016 phase, is characterised by a neoliberal depredation in which elementary education is not even viewed as a public good, but as a commodity to be purchased in accordance with the purchasing power of the section of society a student belongs to.

Phase I: policy wisdom of early post-independent India: egalitarian visions

Pre-colonial Indian society was characterised by exclusions based on economic status, caste and gender; and colonial education 'sought to legitimise the privileges of colonisers' (Kumar 2006:15). Yet, there existed historic counter-currents. There are two significant counter-currents in the trajectory of an egalitarian imagination of Indian society. The first: Rajarshi Shahuji Mahararaja in Kolhapur state established India's first common school system in the late 1890s. The second counter-current was contest of British hesitance to universalise elementary education in 1911 by Gokhale's Free and Compulsory Education Bill. The freedom movement inherited this radical social imaginary. An imagination of a society in which all the sections of population, including children belonging to various social backgrounds, had claims on the state in accordance with the principles of equality, justice and protective discrimination. The role of the state determines the nature of rights availed of by the citizenry and has been the basis of intellectual, social and educational development in the history of human civilisation (Prasad, 2020:177). Post-independent India's agenda of educational development for our emerging nation-state was shaped by this progressive vision. The Preamble to the constitution reflects an aspiration of democratic citizenship for a socialist, egalitarian and just society, envisioning education to be the moral force to build a new inclusive society. Article 45 directing the state to provide for free and compulsory education to all children till 14 years of age aims to actualise this constitutional morality. The Preamble set out the policy development framework according to which education was a process to build citizenship for a democratic, socialist, egalitarian and just society—with guarantee of equality as well as equality of opportunity. Equitable elementary education that reached out to children from diverse social, linguistic and economic backgrounds was constitutionally a public good in our stratified society.

Be that as it may, early decades of educational development in post-independence India ignored an *actual* policy thrust on elementary education (Sadgopal, 2010; Bhatty, 2014). The University Education Commission (1948–49) looking into the aims and scope of higher education, and the Secondary Education Commission (1952–53) were constituted much before the Education Commission (EC) was set up for a comprehensive review of the state of education in the country during 1964–66. The EC believed education to be integral to national development, titling its report *Education and National Development*. The main

recommendations of the voluminous report included: relating education to productivity; promoting national integration; modernising the methods of teaching; and setting up a common school system (CSS) of public education (GoI, 1966). In alignment with an optimistic sociology of education characterising the 1960s era of re-distributive policy-making for inclusive development through public education, the EC believed that education could be the harbinger for social transformative processes. In the spirit of constitutional morality, the report of the commission was critical of the classist access to school education through differential arrangements of schooling for children belonging to socially different sections of society. The commission's report lamented that this was turning schools into oppressive instruments of the perpetuation, legitimisation and entrenchment of a class divide (NCERT, 1970: 449). In order to gradually abolish this divide that becomes a barrier to social integration of certain advantaged socio-economic sections from the rest of the community, the recommendation for establishment of the CSS to attenuate the systemic inequities between public and private schools was seminal. According to the recommendation made,

> The existing segregation in the educational system in which the well-to-do educate their children in a small minority of private schools that charge high fees and maintain good standards while the masses are constrained to send their children to the vast bulk of publicly maintained and free (or charging comparatively lower rates of fees) but poor quality schools, should be brought to an end; and the objective of educational policy should be to evolve a common school system of public education (Naik, 1969: 5).

Such a state-funded school system would be open to all children irrespective of their social background, making quality education universally accessible while mitigating glaring systemic inequalities. Based on the report of the commission, the seven-and-a-half page NPE 1968 was released. It accepted the recommendation of CSS for the twin goals of equalising educational opportunity, and promoting social cohesion and national integration among the children of the country (GoI, 1968). However, it only offered a 'broad framework only without delineating the specific necessary organizational and financial support structures this requires from the state' (Raina, 2020b: 73). The constitutional vision of state-funded education for children from different sections of society did not turn into a reality, and the 'early decades of Independence witnessed a continuous deferral of achievement targets for universal elementary education' (Mukhopadhyay and Sarangapani, 2018: 9).

The modern Indian state failed at the implementation process that was simply passed over without even an analysis of why policies remained rhetoric. This neglect of the state sorely underwrites Article 45, the only constitutional provision with a time frame that ended in 1960, far from its actualisation. Different social processes in post-colonial Indian democracy acted towards maintenance of autonomy between institutions (state schools) and the norms (equality) that are supposed to inform their participation in society (Bhargava, et al., 2005: 40). The self-aggrandising interests of private schools as a social group retained autonomy from institutional arrangements of school education even in the face of contrarian policy 'norms' that were mandated by NPE 1968. However, the stance of the state recognised equitable elementary education as a public good in policy parlance. Policy-making emphasised the concerns of equality, social justice, equal access to educational opportunities and direct delivery of elementary education as values underlying the state agenda, if not state action. Arguably, the notion of equality has been bestowed great importance by different committees and policy documents of the State as well. Thus, education came to be perceived as a right and not a privilege (Kumar, 2006:22).

The ducks were in the row in the first phase of policy shift with possibilities for inclusive development through an equitable school education system. The state could have fared so much better by actualising the policy solution of CSS in alignment with the era of nation-building when many institutions of our society, including banks, were nationalised. This would render classrooms inclusive, deepen democracy, and ameliorate life-chances of vulnerable socio-economic groups.

Phase II: neoliberal restructuring

NPE 1986, along with the Programme of Action (POA) 1986, as also their modified versions of 1992, undertook policy initiatives like introduction of non-formal education (NFE) as another layer adding to the existing hierarchies in school education. On the policy concerns of equalising educational opportunities as well as strengthening of CSS, its policy text merely restated the earlier recommendations briefly but again passed over matters of detail. These included commitment of public funds, specific financial allocations, and region-specific measures related to school planning and management. The NFE was now the flagship programme to universalise elementary education. It was touted as comparable in quality to

formal schooling simply because of special provisions for girls in afternoon centres and for boys in the evening. The policy text uses the word 'resolve' (GoI , 1986: 17) in addressing the problem of children dropping out of school, and retaining them in school with coordination with non-formal centres but via the NFE. The NFE proliferated as the Indian state had evaded its responsibility of providing free elementary education for all children as stated in the directive principles of state policy decade after decade. The Acharya Ramamurti Committee Report (GoI, 1990) pointed out that at the time of adoption of NPE 1986, the number of 'out of school' children in the country was almost half the total number of school-going children. The assumption underlying policy formulation was that a formal school is not necessary for every child, unabashedly recognising that those who were already out of the system could make do with a non-formal centre of learning in the name of elementary education. NPE 1986 also introduced other discriminatory parallel streams and multi-tracks in school education under the category of pace-setting schools which were supposedly above the formal school, i.e. for children with special talent 'by making good quality education available to them, irrespective of their capacity to pay for it' (GoI, 1986: 13). Anil Sadgopal elaborates,

> The most visible structural distortion of the school system comprised the introduction of a non-formal (NFE) stream of educational facilities (not school!) of inferior quality for more than half of the nation's children below the school system. The 1986 policy also introduced a layer of expensive residential Navodaya Vidyalaya's above the school system for a handful of children (about 80 children per district per year). The Navodaya Vidyalaya's were justified, among others, on the untenable ground of acting as 'pace-setting schools' for the ordinary government schools in its neighbourhood—an objective that turned out to be entirely misconceived (2010: 4).

NPE 1986 introduced new policy proposals for community participation, including generating community resources and involvement of non-government organisations. In Section 11.2 on 'Resources and Review' the policy text states,

> Resources to the extent possible, will be raised by mobilising donations, asking the beneficiary communities to maintain school building and supplies of some consumables, raising fees at the higher level of education and effecting some saving by the efficient use of facilities. Institutions involved with research and the development of technical and scientific manpower should also mobilise some funds by levying a cess or charge on the user

> agencies, including government departments and entrepreneurs (GoI, 1986 .: 47).

The change in direction was 'in favour of privatisation (or non-state stake holding), reducing the role of the state and its commitment to public education' (Raina, 2020a: 2). Is it any different from 'camouflage' (Sadgopal, 2006: 105) when NPE 1986 pays lip service to the recommendation of enhancing the total outlay of education in the following words:

> The National Policy on Education, 1968 had laid down that the investment on education will be gradually increased to reach a level of 6 percent of the national income as early as possible. Since the actual level of investment has remained far short of that target…. While the actual requirements will be computed from time to time on the basis of monitoring and review, the outlay on education will be stepped up to ensure that during the Eighth Five Year Plan and onwards it will uniformly exceed 6 percent of the national income (GoI, 1986: 38).

The increased outlay has never become a reality till date. Even the UNESCO Institute for Statistics reveals that our education outlay stood at a mere 3.84 per cent even as late as 2013.

Both the policy texts of NPE 1986 and its companion document, POA 1986, were approved by the Parliament in May and November 1986, respectively. The Parliament revised NPE 1986 in 1992, which stated the rationale for legitimisation of this structural distortion, or, another aspect of systemic inequality:

> Given the present condition of schools in general, the challenges before the school system are many, e.g., enrolling and retaining children who cannot afford to attend school regularly; a harmonious interaction with community around; improving the infrastructure, quality and learning environment; and ensuring that every student acquires minimum levels of learning. These challenges are daunting enough and it does not seem desirable to overload the school system with yet another formidable challenge of meeting the educational needs of children with severe para educational constraints (GoI, 1992: Section 9.13).

The school education landscape pre-NPE 1986 comprised government, government aided and a smaller section of private schools (unaided by the government), albeit in a graded hierarchy. There were now other streams that were both parallel to and above the mainstream formal school education system. The previous policy had attempted to at least course-correct this structural distortion through the policy imperative of the CSS. Even NPE 1986 camouflaged a commitment to the ideal of CSS with the policy text stating that 'effective measures will be

taken in the direction of the Common School System' (GoI 1986: Section 3.2), even though it made contradictory policy shift(s) in the opposite direction by legitimising the differentiations in the school system, or rather, institutionalising multiple tracks of 'higher' and 'lower' to mainstream schools. It can be read as the beginning of a distinct new phase of policy change, or, a new policy cycle:

> …it was the first policy-level acknowledgement since independence that elementary school education of *comparable quality* will *not* become available to all children of India in the 6 to 14 age group. The notion of education of *comparable quality* for all children, irrespective of their class, creed, caste, gender, linguistic or cultural background or physical/mental disability, was clearly implied in the Constitution (Sadgopal, 2006: 96 emphasis in original).

Policy analysis tends to miss the fact that NPE 1986 itself was preparation for adjustments in the name of edu-reforms that followed economic liberalisation after 1991 (ibid.: 125). This was the first major post-independence collapse of Indian education policy, abdication of the constitutional responsibility for direct delivery, and abandonment of policy thrust on establishing a CSS.

The policy cycle of phase II coincided with Rajiv Gandhi's government coming to office with slogans like 'taking India to 21st century' in an attempt to introduce a techno-managerial approach to economic and political life. In keeping with this economistic trend of the time, NPE 1986 introduced an 'outcome' orientation to school education. This new orientation took the focus away from supply side variables like creating infrastructure like school buildings, appointing teachers, to externally observable parametres. The most significant of these was quantification of learning in the name of learning outcomes. The increase in enrolment, fewer dropouts and attenuating disparities were also sought to be assessed in terms of quantitative measures. NPE 1986 introduced the notion of Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL) which trivialised school education to merely literacy and numeracy 'skills' in the name of functional literacy in a behaviouristic approach to learning, curriculum and pedagogy. The underlying assumption was that learning is a linear additive process which can be broken down into measurable competencies. Although POA 1992 aimed at assessing the implementation of NPE 1986, it continued with this emphasis on outcome by defining quality of education through the MLL. So did later programmes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) beginning in 2000 embracing improvement in learning outcome levels as a central objective.

The apex body, the NCERT, designed various cycles of National Achievement Surveys for children in grades 3, 5, 7 and 8 to generate time-series data on MLL. It is from here that the quest to develop various 'indicators' aimed at assessment of learning as reflective of quality of school education became a major policy pursuit. This had far reaching consequences for the next policy cycle (post-2016, phase III), mainly framed around development of various such indicators of quality school education.

An important tool distinct to educational policy analysis is locating policies in the broader continuum of policy changes, policy cycles and policy history. This enables a sharper focus on 'the *character of the policy* itself' (Sadgopal, 2006: 125, emphasis in original). It is often looked at as if the constitutional policy-making era continued till NPE 1986 and neoliberalisation of education was ushered in suddenly with the opening of the Indian economy in 1991. The cumulative policy shifts towards non-state stake holding, privatisation and pruned public financing had already begun post-NPE 1986 and prior to opening of the economy. The policy shifts prepared a fertile ground post-NPE 1986 itself for neoliberal restructuring following the entry of global agencies in 1990.

SAP, following the economic liberalisation of 1991, nearly coincided with the government signing up for the UN goal of education for all in 1990. The T's were crossed and the I's already dotted with the presence of an economistic framework centred on measurable outcomes for abandoning the constitutional agenda of systemic transformation in education, at least as stated in policy texts so far. This economistic approach provided a new discursive framework for the 'altered political economy paradigm of education', naturalising 'this shift within the changing nature of the Indian state, its developmental agenda and class dynamics that have accompanied these changes. The policy priorities in school education, more often than not, have mirrored these shifts' (Sarangapani and Mukhopadhyay, 2018: 9). There took place a downsizing of government spending on elementary education in SAP with minimalistic contribution by the international donor organisations (WB–IMF) in the name of universalisation of elementary education (UEE). This was in opposite direction to phase I policy cycle; even in early phase II there was some space in policy text for enhanced funding through state's internal resources to provide for education. SAP aligned educational reforms began with the flagship District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1994 and continued later through SSA in 2000 in 'mission mode', but the external aid came with a

changed definition of elementary education. The constitutional guarantee of eight years of elementary education was reduced to five or less years of primary education with the scope for equality of educational opportunity restricted to opportunity to attend a learning centre (not necessarily a formal school) and attain MLL in the name of learning. The policy framework for alternatives to regular schooling was already laid by NPE 1986 as DPEP and SSA further buttressed such alternatives. This was the policy demise of constitutionally guaranteed quality equitable education through a neighbourhood CSS. Instead, policy solutions were indifferent to structural distortions operationalised as a multi-layered school system including parallel inferior tracks of school education. The new layers even included alternative schools, non-formal schooling, and initiatives like the Education Guarantee Scheme of Madhya Pradesh in the 1990s. A significant part of educational development (increased enrolment of children in schools) which made for celebratory enrolment exclusion accrued from this arena. This outcome approach (Ayyar, 2017: 26) aligned with tenets of neoliberalisation of elementary education: namely, a techno-managerial model in which assessment of education through measurable standards, outcomes and targets was a key aspect.

The narrow posing of school education status via proxy indicators like learning outcomes further created divisions in an already distorted school system through large-scale assessment and quantification of learning (ASER, various years). This kind of assessment has resulted in creating a binary between public and private school systems which has tended to show public schools as poor centres of learning or even as dysfunctional. As a result of such reports, perceptions of dysfunctionality of state schooling are commonplace across sections of our society. The resultant 'exit' is reflected in surveys that show that in 2014–15, 30 per cent of children in India attend private schools (NSSO, 2016). Even in the avowedly capitalist economies of OECD countries, the enrolment of children in private schools is below 10 per cent. District Information Systems for Education (DISE) data point out the proliferation of private schools that began in the 1980s and was accentuated over the years. The number of new private schools established form 2010–11 to 2014–15 in comparison to state schools is illuminative. The number of new private schools as opposed to state schools was 71,360 and 16,376, respectively, four times more. This is a trend that began in phase II. This trend continued the next year, 2015-16; the number of the former has increased to 77,063 while the

number of the latter decreased to 12, 297. The corresponding increase in enrolment in private schools was 16 million children, and the fall in numbers in government schools was 11 million from 2010–11 to 2014–15 (NIEPA, 2016). The unprecedented further privatisation at the current juncture is reflected in recent educational statistics that indicate that out of the 250 million school students in India, 120 million attend 4,50,000 private schools, and 130 million students are going to 1, 09,000 state-run government schools (NIEPA, 2019). This means that almost half the school students are a part of India's private school system. The policy shifts towards development of flawed proxy indicators of learning seem to have dealt a further blow to government schools. That India currently has the largest number of children attending private schools in the world as a result of neoliberal policy shifts in elementary education can be read as a commentary on the posers of how the Indian state has fared in elementary education, and its progress towards the constitutional goal of creating an equitable school system for all our children.

The signpost Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, ostensibly aimed at UEE, in fact restricted the constitutional entitlement (free compulsory elementary education of equitable quality to all children) to much *less* than that our constitution already provides (Sadgopal, 2010) The Act seeks to universalise schooling not by strengthening state schooling systems, but through a distorted market of school education consisting of different types of schools. The passing of the Act provided an escape route for the state and blunted civil society movement for a CSS. Education activists have read the passing of the Act as the death of the idea of CSS. The progressive elements in the Act such as specification of input norms and standards in physical infrastructure, academic resources including teachers, etc., was not supported by adequate financial allocation by central or state governments—and are increasingly under dilution in phase III. The EWS provisions for mere symbolic inclusion of children from marginalised social backgrounds in private schools do not make for an equitable elementary education for the vast majority among more than 300 million children of our country.

The policy shifts by the end of phase II led to two particularly worrying outcomes. The first is the continued regularisation of structural distortion of school education into multi-layered hierarchies of access, coupled with abandonment of policy solutions to attenuate these distortions. Second, the naturalisation of assessing the status of education largely by proxy

indicators of learning that privilege private schools. The future of school education got framed with this new discursive regime of outcome, performance and non-state stake holding, in which there was a dismantling of public education, social justice and equity in public policy.

Policy development processes

Educational issues remain invisible in electoral politics, yet regimes take up policy-making with alacrity on forming governments. This trend has slipped under the radar of policy analysis literature in India. Soon after the Congress government was elected to office in December 1984, it set a bureaucratic process in motion at the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) to formulate a new education policy. Policy proposals were ready by August 1985, which were speedily brought to Parliament in May 1986. When the present BJP government first assumed office in 2014, it appointed a committee headed by former Cabinet Secretary T.S.R. Subramaniam to formulate a new education policy for the nation. The committee submitted a 217-page report titled as National Policy on Education 2016 (henceforth NPE 2016) merely within a few months in May 2016. Presumably based on this report, the MHRD released a 43-page document titled 'Some Inputs for Draft National Education Policy 2016' henceforth DNEP, 2016 (GoI, 2016b) in the public sphere. There remained uncertainty about the status of these two policy texts as the government did not make any official pronouncement in this regard. However, the MHRD appointed another nine-member committee in June 2017, headed by eminent space scientist K. Kasturirangan, to prepare a new education policy. The Press Information Bureau released a clarification on 26 June 2017 that the latter committee will draw from both policy texts in its policy-making process. The latter committee has formally submitted its 484-page report, DNEP 2019 (GoI, 2019) just a day after the new BJP-led government assumed office in May 2019. Both the committees taken together worked for over four years. Finally, the new National Education Policy henceforth NEP, 2020 (GoI,2020) was announced on 29 July 2020, notified the next morning, with the pronouncement that it will be implemented from the forthcoming academic session 2021–22. The phase II and III policy-making processes contrast with the history of educational policy-making in phase I. The noteworthy EC was constituted in July 1964 and submitted its detailed report after two years of deliberations in 1968. The seven-and-a-half

page NPE 1968 released years later was based on this thorough work. There was no room for haste. Experts from the field of education were regarded as indispensable and membership of the commission cut across academics, scientists and public intellectuals from the country and even other countries. This was regarded as essential to policy wisdom which could not emerge from mere bureaucratic exercises. The era of expert commissions of educationists foregrounding policy development is arguably over as phase III is evolving in an altered policy context. The phase III policy texts came with a change of name from the earlier policy parlance of NPE to a new nomenclature NEP as if hinting at a keenness to be a distinct policy cycle (Menon, 2020) to overhaul the education system.[1]

Phase III: overlooking structural distortions

The post-2016 phase III policy context of school education constitutes a 'non-linear policy cycle', breaking away from policy concerns, policy history and policy solutions of preceding policy phases. The changes in the past three decades include a political economy framed by the prevailing global wave of market fundamentalism that aligns with transnational advocacy networks supporting private schools, essentialising a new discursive regime of thin managerial notions. The new regime is framed around notions of quality, efficiency and accountability with very little reference to 'fundamental aims and purposes of education, the context of a segregated and stratified school institutional system that characterises the Indian landscape, or the weak institutional structures and outdated frameworks of educational governance that are expected to regulate the relationship between the state and the market in education' (Mukhopadhyaya and Sarangapani, 2018: 6). This current neoliberal economistic policy context 'of unprecedented privatisation/quasi-privatisation of schooling, driven by both the market and the neoliberal state' (Raina, 2020b:83), is re-framing new exclusionary policy priorities. The base work for NEP 2020 derives from five documents released by the government since 2016. The first is the Subramanian committee's report, NPE 2016 (GoI, 2016a); second, its companion text, DNEP2016 (GoI2016b); third, NITI Aayog's 176-page *Three Year Action Agenda* released in 2017; fourth, the report of the Kasturirangan Committee DNEP 2019; and fifth, the 153-page document, *The Success of Schools: School Education Quality Index,* that was released in September 2019. These five documents reveal NEP 2020's ideological–philosophical underpinnings of an economistic policy framework of

privatisation, managerialism and an outcome approach. Accordingly, school governance, teacher management and ICT received considerable space in the document –text(s), an emphasis that continues in DNEP 2019 and NEP 2020. In the opening pages, the NEP 2016 policy text accords to education a role that 'will amalgamate globalization with localization' (GoI, 2016a: 1), provide a 'new impetus to skill development through vocational education in the context of the emergence of new technologies in a rapidly expanding economy in a globalised environment', and 'encouraging ways of enhancing private investment and funding' (ibid.: 2). The drafting committee's chairman in a summary article reported the state of education in our country to be in disarray and identified 'quality upgradation' and 'inclusivity' as focus areas for rejuvenating the school education system (Subramaniam 2016: 30–33). NPE 2016 regards plummeting learning at all levels of school education (GoI, 2016a: 3) as a chief policy concern' to quote: '…the main objective of the school education system, as it has evolved in the last few decades is to prepare students for the board examinations' (ibid.: 190). This is an emphasis that continues in the name of urgency and necessity of foundation literacy and numeracy for 'future schooling and lifelong learning' subsequently too (GoI, 2020: 8). Out of the 56 pages that were dedicated to School Education in the 217-page NPE 2016 (GoI, 2016a), there was no subheading 'CSS'. The seminal policy concern was simply overlooked. The phrase finds mention only twice in the 217-page text:

> Keeping in view judicial pronouncements on the subject and its objectives, the provisions of section 12(1) (c), which deals with the right of children to free and compulsory education will be continued as it is the best way of promoting a common school system and for enhancing social equality (GoI, 2016a: 200).
>
> The Committee feels that Clause 12(1) (c) Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education is designed to conform to the spirit of a common curriculum and a common school system (ibid:76).

The companion document, Draft NEP 2016, in ideological consonance with the economistic frame of NPE 2016, reiterated a focus on learning outcomes in school education. It emphasised a curriculum renewal, examination reform, inclusive education, and student support through an outcome-based curriculum which provide opportunities to aspire for 'excellence in learning outcomes', 'comparable to student learning outcomes in high-performing international education systems', as well as, designing a common national curriculum for the subjects: science, mathematics and English (GoI, 2016b: 21).

On financing education, the DNPE 2016 admits,

> Education, in Indian context, should be considered a public good and there is a need for greater public investment in the sector. There are evidences to show that countries which have heavily privatized education systems could not economically and socially progress and hence there is a value loss rather than gain. On the other hand, countries which consider education a public good reap greater social benefits on a sustained basis. The earlier National Policies of 1968 and 1986/92 had recommended 6% of GDP as the norm for the national outlay on education. However, the actual expenditure on education has remained consistently below this level and in recent years it has hovered around 3.5% (ibid.: 40-41).

It recommends a policy initiative of raising the investment on education as a priority. Yet, in the very same document, the term CSS does not appear even once in the text. It can be said that both the documents reflected the 'guarded agenda' (Gupta, 2016) of regularisation of the structural distortion into hierarchies of access in school education, coupled with an outcome orientation that supports the distortion.

The third document, NITI Aayog's action agenda, essentialises market fundamentalism in the wider national context of policy-making. 'Education and Skill Development' appears as one of its 24 chapters under the section on 'Social Sectors'. Its 'School Education Action Agenda' seeks to achieve three major goals in the three years, 2017–20. First, orient the system towards outcomes; second, provide tools to teachers and students for effective learning; and third, to improve governance mechanisms. The document regards the most important goal of the Indian school education system to be that of improving learning outcomes (NITI Aayog, 2017: 153). In keeping with this outcome orientation, the agenda proposed the new policy construct: School Education Quality Index (SEQI) as a lever to drive improvements in school quality by tracking outcomes. The agenda, in its comprehensive vision to transform India, recognised a liberalised economy, but had nothing to say about the discriminatory role of multi-layered school education as an oppressive instrument that firms up the overlapping social divisions with a differentiated system of schooling for children belonging to different social segments. The term CSS is missing, but a focus on hollowing out of public schools finds space in the document text. The agenda does not hesitate to recommend a case for private players in school education. stating,

> A working group should be set up with states' participation to explore and pilot other bolder experiments by interested states. These could include

> education vouchers and local government led purchasing of schooling services. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) models could also be explored where the private sector adopts government schools while being publicly funded on a per child basis. This latter instrumentality may provide a solution to the problems of schools that have hollowed and are incurring massive expenditures per pupil currently (ibid.: 156).

Need the state abdicate any more responsibility for direct delivery of school education?

The fourth document, DNEP 2019, again reiterates a focus on learning outcomes in the name of improving the school education system with SEQI as a new referent in policy concerns. DNEP 2019 ignores the idea of CSS, regional disparities and issues of access to school education. The 'role of schools in dislodging the structural inequality', 'unequal distribution of opportunities of school education', and 'lack of thrust on strengthening the public provisioning of school education by the state' (Raina, 2019: 16) were side-stepped. The concept of 'affordability' was mentioned in the policy text, thereby entrenching further the processes of segregation and differentiation of schooling experiences for different social groups (Maniar, 2019: 18).

The fifth document released by NITI Aayog just six months after DNEP 2019 was solely focused on the new policy construct: SEQI. The policy intent to further operationalise an outcome approach by institutionalising SEQI is evident. The SEQI will collect, systematise and publicise the measurements in school education, assessing the success of schools by this indicator. The document text details, 'SEQI focuses on indicators that can drive improvements in the quality of education rather than on inputs or specific processes. The index has been developed through the view of an outcome lens rather than a process lens' (NITI Aayog, 2019: 119).

The SEQI assesses states on the basis of learning, access, equity and infrastructure outcomes among 30 other indicators. It uses survey data, self-reported data, from states and third-party verification in a sophisticated scoring methodology replete with quantitative data from all but one state—West Bengal—which did not participate in the evaluation exercise. The process of developing the index frame was drawn from the neoliberal economist framework with advocacy networks of liberalisation, privatisation and de-focus on state schooling emerging as the main players in policy-making. This new construct in school education policy aimed at

'data-driven decision making, including better targeting of interventions for quality enhancement' (ibid.: 106).

III. NEP 2020: Towards a Technocratic Society

The much-awaited 65-page third policy on education, NEP 2020 released after a gap of 34 years, was met with initial celebratory welcome; notwithstanding the campus closure due to the pandemic with blunted possibilities for creative criticism, enabling suggestions and resistance. It begins by setting out its aim to reconfigure the 'entire education system' (GoI, 2020: 4) with policy proposals for 'the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, including its regulation and governance, to create a new system that is aligned with the aspirational goals of 21st century education' (ibid.: 4). In re-envisioning the education system it highlights how the world today is dramatically different from what it used to be; is 'undergoing rapid changes in the knowledge landscape'; 'quickly changing employment landscape and global ecosystem'; and there is a need to 'address the many growing developmental imperatives of our country' (ibid.: 4). Its predecessor Draft NEP 2019 had already spoken of crafting a completely new and far-sighted policy. NEP 2020 is an ahistorical policy text, phase III being a new non-linear, in a non-sequential policy cycle (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009). It makes a cursory reference to 'Previous Policies' and their unfinished agenda in all but six sentences—possibly for textbook policy continuity—yet steers away from past policy.

There is no gainsaying that India of today is indeed unrecognisable from its past. The attempt to make sense of the pandemic has highlighted that the past may not always be an indication of what the future portends. Optimism has been expressed that 'rapid advances in technology present both opportunities and challenges to human well-being', with NEP 2020 aiming to change India by transforming education (Kasturirangan, 2020).

A scrutiny of this transformation process begs the question that, is this a change towards the constitutional vision of an equitable schooling system that was envisaged as the instrument for creating an inclusive society? Is this what NEP 2020 identifies as the problem in school education upon which policy solutions are to be premised? NEP 2020 eschews a social vision for a globalising knowledge-based economy and society, in which knowledge is envisaged as

an uncritical lifelong learning of skills for productivity of a national-–lobal citizenry within a globalising polity. A technocratic society which needs 'a skilled workforce, particularly involving mathematics, computer science, and data science' (GoI, 2020:4), also mentioning the 'need for new skilled labour, particularly in biology, chemistry, physics, agriculture, climate science, and social science'. The basis of this vision emerges from 'rise of big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence' in which 'many unskilled jobs worldwide may be taken over by machines' with a veiled layer of emphasis on 'multidisciplinary abilities across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities' (ibid.). 'Teaching employable skills' was already a paramount concern in phase III (Dhankar, 2020: 99), with policy thrust on employable skills in NEP 2016 and DNEP 2016 in a narrow vision of a technocratic society:

> Recommendations concerning skills dominate every section. It is also understandable that if the society is seen as KBES, then the most important task for education is only to prepare people who can be employed in it. The aims also make it amply clear that the skills are needed to cope in this system, not to challenge or modify it (Dhankar, 2020: 105).

NEP 2020 dedicates 24 pages and eight sub-sections to school education (which merited far greater attention because of its foundational nature). It is framed in an economistic, outcome orientation with a proposal to set up a National Assessment Centre, PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development), a new body for setting norms, standards and guidelines for student assessment. It recommends that 'For a periodic "health check-up" of the overall system, a sample-based National Achievement Survey (NAS) of student learning levels will be carried out by the proposed new National Assessment Centre, PARAKH with suitable cooperation with other governmental bodies—such as the NCERT—that may assist in assessment procedures as well as data analysis' (GoI, 2020:32).

Its 7th sub-section, 'Equitable and Inclusive Education: Learning for All?' sidesteps the structural question altogether. With 'no plan to do away with the discrimination-based multi-layered school system' (Sadgopal, 2020), and not even a single mention of the CSS in the entire policy text, its reaffirmation 'that bridging the social category gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes in school education will continue to be one of the major goals of all education sector development programmes' is mere rhetoric (GoI, 2020: 25). It is

camouflage, to proclaim, 'The public education system is the foundation of a vibrant democratic society, and the way it is run must be transformed and invigorated in order to achieve the highest levels of educational outcomes for the nation' (ibid.: 31). It is camouflage because the very next sentence — 'At the same time, the private/philanthropic school sector must also be encouraged and enabled to play a significant and beneficial role' (ibid.: 31)—is a policy solution to the contrary. There is the introduction of a new policy vocabulary: public-spirited or philanthropic, words that are frequently hyphenated to the right of private in the policy text; a new acronym Public Philanthropic Partnership (PPP) appears in place of public-private partnership (an existing euphemism for diverting public funds to private players). The contemporary social realities include: economic inequality; domination of private capital; graded social hierarchies; exacerbated multi-layers in educational system; ecological threats jeopardising our common future; patriarchal barriers to gender justice; caste fault lines; and an impending economic crisis for the common people. There are distinct differences between past and present challenges, but what ails the school education system for decades now is its stratification into layered hierarchies mirroring social divisions.

The policy proposals to establish school complexes/clusters (ibid: 30) in the name of sharing resources may reverse equity by closure of small schools in underdeveloped regions. The spotlight on digital infrastructure including online teaching, ignores evidence based policy-making from the most recent indicators of household social consumption on education in India. These indicators reveal the percentage of households with computer and internet facility from different states. This is a bare 10.7 per cent (4.4 and 23.4 per cent for rural/urban households, respectively) with a computer; and only 23.8 per cent (14.9/42 percent in rural/urban households) for those who enjoy internet facility (NSS, 2019: 47). Personal experience demonstrates the pedagogic limitations of online education which mainly involves no more that uncritical acquisition of inert knowledge (Raina, 2020c, 2020d).

The recovery of critical thought while undertaking policy analysis involves reading 'what is concealed and what is unveiled' (Babu, 2020), what it identifies as the problem in school education. The principle of discontinuity is a penetrating tool of policy analysis, which illustrates how 'Discourses construct certain possibilities for thought. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations…are

constituted by exclusions as well as inclusions, by what cannot as well as what can be said (Ball, 2012: 18).

NEP 2020's silences, the ideas it overlooks, new vocabulary, and how it identifies what is wrong with school education makes it look factious when it proclaims that 'The aim of the public-school education system will be to impart the highest quality education so that it becomes the most attractive option for parents from all walks of life for educating their children'(GoI, 2020.: 32), because NEP 2020 says so much more aimed at legitimisation of privatisation in school education. The policy states that school participation is encouraged by 'various successful policies and schemes such as targeted scholarships, conditional cash transfers to incentivise parents to send their children to school', that it will support 'non-governmental philanthropic organisations to build schools, to encourage local variations on account of culture, geography, and demographics, and to allow alternative models of education, the requirements will be made less restrictive' (ibid.: 11); this increases the scope of privatisation, which is already exponentially rising due to policy support. Such policy solutions are oblivious to growing school differentiation that reinforces existing structural marginalisations in a direction opposite to the idea of education as a leveller.

Other significant recommendations of NEP 2020 are 'that the extant 10+2 structure in school education will be modified with a new pedagogical and curricular restructuring of 5+3+3+4, covering ages 3–18'(ibid.: 7); continuation of the three-language formula with preference for local language; and an emphasis on multi-streaming of disciplinary domains—each is fraught with veiled thickets of inegalitarian consequences.

The post-2016 emergent policy context simply overlooks the basic barriers to an equitable system of schooling: structural distortions, systemic inequalities, classroom processes and development of critical educators (Raina, 2020b: 82). In a history of ideas in policy-making, the current period is one of unprecedented crisis in which school education is cast in a limiting economistic frame ignoring its social aims. This is in alignment with the naturalised transnational trend of 'thinking that the global market has a fundamental role in deciding education policies' (Rizvi, 2017, cited in Sharma, 2020: 261).

IV. Death of a Dream

The American educator Horace Mann, euphemistically referred to as the father of the common school movement, coined the term for schools that would be tax funded for attendance by children cutting across social backgrounds to nurture inclusivity in 19th century United States. He believed that in a democratic society, school education must be provided by the state, and this implied a commitment to the idea of universal, free and non-factional common schools (Cremin, 1957: 23–78). Yet, racial segregation of blacks and whites in separate schools did not go away. It took a Supreme Court order as late as 1954 to declare such schools illegal (Kluger, 2011). Even though the Indian state passed over the processes of implementation, the idea of CSS was not abandoned till the second phase of policy change. NPE 2020 is silent on the establishment of a CSS as a key policy solution to alleviate inequality in school education. The state did not even require a policy for school education as the constitution had already shown the way. The Indian state did not seriously attempt to actualise the possibilities of inclusive development through an equitable system of schooling in any of the three phases of school education policy. Social scientists have highlighted the overlapping divisions of class, caste, gender, locale and region that lead to social divisions in our deeply stratified society, as school education becomes one more category of social division. A child attending a government school can be read as a marker of poor socio-economic background. The contemporary phase III represents 'a gradual consensualisation about the graded schooling hierarchies, consequent social divisions as also the wider underlying educational inequality' (Raina, 2020e: 34). Recent research has highlighted that inequality in India is currently at its highest since 1922. We are farthest than ever before to the constitutional vision of equitable elementary education. with policy shifts that exacerbate existing inequalities.

Notes

[1] The Subramanian committee for evolution of new education policy titled its report *National Policy on Education 2016* abbreviated as NPE 2016 in policy literature. It's companion-document released subsequently on the basis of this report was titled *Some Inputs for Draft National Education Policy 2016* and is abbreviated as DNEP 2016. The two subsequent releases of GoI are also titled Draft National Education Policy 2019 and National Education Policy 2020. They are abbreviated as NEP 2019 and NEP 2020 respectively. The four document-texts referred to in the article are abbreviated as NPE2016, DNEP 2016, NEP 2019 and NEP 2020 respectively.

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