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ELUSIVE INDIA— LOST IN THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020?

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Abstract

The paper attempts to unpack the notion of India and 'Indian' which provides the context for the National Education Policy 2020. I discuss the location envisaged for India within the global context, pointing to the anomalies between the projection and a more realistic location. This leads on to an examination of the implications of the centrality accorded to Sanskrit within the document. I also analyse the ways in which 'Indian knowledge' is defined, almost as a monolithic entity, ignoring the complex processes of sharing, both within and beyond the subcontinent, that have been characteristic of knowledge production and dissemination. The selective privileging of certain Sanskritic traditions also leads on to an erasure of the medieval. The implications of this erasure, it is suggested, are disturbing to say the least. Finally, I suggest that recognising multiple, divergent and even conflicting traditions of knowledge is crucial if we are to move towards a genuinely inclusive educational system.

Keywords: Vishwa guru, Constitution, Sanskrit, knowledge systems

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The National Education Policy 2020 has been opened up to intense scrutiny and discussion, even as its implementation is imminent and may have already begun in some cases. While there are several dimensions of the policy that have attracted attention, here I focus on the notion of India and 'Indian' as either taken for granted or elucidated in the text of the policy. Although this may seem to be of less immediate importance—in a situation where the policy and its implementation have assumed priority—it may be useful in providing some insights into the context for the provisions that are laid down, and can thus enable us to respond to its challenges more effectively.

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There are at least two intersecting levels at which the notion of India is invoked—one, in an increasingly globalised environment, of India vis-à-vis the wider world, and the second, of an India that is held up for the consideration of and emulation by those who claim to be or are recognised as Indians. We will attempt to explore both these levels, dwelling more on the latter. In doing so, we will focus on the place accorded to the Constitution, the privileging of Sanskrit, and the understanding of traditions of knowledge production, transmission and circulation.

I. India and the World

One of the very first statements of the National Education Policy document (2020: 3)[1] is as follows:

> Providing universal access to quality education is the key to India's continued ascent, and leadership on the global stage in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, scientific advancement, national integration, and cultural preservation.

Let us compare this claim with India's ranking in terms of the human development index (HDI). On 9 December 2019, the *Hindu Business Online* noted that India ranked 129th out of 189 countries in the world, having inched up one point in the order from its position as 130th in the previous year. The top five countries were Norway, Switzerland, Ireland, Germany and Hong Kong. Within South Asia, Sri Lanka was ranked 71st, Bhutan and Bangladesh 134th and 135th respectively, and Pakistan was at 152. Thus, while India ranked somewhat higher than most of the other countries in the region, its position within the world order was not particularly impressive. In view of these figures, it would appear that our performance in terms of the HDI does not quite substantiate the claim to 'continued ascent and leadership on the global stage' as claimed in the NEP.

More specifically, in terms of gender, about 11.7 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women in India, well below the average of 17.1 percent for South Asia as a whole. Further, only 39 per cent of adult women have attained education up to the secondary level, in contrast to 63.5 per cent men. In terms of poverty, it was estimated that about 28 per cent of the 1.3 billion poor in the world were in India. It is unlikely that this scenario has improved in the course of the pandemic and the lockdown(s) that we have witnessed since March 2020. In

such a situation, claims to global leadership in terms of social justice and equality seem far-fetched and unrealistic, to say the least.

The NEP occasionally acknowledges a near-crisis situation within the educational scenario (NEP: 2.1):

> various governmental, as well as non-governmental surveys, indicate that we are currently in a learning crisis: a large proportion of students currently in elementary school - estimated to be over 5 crore in number - have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy, i.e., the ability to read and comprehend basic text and the ability to carry out basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals.

That the situation is particularly grim for those designated as SEDGs (socially and economically disadvantaged groups, a catch-all phrase for girls/ women, minorities, Scheduled Tribes and Castes, and the disabled, amongst others), is also admitted in the document (ibid.: 6.2.1):

> According to U-DISE 2016–17 data, about 19.6% of students belong to Scheduled Castes at the primary level, but this fraction falls to 17.3% at the higher secondary level. These enrolment dropoffs are more severe for Scheduled Tribes students (10.6% to 6.8%), and differently-abled children (1.1% to 0.25%), with even greater declines for female students within each of these categories. The decline in enrolment in higher education is even steeper.

It is in this context that we need to examine the following aspiration: 'India will be promoted as a global study destination providing premium education at affordable costs thereby helping to restore its role as a Vishwa Guru' (ibid.: 12.8). What exactly does 'restoring' India to the role of Vishwa Guru mean? It assumes that there was a time when India functioned and was acknowledged as a Vishwa Guru, one of the many unsubstantiated and perhaps not substantiable claims in which the document abounds. The second, and perhaps more problematic issue, is whether in fact, if we dream of a democratic world, the model of the *guru-shishya parampara*, based on the exercise of almost unbridled power and authority on the part of the guru, and unquestioning obedience and subservience on the part of the disciple, is an ideal worth pursuing. Perhaps there are other goals and destinations, beyond that of unswerving loyalty, and more suited to 'cultivating critical thinking', one of the catch-phrases that the document resorts to time and again.

There is a more realistic assessment of the relationship between India and the world towards the end of the document (ibid., Section 22, Promotion of Indian Languages, Arts and Culture), which provides an insight into some of the central concerns of the policy—combining profit, privatisation, commercialisation, with the promotion of culture as a commodified good, for the 'betterment' of the world as well as of the country. We are informed that 'India is a treasure trove of culture' and that 'crores of people from around the world partake in, enjoy, and benefit from this cultural wealth daily'. This is acknowledged as being 'truly important for the nation's identity as well as for its economy' (ibid.: 22.1). And yet, while there is an intense desire to mesh and merge identity with economy, this is a source of tension within the policy. While these inconsistencies may appear as irritants, they may also be indicative of spaces that are susceptible to intervention. Having said that, let us turn to the ways in which identities are envisaged, especially within the country.

II. Decentering the Constitution

It may be useful to begin the discussion by flagging the space or the lack of space accorded to the Constitution within the document. One would have assumed that the Constitution in its entirety would provide a focal point for what is being projected as long overdue intervention in educational policy. However, this assumption is sadly belied. To cite just one instance, in the context of school education, we are told:

> As consequences of such basic ethical reasoning, traditional Indian values and all basic human and Constitutional values (such as seva, ahimsa, swachchhata, satya, nishkam karma, shanti, sacrifice, tolerance, diversity, pluralism, righteous conduct, gender sensitivity, respect for elders, respect for all people and their inherent capabilities regardless of background, respect for environment, helpfulness, courtesy, patience, forgiveness, empathy, compassion, patriotism, democratic outlook, integrity, responsibility, justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity) will be developed in all students (ibid.: 4.28).

As many as twenty-nine words/ phrases are listed within brackets. One would assume that some of these are related to ethical reasoning, some to traditional Indian values, some to basic human values and some to Constitutional values. Given that Constitutional values figure at the very end, and are best identified with the last four terms of the long list, it is unlikely that either teachers or learners will consider these as a priority. Second, the other values are so diverse (and even amorphous), that teachers and learners would probably have a tough time

classifying them and engaging with them. Faced with this situation, and given that the list begins with a long series of terms derived from Sanskrit, it is most likely that there would be a tendency to privilege these as 'traditional Indian values' and prioritise them. This may in itself seem unexceptionable—after all, what is wrong with service, non-violence, cleanliness, truth, selfless performance of duty, and peace? Are they incompatible with justice, liberty, equality and fraternity?

The actual question that we need to pose is about the context within which these values are hierarchised. In a situation where socioeconomic, cultural and political differences and inequalities have become sharper, concerns with justice and equality cry out for prioritisation in our understanding, and are likely to be of immediate concern to future generations of learners. Tucking them into the tail end of a long list of values does little to address this situation. In other words, retrieving and focusing on Constitutional values is likely to prove an uphill task for those who are confronted with this formidable list.

III. Sanskrit Knowledge Systems

The attention devoted to Sanskrit in the NEP has been commented on earlier, and insightfully (see for instance Narayanan, 2020). An entire subsection (NEP: 4. 17) in the recommendations on school education is devoted to Sanskrit, in which Sanskrit knowledge systems are mentioned. This use of the plural is a striking departure from the tendency to reduce multiplicities to uniform, singular categories, which we will discuss later. The plural terminology used in the present instance is a tacit acknowledgement of developments within the wider academic universe.

The idea of Sanskrit knowledge systems derives from an ambitious and complex project, initiated by Sheldon Pollock and a team of scholars, that attempted to explore the state of Sanskrit in what the team defined as the early modern period, specifically between 1550 and 1750. The website of the project describes these two centuries as 'one of the most innovative eras in Sanskrit intellectual history.'

We are also informed that:

> Sanskrit continued to be used exclusively in such major disciplines as language analysis (*vyak*arana), hermeneutics (*mimamsa*), logic-epistemology

> (*nyaya*), moral-legal-political discourse (*dharmasastra*). The emerging regional languages were largely restricted to religious poetry, sometimes theology, and practical arts such as medicine. Persian (Urdu would not become a language of scholarship until the mid-nineteenth century) inhabited a separate knowledge sphere, where inspiration for ways of making sense of and inscribing the world derived from sources altogether different from those of Sanskrit (some exact sciences excepted, where both groups relied in part on Greek sources).

The project was described as 'an attempt to grasp at once the remarkable strengths of the Sanskrit disciplines and their remarkable weaknesses in the face of European colonial modernity.' Interestingly, while the name of the project is appropriated within the NEP, there is little or no attempt to engage with the problem with which the project attempted to grapple, or the multilingual and multicultural milieu it envisaged. In other words, the NEP abstracts Sanskrit out of its many contexts of transmission and circulation, to create an almost ahistorical understanding of what is projected as its almost universal and eternal appeal.

This leads to a simplistic and naively celebratory understanding of Sanskrit and its resources, which does little justice to the complexity of a rich historical tradition. Unfortunately, sterile as this may be, it is this that is likely to be promoted insistently. As much seems evident in the detailed provisions for ensuring the centrality of Sanskrit:

> Due to its vast and significant contributions and literature across genres and subjects, its cultural significance, and its scientific nature, rather than being restricted to single-stream Sanskrit Pathshalas and Universities, Sanskrit will be mainstreamed with strong offerings in school – including as one of the language options in the three-language formula – as well as in higher education. It will be taught not in isolation, but in interesting and innovative ways, and connected to other contemporary and relevant subjects such as mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, linguistics, dramatics, yoga, etc. Thus, in consonance with the rest of this policy, Sanskrit Universities too will move towards becoming large multidisciplinary institutions of higher learning. Departments of Sanskrit that conduct teaching and outstanding interdisciplinary research on Sanskrit and Sanskrit Knowledge Systems will be established/strengthened across the new multidisciplinary higher education system. Sanskrit will become a natural part of a holistic multidisciplinary higher education if a student so chooses. Sanskrit teachers in large numbers will be professionalized across the country in mission mode through the offering of 4-year integrated multidisciplinary B.Ed. dual degrees in education and Sanskrit (ibid.: 22. 15).

Whether this should be a priority in a situation where access to education itself remains a distant dream for many is a question that is not even raised, let alone addressed.

IV. Circumscribing the 'Indian'

The document occasionally mentions 'Knowledge of India'. One of the first references to this knowledge, and its purported uses, is found in the introduction (ibid.: 4):

> Instilling knowledge of India and its varied social, cultural, and technological needs, its inimitable artistic, language, and knowledge traditions, and its strong ethics in India's young people is considered critical for purposes of national pride, self-confidence, self-knowledge, cooperation, and integration.

'Knowledge of India' also figures in the context of teacher training, especially for those who undergo the four-year programme which is projected as the norm for the future (ibid.: 15.5). This begs the question; what exactly would knowledge of India mean? Consider a paragraph from the introduction, a long paragraph that has been retained, with slight modifications, from the earlier draft documents, even as the present policy document itself has shrunk drastically from over four hundred pages in draft versions to a slim 66-page document at present:

> The rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought has been a guiding light for this Policy. The pursuit of knowledge (Jnan), wisdom (Pragyaa), and truth (Satya) was always considered in Indian thought and philosophy as the highest human goal. The aim of education in ancient India was not just the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for life in this world, or life beyond schooling, but for the complete realization and liberation of the self. World-class institutions of ancient India such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Vallabhi, set the highest standards of multidisciplinary teaching and research and hosted scholars and students from across backgrounds and countries. The Indian education system produced great scholars such as Charaka, Susruta, Aryabhata, Varahamihira, Bhaskaracharya, Brahmagupta, Chanakya, Chakrapani Datta, Madhava, Panini, Patanjali, Nagarjuna, Gautama, Pingala, Sankardev, Maitreyi, Gargi and Thiruvalluvar, among numerous others, who made seminal contributions to world knowledge in diverse fields such as mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy, medical science and surgery, civil engineering, architecture, shipbuilding and navigation, yoga, fine arts, chess, and more. Indian culture and philosophy have had a strong influence on the world. These rich legacies to world heritage must not only be nurtured and preserved for posterity but also researched, enhanced, and put to new uses through our education system (ibid.: 4).

There are several features of this paragraph that are striking. Note, for instance, the consistent use of the singular for many of the categories and concepts that are thrown in. These include Indian thought and philosophy, 'the aim of education', and, later in the paragraph, 'the Indian educational system'. Amongst other things, the constant and repeated usage of the singular erases and obliterates memories of the multiplicity and diversity of Indian traditions and replaces these with a monolithic, uniform frame of reference. What happens, one wonders, to the conventional six schools of philosophy, the *sad-darshana*, mentioned within Sanskritic traditions? Where would Buddhism, perhaps one of the most influential philosophical systems to emanate from the subcontinent and spread through Asia, feature within this scheme? One is also left wondering why there is an urge to reduce differences and contentious as well as vibrant debates to create a bland, homogeneous, almost stifling view of the past. The strategy of encapsulating all these possibilities within the seemingly unexceptionable frames of *jnan*, *pragyaa* and *satya* leaves little room for grappling with distinctive and even conflicting understandings. And, while the importance of critical thinking is acknowledged time and again in the document, this detailed invocation of an imagined monolithic tradition does not leave space for it.

Also, this perspective implicitly denies the multi-directional flows of knowledge both into, and within the subcontinent, that have been as, if not more important, than the outward flow from the subcontinent for centuries, if not millennia. So, contacts with China, Southeast Asia, East Africa, West Asia, and Central Asia, the Mediterranean world in the precolonial context, as well as the complex colonial encounter—which enriched knowledge systems within the subcontinent—find no space within this framework. That this heritage needs to be constructively and critically evaluated and assessed, rather than ignored, is obviously beyond the purview of the policy.

The reliance on the singular resurfaces in specific contexts such as school education as well. Here we learn that part of the purpose of such education will be 'imbibing the Indian ethos through integration of Indian art and culture in the teaching and learning process at every level' (ibid.: 4. 7).

We could, if we wanted to, dismiss these usages as rhetorical, but the choice of rhetoric is perhaps significant and worth reflecting on. Also important to note is that these statements

are occasionally repeated in a document that is often terse, if not cryptic. So, we find the following statement (ibid.: 10.2):

> Moving to large multidisciplinary universities and HEI (higher education institution) clusters is thus the highest recommendation of this policy regarding the structure of higher education. The ancient Indian universities Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi, and Vikramshila, which had thousands of students from India and the world studying in vibrant multidisciplinary environments, amply demonstrated the type of great success that large multidisciplinary research and teaching universities could bring. India urgently needs to bring back this great Indian tradition to create well-rounded and innovative individuals, and which is already transforming other countries educationally and economically.

This culminates in a claim that the roots of a liberal education lie within the 64 *kala*s or arts mentioned in Sanskrit literature (ibid.: 11.1):

> India has a long tradition of holistic and multidisciplinary learning, from universities such as Takshashila and Nalanda, to the extensive literatures of India combining subjects across fields. Ancient Indian literary works such as Banabhatta's Kadambari described a good education as knowledge of the 64 Kalaas or arts; and among these 64 'arts' were not only subjects, such as singing and painting, but also 'scientific 'fields, such as chemistry and mathematics, 'vocational ' fields such as carpentry and clothes-making, 'professional 'fields, such as medicine and engineering, as well as 'soft skills' such as communication, discussion, and debate. The very idea that all branches of creative human endeavour, including mathematics, science, vocational subjects, professional subjects, and soft skills should be considered 'arts', has distinctly Indian origins. This notion of a 'knowledge of many arts' or what in modern times is often called the 'liberal arts' (i.e., a liberal notion of the arts) must be brought back to Indian education, as it is exactly the kind of education that will be required for the 21st century.

I have discussed the contents of the 64 *kalaa*s and their incongruence with current notions of liberal education elsewhere (Roy, 2020). The list, as available in the *Kamasutra* (I.3.15, Dongier and Kakar, 2002: 14–15) is as follows:

> Singing, playing musical instruments, dancing, painting, cutting leaves into shapes, making lines on the floor with rice powder and flowers, arranging flowers, colouring the teeth, clothes and limbs, making jewelled floors, preparing beds, making music on the rims of glasses of water, playing water sports, unusual techniques, making garlands and stringing necklaces, making diadems and headbands, making costumes, making earrings, mixing perfumes, putting on jewellery, doing conjuring tricks, practising sorcery, sleight of hand, preparing various forms of vegetables, soups and other things to eat,

> preparing wines, fruit juices and other things to drink, needlework, weaving, playing the lute and the drum, telling jokes and riddles, completing words, reciting difficult words, reading aloud, staging plays and dialogues, completing verses, making things out of cloth, wood and cane, woodworking, carpentry, architecture, the ability to test gold and silver, metallurgy, knowledge of the colour and form of jewels, skill at nurturing trees, knowledge of ram-fights, cock fights, and quail fights, teaching parrots and mynah birds to talk, skill at rubbing, massaging and hairdressing, the ability to speak in sign language, understanding languages made to seem foreign, knowledge of local dialects, skill at making flower carts, knowledge of omens, alphabets for use in making magical diagrams, alphabets for memorising, group recitation, improvising poetry, dictionaries and thesauruses, knowledge of metre, literary work, the art of impersonation, the art of using cloths for disguise, special forms of gambling, the game of dice, children's games, etiquette, the science of strategy and the cultivation of athletic skills.

The advocacy of spurious connections between this list and the present-day understanding of liberal education does not inspire confidence in the document or its implications.

Another noteworthy element, here and elsewhere, is the elimination of the medieval. We move swiftly and seamlessly from the ancient to the present. So, there are no references, even rhetorical, to medieval educational institutions, whether *matha*s or madrasas, that thrived in different regional centres of the subcontinent. Further, this narrative has no space for the complex negotiations through which modern universities have evolved—through dialogue and contestation with religious institutions, state structures, and corporatisation, processes which are by no means smooth or, fortunately complete.

To return to the eradication of the medieval, noted above. This happens in more than one instance. The introduction (ibid.: 6) refers to 'ancient and modern culture and knowledge systems and traditions'. Further, in the context of school education, we are told (ibid.: 4.27) that 'Knowledge of India' will include knowledge from ancient India and its contributions to modern India.

Once again, the medieval is elided over in silence. This is reinforced by adding in the same context that 'Video documentaries on inspirational luminaries of India, ancient and modern, in science and beyond, will be shown at appropriate points throughout the school curriculum.' (ibid.)

This ellipse is repeated in the discussion on languages in the context of school education, where we learn:

> India's languages are among the richest, most scientific, most beautiful, and most expressive in the world, with a huge body of ancient as well as modern literature (both prose and poetry), film, and music written in these languages that help form India's national identity and wealth (ibid.: 4. 15).

Note the absence of any reference to medieval literature. What, one wonders, will happen to the vast repertoire of devotional literature, within diverse strands of Bhakti, Sufi and Sikh traditions, amongst others, that emerged during this period? Are they all to be consigned to oblivion because of their diversity, and the fact that they cannot be reduced to or confined within a monolithic framework?

Returning once more, to the introductory paragraph, the third element, again noteworthy, is that an assortment of men (and a couple of women) has been mentioned as being produced by the 'Indian education system.' This statement is misleading, to say the least. We know virtually nothing of the education that these men received, and to project them as the products of an education system, as if they were alumni of a university or a college, is at best, a comforting illusion. But whether it lives up to the claims of *satya*, mentioned a couple of sentences earlier, or not, remains doubtful.

In the very rare instances where traditions preserve narratives about how any of these deservedly acclaimed men and women acquired knowledge, what is noteworthy is the absence of access to anything resembling a formal system. In this context, the story of Maitreyi and her husband, the philosopher Yajnavalkya, preserved in the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (2.4, 4.5; Olivelle, 1998: 66–71; 126–131) is illustrative. When the sage was planning to enter into a different, non-domestic stage of life, he offered to make arrangements for the material support of Katyayani and Maitreyi, the wives he would be leaving behind. While the former was satisfied with the arrangement, Maitreyi, we are told, asked him to impart the knowledge that might lead to immortality, which she thought would be more valuable than wealth. The text goes on to record the dialogue that ensued between husband and wife, as the former imparted knowledge to the latter. This mode of transmission was clearly not part of any formal, institutionalised educational system, even as it may have been effective.

A fourth issue, which I have raised and discussed elsewhere (Roy, 2019), is the mismatch between the two lists that are part of the long, central sentence of this paragraph. Briefly, the unwary reader may be led into believing that Charaka and Sushruta contributed to mathematics and astronomy rather than medicine, if they innocently tried to match the two lists. But these are, perhaps, minor inaccuracies that we should overlook.

Far more important is a fifth issue, which I will highlight by drawing on Kancha Ilaiah's work (2007). In this book, meant for young readers, Ilaiah highlights the enormous range of knowledge and skills developed, transmitted and possessed by non-literate peoples. Consider just two examples to illustrate the insights he arrives at, those of the adivasis and barbers.

This is what Ilaiah says about the adivasis (ibid.: 12, 15):

> The adivasis introduced most of the basic food items to the plainspeople. Not curd-rice or pizza, but pineapple, jackfruit, mango, melons, custard apple (*sitaphal*), various types of bananas and scores of fruits were first discovered by the adivasis. They also discovered the sourness of wild lemons and used them as an additive to food. They were the first to gather wild honey that has medicinal properties. Most vegetables, fruits and flowers we cultivate today have their origins among the adivasis. They are, therefore, our first teachers.
>
> Having risked their limbs and lives in order to develop our basic food culture, the adivasis shared such knowledge with others. They also orally passed this knowledge from generation to generation, through songs and stories. Several medicinal plants used in ayurveda and siddha were originally identified by adivasis. The adivasis were also the first to discover the gums, resins and dyes that are commercially produced today. We not only have to respect adivasis, but we also have much to learn from them.

About the barbers, Ilaiah writes (ibid.: 78, 80):

> Among the medical sciences, the cutting of hair occupies a significant place in history. Cutting the hair that grows on our heads and other parts of the body needs skill and tools of precision—sharp blades and scissors. The barbers, in several societies, also doubled up as the world's first doctors and surgeons. …They tended to battlefield injuries because of their expertise in handling the razor. Surgery, in fact, is organically linked to barbering. The presence of hair on the part of the body where surgery is to be performed can cause infection. The clean removal of hair is therefore mandatory before surgery. This practice continues to this day. The barbers can therefore be called the earliest social doctors of India.

What Ilaiah alerts us to through these and other examples is the fact that knowledge is produced in diverse sites—and is by no means a monopoly of the 'high' tradition. In fact, if anything, the 'high' tradition appropriates and monopolises much of the knowledge that is generated through other, less hierarchical modes and, in the process, displaces or marginalises those who may have arrived at the original insights through painstaking experiments, trial and error, and through preserving and transmitting knowledge through generations.

How would a new education policy look if these roots were acknowledged centrally rather than tucked into the margins of the document? While we can raise the question, answering it imaginatively, creatively and constructively would demand disinvesting in the exalted 'great' traditions that we are conditioned to celebrate, and acknowledging far more complex relationships of dependence and support. It would compel us to question the social, political and economic hierarchies, in terms of gender, castes, communities, tribes, regions, that are naturalised and normalised at present, and push us out of our comfort zones. Whether we, and more importantly, those in charge of designing and implementing the National Education Policy are prepared to move in this direction or not is the question. Till then, those described by Shereen Ratnagar (2004) as *The Other Indians* will remain on the margins of the NEP.

Notes

[1] All references to pages and sections of the *National Education Policy,* henceforth NEP, are from the document available on the website of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

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