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RECLAIMING EDUCATION POLICY FOR EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

MADHU PRASAD*

Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has prominently claimed that it is breaking new ground and is poised to achieve what no previous education policy has been able to achieve in more than seventy years, i.e. providing quality education for all India's children. However, the policy process itself shows inadequacies of procedure and fails entirely to analyse the obstacles facing such a claim or to consider the achievements and failures of previous policies.

The entrenched nature of discrimination, oppression and exclusion is focussed in the article. A historical survey highlights the impact of the caste system and colonial rule (both of which are not even mentioned in the NEP 2020) and reveals how the long fought struggle for independence from colonial rule (this too finds no consideration in NEP 2020) finally raised the call for liberty, equality and fraternity in a meaningful way. Consequently, the idea of education as a crucial component of an egalitarian social transformation of India emerged and found expression in earlier education policy. The reasons for its failure are examined.

NEP 2020 reveals itself as a market-oriented education policy to be the carrier of historically entrenched exclusions and contemporary neoliberal inequalities. It betrays the promise of the egalitarian alternative and hence stands out as diverging from the Constitutional guarantee of the right to education as a fundamental right.

Keywords: Social justice, Nai Talim, NEP 2020, neoliberal, commercialization.

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A system of education and a policy for its implementation form an integral part of a social order. Therefore, making school education universal is not primarily a question of reaching a *numerical* target even when it is articulated in the form of an apparently laudable slogan like 'no child left behind'. It is in fact a fundamental component of an approach to society in which all sections of the population, including children, have equal rights and claims on the state, not merely to protect those rights but also to ensure that they are realised in ways that comply with principles of equality and justice.

The progress towards the formation of the modern state, one that could be held accountable for performing this role, was an outcome of the growing primacy of the market under ascendant capitalism more than two hundred years ago. This necessitated the 'secularising' of the economic, social and political functions that had previously been under the hegemony of religious institutions. The dominance of the Church had already begun to weaken with the pre-eminence of reason—associated with Enlightenment thought—and eventually declined with the growth of scientific knowledge which accelerated productivity and greatly enhanced trade.

The need for a better skilled and disciplined labour force was a prerequisite of production under capitalism so the social independence of labourers from the bondage of landlord-serf relations had to be ensured. Thus, the prospect of achieving the democratic individual freedoms articulated during the Enlightenment became a distinct possibility and eventually the secular state emerged as the provider and defender of the rights of its citizens.

From the mid-19th century onwards, industrialising nations placed the responsibility for providing education on the modern state. In 1845, Fredrick Engels upheld the rationale of a modern rights-based perspective. The 'general education of all children without exception at the expense of the state – an education which is equal for all and continues until the individual is capable of emerging as an independent member of society....would be only *an act of justice*....for clearly, *every man has the right to the fullest development of his abilities and society wrongs individuals twice over when it makes ignorance a necessary consequence of poverty*' (Engels 1845).

Significantly, he recognised that the concepts of right, equality and justice were problematised due to the inequality inherent in the contradictory economic interests of the

capitalist class and the workers. A hundred and seventy-five years later, this idea appears to have lost none of its force. That every child has a *right* to receive an education provides the impetus for universalising education.

In the 1990s, when the strategies of neoliberal capitalism that commoditised even social services like health and education were fast becoming 'common-sense', not only in the developed world but even in developing countries, the American political scientist Myron Weiner noted that 'development' itself was founded on treating every child's right to education as a legal duty of the state: 'parents are required to send their children to school, children are required to attend school and the state is required to enforce compulsory education.' The state as the provider of education becomes the barrier protecting children from the economic compulsions of impoverished parents and from would-be exploiters (Wiener 1994: 83–86). Compulsory and free formal education, Weiner argued, was the only way to make child labour socially unacceptable and bring this repugnant practice to an end.

I. The Caste System

In India, the early emergence of a hierarchical division of castes and status under dominant Brahmanism denied any opportunity for the productive 'lowered castes', as Dr B.R. Ambedkar very perceptively referred to them, to educate themselves or even live a life of social acceptance and dignity. The continuity of this inhuman system for centuries was not due to any inherent occupational or social values that it has been claimed to possess, but because it allowed the economic surplus to be easily extracted from the semi-enslaved labouring and industrious sections of the village community (Habib 2009).

The 'guru-shishya' tradition, carelessly referred to as an 'ideal' relationship between teacher and student—particularly now when anything harking back to the fiction of an 'ancient golden age of Vedic India' is treated as sacrosanct—may have been imminently suited to indoctrination in dominant caste orientation and practices. However, it is completely out-of-place and even detrimental within a democratic conception of society and education. Within this tradition, knowledge is regarded as being 'received', like water poured into an empty vessel, by the subordinated student. The teacher, the possessor of wisdom and truth, is not only beyond critical questioning but also empowered to deny this knowledge at will. The guru demands only the 'discipline' of complete adherence from the shishya. That this relation

should be idealised even today signals the persistent failure to break with unequal and rigidly discriminatory stratifications.

It is unfortunate that the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) chooses to uncritically eulogise 'Sanskrit knowledge systems', which are deeply entrenched within the caste ideology, as the sole basis for evolving a contemporary system of education steeped in the 'Indian ethos' (NEP 2020: Introduction). Extolling the virtues of the early universities of Nalanda and Takshashila, NEP 2020 astonishingly fails to even mention that these famed institutions were centres of Buddhist learning which rejected caste exclusion, welcomed scholars from Afghanistan, China and south-east Asia, and were renowned for delving deep into the rich and diverse literatures of the Pali and Prakrit traditions.

II. Colonial Subjugation

At the other end of the pendulum, British colonialism is often lauded as the engine of modernisation of education and society. This shows little understanding of the predatory nature of imperialism and its impact on Indian society.

'It is a startling but too notorious a fact, that, though loaded with a vastly greater absolute amount of taxation, and harassed by various severe acts of tyranny and oppression, yet the country was in a state of prosperity under the native rule, when compared with that into which it has fallen under the avowedly mild sway of British administration. ... almost everything forces the conviction that we have before us a narrowing progress to utter pauperism. . . . Most of the evils of our rule in India arise directly from, or may be traced to, the *heavy tribute which that country pays to England*' (Marriott 1846:11).[1]

Under such circumstances, even the technological modernity required by colonial economic interests did not encourage modern consciousness and practices in society. For example, the introduction of the Railways in April 1853 was undoubtedly a major step towards technological 'modernisation' of the country, but we cannot ignore the fact that lowered castes were prohibited from drinking water from the supposedly 'common' facilities provided at railway stations.

The East India Company's (EIC) early educational initiatives followed both caste strictures and religious divisions. The Calcutta Madrasa (1781) and Benaras Sanskrit College for

Brahmins (1791) followed traditional Persian/Islamic and Vedic curricula respectively. It was only in 1823–24 that the Government Colleges at Delhi and Agra were started with 'open' admissions and Oriental literature, science, history and jurisprudence being taught along with mathematics and modern science. These features in fact continued a practice prevalent in the madrasas of the region which was still under the cultural influence of the Mughal court. Large numbers of Khatris and Kayasthas, denied the higher education reserved only for Brahmins, attended these schools of Persian literature, science and jurisprudence and went on to serve the Mughal and other Indian courts with distinction. 'The Persian schools are the most genuine educational institutions in the country. They are attended largely by the Khatris, the Hindus forming a greater proportion than the Muhammadans' (Arnold 1922: 290).

The exclusionary colonial policy for education, advocated in Macaulay's infamous Minute of 1835, was already contained in entirety in a Despatch (29 September 1830) of the EIC's Court of Directors. Promoting English as the medium of instruction it aimed at creating 'an elite class of learned natives' trained in European science and literature, who would 'communicate *a portion* of this improved learning to the Asiatic wider classes'. The government in India was instructed to use 'every assistance and encouragement, pecuniary or otherwise', including a declared preference in government employment, to further this goal. '*We wish you to consider this as our deliberate view of the scope and end to which all your endeavours with respect to the education of the Natives should refer*' (Howell 1872: 20–21).

However, the promise of jobs in the government succeeded primarily in promoting 'baboo', i.e. clerical, culture. The term, a derogatory distortion of the word 'baboon', reveals the attitude of EIC officials towards the education and opportunities provided for Indians as these lowly positions were the only jobs open to the 'natives'. It compared mimicking monkeys with these native 'imitators' of their colonial masters; 'That the baboo should be created and then ridiculed is of a piece with the ideology of the cultural subjugation of colonial rule' (Chaudhary 2002: 86).

Not surprisingly, one of the principal 'weaknesses of the native student' was soon identified as 'the strong temptation to lay aside his studies as soon as employment supplies his moderate necessities; the scanty inducement to fit himself for higher duties, - all help to dwarf the moral and intellectual growth....His ambition waits upon his daily wants' (Report

of the Education Commission 1882: 300–304). The EIC's decision to abolish the common madrasa practice of providing stipends for non-elite students who could not afford private education at home and to impose fees undoubtedly aggravated this tendency.

The dismissive attitude of the traditional cultured classes, particularly at Delhi where the learning, aesthetic and tastes of the Mughal court remained vibrant well into the 20th century, was evident in the comment of Urdu poet and writer Altaf Hussain Hali[2]: '. . .in the society in which I was raised...English education was not seriously regarded as learning...we regarded English as a means of getting a job, not an education' (Gupta 1981: 7).

The situation altered little after the direct rule of the British Crown was established following the defeat of the rebellion of 1857. The gap in years of schooling between India and early leaders, such as the US and Germany, which was less than two years in 1870 increased to 7.8 years by 1950 (Lee and Lee 2016). As late as 1921 only 11 per cent of India's population was even literate.[3] British India had the lowest public expenditure in the world between 1860 and 1912 (Davis and Huttenback 1986).

In stark contrast, during the latter half of the 19th century and in the early 20th century, rulers of Indian states spent twice as much per capita on education. Even as individuals like Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh were already engaged in 1848 in radical endeavors to open up education for all, including lower castes and girls, the Maharajas of Kohlapur and Baroda, and the Begums of Bhopal, among others, provided free primary education for all. Greatly influenced by social reformer Jyotiba Phule, Shahuji Maharaj of Kohlapur was associated with many progressive and path breaking activities during his rule (1894–1922). Primary education for all regardless of caste and creed was one of his most significant priorities. While introducing a Bill on compulsory primary education on 16 March 1911 which would be defeated in the Imperial Legislative Council, Gopal Krishna Gokhale had pointed out that, 'His Highness (of Baroda) began his first experiment in the matter of introducing compulsory and free education into his State eighteen years ago in ten villages at the Amreli Taluka. After watching the experiment for eight years, it was extended to the whole taluka in 1901, and finally, in 1906, primary education was made compulsory and free throughout the State for boys between the ages of 6 and 12, and for girls between the ages of 6 and 10' (Natesan 1916: 725–726).

A great reformer in the tradition of her mother and grandmother, Sultan Jahan of Bhopal founded several important educational institutions in Bhopal, establishing free and compulsory primary education in 1918. During her reign, she had a particular focus on public instruction, especially female education. She built many technical institutes and schools and increased the number of qualified teachers.

III. Education for All and the Struggle for National Independence

The demand that the government accept its responsibility for providing education for all had already been powerfully raised with the Education Commission in 1881 by nationalist economist Dadabhai Naoroji and social reformer Jyotiba Phule. The former drew support from the analysis of Frederick John Shore, Judge of the Civil Court and Criminal Sessions, District Farrukhabad, who left the following account on the condition of the people:

'But the halcyon days of India are over; she has been drained of a large proportion of the wealth she once possessed, and her energies have been cramped by a *sordid system of misrule to which the interests of millions have been sacrificed for the benefit of the few*. . . .The grinding extortions of the English Government have effected the impoverishment of the country and people to an extent almost unparalleled' (Shore 1837: 28).

In his Appeal to the Education Commission (1884), Naroji demanded that having pauperised the people with its policies, the government must open the path to recovery by providing free and compulsory education to all children for four years. Phule argued in his Deposition to the Commission that although the government extracted its surplus from the ryots, it expended it on higher education which benefitted only the Brahmins and the wealthy. The masses were left to wallow in ignorance. Unfortunately little came of their appeals which went largely unheard.

As the freedom movement gained in spread and intensity, drawing in more and more sections of the population, the demand for education for all became an important expression of the people's rising consciousness. The Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1920 directly addressed the students and youth calling upon them to withdraw from existing colonial schools and colleges, which only taught empire worship, and join the struggle for freedom. It demanded that nationalist educational institutions be set up. The Jamia Milia

Islamia at New Delhi was the first such well-known institution to be established in 1920 itself. This showed that the idea of a system of education, providing equal opportunity and propagating values of national independence and which could become an instrument of social transformation, became an integral part of nationalist thinking.

The proceedings of the Wardha Conference (1937) on *Nai Talim* (New Education) were formulated as proposals in the Zakir Husain Committee Report (1938). It recommended a *system of free and compulsory education in the mother tongue based on practical work as the pedagogical means to enhancing comprehension and generating knowledge*. Accessible to *all* children for 8 years, i.e. up to 14 years of age, it was defined as 'equivalent to matriculation *minus* English *plus* craft' (Naik 1975). Breaking the elitist mould of colonial education, 'through craft, (Gandhi) wanted to impart knowledge on all important branches of knowledge' (Biswas & Aggarwal 1994: 90).

The productivity based teaching-learning methodology of this approach inculcated the social values of equality and social justice as an integral part of the curriculum. At the Haripura session of the INC in 1938 it was resolved that the national system of education would be built on a 'wholly new foundation'.

Far from analysing and learning from the *Nai Talim* approach of letting knowledge flow from practice, it is unfortunate that NEP 2020 does not even refer to it. It adopts a conservative and prejudicial approach to what is called 'vocationalisation'. Skilling is treated as a lesser alternative the children of lower castes and classes who it is presumed must start earning as quickly as possible to contribute to their pitifully low family incomes. Formal book learning remains reserved for children from privileged backgrounds. NEP 2020 thus locates three 'exit' stages in elementary education itself at classes 3, 5 and 8. Each stage envisages a transition to vocational training. A co-related initiative aims at *selectively* making the elementary curriculum vocational for targeted backward and tribal areas.

This is especially challenging since a recent amendment in 2016 to the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 now permits even ten-year-old children to participate in labour in 'family enterprises'. This will reinforce caste-based occupations as children will be 'pushed out' of academic courses and denied the opportunity to acquire access to other

professional openings. It is a retreat even from the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE 2009) which stipulates through its no-detention policy that, as per their constitutional Fundamental Right, children be retained in school till the age of 14 years.

The fact is that NEP 2020 has a huge, gaping vacuum in its history of the subcontinent. Over twelve hundred years that contributed enormously to the technological, cultural, linguistic and ideological growth of our civilisation are completely absent from its point of view. So also is the period of colonial domination and economic deterioration. Consequently, it fails to comprehend the significance of the freedom struggle, and the Constitution which reflected its range and values in constituting our society into a nation. The national movement and the long constitutional debate add nothing to the narrative of the NEP 2020. Its perspective remains obsessed with the supposed purity of what has thereby become an almost mythical 'ancient' past.

IV. A National System of Education

However, in the 1940s even the colonial administration had been compelled to respond to the growing radicalisation of the freedom movement. The Report of the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), *Post-War Plan of Educational Development in India*, withdrew from the earlier colonial position and declared that 'the minimum provision which could be accepted as constituting a national system postulates that all children must receive enough education to prepare them to earn a living as well as to fulfill themselves as individuals and discharge their duties as citizens'. Further, it was argued that

> if there is to be anything like equality of opportunity, it is impossible to justify providing facilities for some of the nation's children and not for others.... a national system can hardly be other than universal. Secondly, it must be compulsory, if the grave wastage which exists today under a voluntary system is not to be perpetrated and even aggravated. And thirdly, if education is to be universal and compulsory, *equity requires that it should be free and common sense demands that it should last long enough to secure its fundamental objective* (GoI 1944: 3).

The recommendations of the Report of the B.G. Kher Committee on the *Ways and Means of Financing Educational Development in India* (1950) shaped Article 45 of the Directive Principles of the Constitution mandating that the 'State shall endeavour to provide within a

period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years.'

The demand for universalising free and compulsory education was taken up as an essential component of the Indian people's right to constitute themselves as an independent nation by repudiating traditional and colonial hierarchies of caste/ class and race. Incorporating the notions of both *selfhood* and *nationhood*, it brought to the forefront the idea of the democratic rights of all citizens. The Constitution of the newly-independent Republic was itself the culmination of the struggle and set the standard for evaluating policies, distinguishing between those that would strengthen and *advance* the freedoms promised in the Constitution, and those that undermined its potential by compromise, infringement or direct violation.

It is important to highlight that the very idea of a national system of education was a matter of great significance and a major democratic advance.

V. Policy for an Independent Citizenry

Independent India's first Education Commission (1964–66) was headed by Professor D.S. Kothari Commission and dealt with the education system as a whole including both school and higher education. For the latter, it emphasised the democratisation of the structure of institutions of higher education (IHE) on the one hand, and non-interference from politico-ideological, bureaucratic and market forces on the other. For IHE, the Commission argued, academic autonomy could not be viewed as a 'privilege' but as the necessary 'enabling condition' for the academic community of teachers and students to achieve their intellectual and social goals.

NEP 2020 has made a mockery of this crucial recommendation. It has centralised and concentrated all power of decision-making in so-called 'independent bodies' that are in fact subordinated to the central government which constitutes them but are indeed 'independent' from academia. Accreditation, eligibility and evaluation, the right to award degrees and even to continue to function are made over to these bodies which have minimal disciplinary representation from academia. Within IHEs, all democratic functioning and representation are to be ended. The institutions which will perforce have to become 'autonomous', even as their academic communities lose all autonomy, will be autocratically administered by self-

perpetuating Boards of Governors with a preponderance of investors and financial experts to ensure their 'efficiency'.

For school education, the Kothari Commission had advocated far-reaching structural changes for setting up a *national system of free and compulsory education*. This, it was argued, could not be modeled on elite private schools 'transplanted in India by British administrators and we have clung to it so long because it happened to be in tune with the traditional hierarchical structure of our society. Whatever its place in past history maybe, such a system has no valid place in the new democratic and socialistic society we desire to create' (1.38). It recommended the establishment of state-funded common neighbourhood schools with a socially, culturally and economically diverse student body as the authentic institutions of a pedagogically sound and egalitarian national system of education which would 'provide 'good' education to all children because sharing life with the common people is, in our opinion, an essential ingredient of good education' (10.19).

The Report of the Committee of Members of Parliament on Education (1967) had endorsed the Kothari Commission's view:

> 'the unhealthy social segregation that now takes place between the schools for the rich and those for the poor should be ended; and the primary schools should be the common schools of the nation by making it obligatory on all children, irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic conditions or social status, to attend the primary school in their neighbourhood. This *sharing of life among the children of all social strata will strengthen the sense of being one nation* which is an essential ingredient of good education' (GoI 1967: 2).

This principle has been reiterated recently in a landmark ruling of the single judge bench of Justice Sudhir Aggarwal of the Allahabad High Court (18 August 2015) stating that the failure to fulfill the constitutional obligation has led to an unhealthy division of schools based solely on privilege and wealth. It has no educational basis or social value as it excludes 'almost 90% children' from the so-called good schools which are in fact private enclaves of the rich and powerful. If government schools are strengthened and properly run, (as Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalayas, and other special government schools show), the private schools will become irrelevant.

NEP 2020 claims to have drawn its concept of the 'School Complex' as the basic unit of the education system from the Kothari Commission Report. However, the Commission's *basic unit* is the common neighbourhood school and only small groups of such nearby schools can meaningfully interact with each other. The NEP 2020's school complex on the other hand extends over an area of ten to fifteen kilometres. This is a formidable distance for elementary school children to be covering on a daily basis and will increase the number of 'drop-outs'. It will almost certainly be used to advance the 'rationalisation' scheme of the NEP 2020 which seeks merger and closure of government neighbourhood schools. Already well over one lakh schools have been merged/closed over the past few years and the policy is to be rapidly implemented in the name of greater efficiency only to 'cut costs'.

VI. Subversion of the Radical Goals of the Freedom Movement: Bourgeoise-landlord Alliance

Growing militancy of the working class and the peasantry through the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s expanded the foundations of the freedom movement. The October Revolution in Russia in 1917 had an important political and intellectual influence in India. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was established in 1920, trade unionism grew rapidly, and at Lucknow in 1936, following the general session of the All-India Kisan Congress, a *Kisan Manifesto* was released demanding the abolition of zamindari and cancellation of all usurious debts to bring an impatient peasantry firmly within the ranks of the movement. The student and youth movements also exerted an important influence—the Bharat Naujawan Sabha (a left-wing movement to arouse worker and peasant youth in rebellion against the British Raj) was founded by Bhagat Singh and his comrades in March 1926 and the CPI's All India Students Federation (AISF) was established ten years later. Growing anti-fascist and pro-democracy ideologies gained in stature and strength through the 1930s and 1940s.

The Indian capitalist class had begun to align itself with sections of the feudal land-owning elite as the struggle for independence advanced. The alliance with the landlord classes meant that the Indian bourgeoisie was 'open'—just as we find it currently 'opening up' to international finance capital and crony capitalism at the cost of the people's interests—to compromising on the egalitarian goals of the freedom movement particularly in two major areas. Land reforms were not implemented effectively across the country and hence

accommodation with Brahmanical ideology (despite powerful social justice movements in southern and western India), which sanctioned harshly exploitative caste divisions among the toiling masses was a foregone conclusion. This uneasy partnership allowed both classes to enrich themselves economically and politically but it was at the expense and ruin of the majority of peasants, artisans, tribals, and working people.

The democratic goal of universalising school education that was at the core of the freedom movement's conception of a *modern* republican nation could never be achieved by India's bourgeois-landlord ruling elite. The egalitarian socialist ideals and powerful principles of social justice gradually evaporated into mere slogans. Caste and class prejudices remained intractable. The linkage of 'privilege' with 'quality' inherited from the past could not be broken. The attempt at the elementary level, 'to extend to the poor people an education system basically meant for the well-to-do middle classes did not succeed and the rates of stagnation and wastage became disturbingly high (Naik 1975: 47).' The poor and the marginalised lacked not only the economic but also the sociocultural resources to take advantage of such a system.

The NEP 2020, which has rejected the conditions laid down in RTE 2009 for adequately providing infrastructure and permanent faculty for schools, claims that its attention is centered not on 'inputs' but on 'learning outcomes'. All students are required to attain *uniform* patterns of proficiency in a specified *unit of knowledge* within a prescribed time span. This removes from the classroom context all meaningful references to an individual's personal experience as well as to historical manifestations of privilege and discrimination. Thus, SC/ST/OBC students, minorities, women and persons with disability (PWD) who have direct experience of oppression and have culturally imbibed histories of deprivation and discrimination, are required to achieve the *same* 'learning outcomes' as those coming from backgrounds of privilege. How is that even possible?

NEP 2020 repeatedly uses the expression 'Merit alone' as the basis on which its accreditation, eligibility and assessment mechanisms operate. It makes no mention whatsoever of the principle of reservation which the Constitution provides for those who for centuries have been, and still are, systematically discriminated against. What will, or will not count as knowledge or achievement is thereby *pre-determined* and *standardised* irrespective

of who comes to, or what happens in, the classroom. 'Merit alone' cannot appreciate the diversity of experience or enhance the potential which the deprived sections in particular contribute to learning. It therefore significantly denies *agency* to the socially and educationally marginalised to effect social transformation and emancipation. A market-oriented concept of merit can only reinforce the hold of the privileged, thereby strengthening existing inequalities and injustices.

Far from forging new directions, NEP 2020 will provide a policy-based acceleration to the process of exclusion that began due to the absence of a creative pedagogical curriculum, lack of adequate and timely public funding, and thus failed to keep pace with the expectations of the people. The education system inevitably sank into crisis. Policy decisions responded by narrowing access through the introduction of multi-track discriminatory streams that excluded larger and larger sections of children from what had once been envisaged as a national system of quality education for all.

Instead what emerged was a plethora of elite private schools and low budget schools, government aided and non-aided schools, special and model government schools and an array of government schools without facilities or teachers, non-formal education and education guarantee centres as 'equivalent' to formal schooling for the almost eighty per cent working children and children 'in difficult circumstances', para-teachers and shiksha-mitras, and finally the technological 'cherry' on the cake of 'alternate schooling'—online and Open Distance Learning (ODL).

NEP 2020 has utilised the Covid-19 pandemic crisis to eagerly embrace the last option. Starting out with twenty per cent of all curricula to be covered through this format, as the GoI is proceeding with its 'implementation' through a series of press releases and interviews with the Education Minister and Secretaries from the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry, more than fifty per cent is now scheduled to be covered in this mode. In keeping with the Prime Minister's call for 'Atmanirbharta' this mode will gradually push the entire financial burden on the individual student and her family, as the GoI retreats from the education sector to make space for the entry of IT corporates.[4]

The tendency to grasp online teaching-learning as an effective means for homogenising

knowledge into digitally consumable units on the one hand, and a convenient low-cost option for governments to cope with problems of access on the other, has been vigorously advocated by the World Bank (WB)'s 'Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States' (STARS) programme which has been finalised barely two months ago for NEP 2020s Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. However, GoI's ready adoption of this 'solution' shows no concern for its pedagogical limitations. Still less does it reveal any apprehension about the enormous exclusion that would result because in India only 8 per cent households with children aged from 5 to 24 years have access to both a digital device and internet connectivity and 37 per cent households have only a single dwelling room.

VII. Neoliberal Reforms Policy and the Crisis in Education

The 1993 judgement (Unnikrishnan vs the State of Andhra Pradesh) of the Supreme Court was the last significant attempt to defend the right of India's children to receive quality education through a state-funded system of formal education by linking Article 45 of the Directive Principles with Article 21, the Fundamental Right to Life, making the Right to Education a fundamental and justiciable right.

However, in 1991 the GoI had embarked on the neoliberal economic reforms program. After this the impact of neoliberal dictates and the direct intervention of the WB, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organisation's General Agreement on Trade in Services (WTO-GATS) became a recurrent feature of the Indian education system as GoI gradually began financially starving, disparaging and dismantling state-run schools and public universities (as per WTO-GATS dictates). The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, its Programme of Action, and their modified versions (1992) put into operation a series of 'missions' and *abhiyan*s imparting 'skills', with the lowest one being 'functional literacy'. By 1994, the WB's first direct intervention through the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), introduced 'low-cost' infrastructural and recruitment practices as well as multi-grade teaching in government schools. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the preferred delivery mechanism of the WB, were inducted for 'improving' quality. Although this virtually brought the primary school system to the verge of collapse, the WB's second intervention was invited through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in 2002. Non-formal education

programmes were renamed and the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) were incorporated in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

The 86th Amendment to the Constitution, also introduced in 2002 by the Vajpayee-led NDA government, was tailor-made to coincide with WB pressure to reduce public spending on education. Instead of covering all children 'up to 14 years', the fundamental right was now restricted only to children from six to fourteen years of age. It thereby excluded crores of children from zero to six years of age from its ambit. Although NEP 2020 now claims to be bringing three to six year olds into the Foundation Stage of its 5+3+3+4 altered format, by taking in anganwadis, which already cover their health and nutritional needs, there are many apprehensions on this account. For the latest document released by GoI says nothing about 'extending' RTE 2009 from three to eighteen years, i.e. extending the *fundamental right to education* for all from pre-nursery to Class XII.

The RTE 2009 was brought by the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government within the parameters laid down by the 86th Amendment. It legalised the bewildering variety of discriminatory streams of 'education' that had mushroomed over the decades, and hence signaled that the very idea of a national system of state-funded education for which the central and state governments would be held responsible and accountable had been given up. Along with private unaided schools, 'good' special schools run by governments were placed outside the purview of the Act. Under the Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) scheme promoted under WB pressure, twenty-five per cent quota for admissions in these schools, with re-imbursement by central and state governments, was earmarked for students from the economically weaker sections (EWS). Today, seven years after the 2013 deadline for meeting the beneficial infrastructural requirements stipulated by RTE 2009, fewer than twelve per cent schools are RTE-compliant on 'inputs' but the aspiration for 'private' schooling has been fuelled at public expense by the PPP quota for EWS.

Keeping children out of school or 'pushing' them out of the formal system of education, is the result of a range of *socially negative attitudes and priorities that have come to dominate education policy*. To segregate the poor and the disadvantaged in institutions catering only to them, while 'privilege' uncritically masquerades as 'merit', is a form of exclusion that reproduces entrenched social inequalities, ensures that the vast majority of children are

denied their fundamental right to education, and are condemned to a childhood of labour,[5] and a 'future' as lowly-paid daily wage workers.

This anti-Constitutional and unjust view has gained credibility because not only labour, goods and services but all human activities including culture, social relationships and institutions are treated as appropriately merchandised under neoliberal principles. Learning is now a 'private good', knowledge has become a 'commodity', and education is a marketable 'service'. They can be bought and sold, traded in the marketplace not merely by investor/providers but ultimately also by 'consumers' in search of employment. Those who pay more can expect higher returns as they carry the stamp of 'quality'. Those who cannot afford to pay have only themselves to blame. If you cannot pay, then what is the basis of your expectations?

Once the democratic space for Rights has thus been *de-legitimised*, then existing sites and modes of peaceful democratic debate, dissent and resistance are turned into 'anti-national' acts of sedition. The autonomy and self-governing capacity of the people shrinks as corporate/technological 'expertise' claims precedence in the marketplace. The *democratic unity* that actually constitutes the nation is thereby severely threatened.

This is already being seen at campuses across the country and wherever people, whether women, minorities, or farmers and workers, question and protest against policies imposed without their consent or consultation. A brute parliamentary majority alone cannot ensure the survival of the republic when every other democratic institution and practice is either pushed aside or made subservient through bribery and corrupt inducements on the one hand, or sought to be suppressed through authoritarian modes of arrests without trial or state instigated and protected fascist acts of violence on the other.

The GoI's attempt to *leap-frog* over the democratising phase of ascendant capitalism, with its concomitant increased employment and mass provision of essential social services such as education, health, public utilities etc., is proving disastrous. Adopting the contemporary phase of neoliberal 'jobless growth' with privatisation and corporatisation of all essential services based on the user-pays principles of market 'efficiency', has resulted in a massive 'exclusion' of those who *simply cannot afford to pay*. Showing no concern for people's welfare and in the absence of appropriate policies to address their extreme deprivation, the present

government's approach, favouring only a select group of capitalists to 'revive' the economy, harshly portrays the *social irrationality of bare market transactions*.

The Arjun Sengupta Committee's report on the Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihood in the Unorganised Sector, based on government data for the period between 1993–94 and 2004–05, a decade of the neoliberal reforms, showed that an overwhelming 78 per cent, i.e. 836 million people in India were found to be living on a per capita consumption of less than Rs 20 a day. The per capita consumption of the extreme poor was at Rs 12 per day. The present situation has only further deteriorated. Following the economic shock of demonetisation on small and medium enterprises which employed almost 93 per cent of the work force, the numbers of the impoverished have grown rapidly as wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not been responsible for this but it has starkly exposed, through the effects of the sudden, unplanned nation-wide 'lockdown' leading to an unprecedented migration of lakhs of contract workers, daily-wagers and low income self-employed, the precarious condition of the vast majority of India's working people.

VIII. NEP 2020 and World Bank's Third Intervention in the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan

The STARS programme is the WB's third intervention in school education. It covers the entire period from pre-nursery up to Class XII and includes teacher training, promotion and accountability, and institutional governance as well. Like NEP 2020, it claims to ensure quality education for all.

The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2017 (covering Classes 3, 5 and 8) has shown that 19 of 30 states covered, performed below the national average. At the secondary level, 2015 NAS findings showed that as many as 85 per cent of Class 10 students couldn't answer more than half the questions in English and Maths. Formal education, the STARS document concludes, has benefited only a small percentage of students. A relatively narrow pool of 'excellence' is followed by a long trail of low learning levels.

The solutions of the STARS programme and NEP 2020 to the above long-standing indicators of the crisis of education do not show an allegedly 'path-breaking' direction as the latter has

claimed. The well-worn WB-inspired concepts of the 1990s are once more being promoted to increase the scope of school learning by restricting formal education to a minority and excluding the deprived and marginalised through recourse to i) 'multiple avenues of learning' including introduction of different levels of syllabus complexity in the same classes, diverting students to ODL in national and state level Open Schooling and to online learning (NEP 2020: 3.5), ii) targeted vocationalisation of syllabi and vocational training, iii) 'less restrictive' infrastructural input requirements for schools in order to facilitate entry of 'non-state actors' in low-budget private education and encouraging its spread through reimbursement and voucher system schemes and finally, iv) involvement of community, alumni and 'volunteers' for 'one-on-one tutoring', literacy 'extra help sessions', 'support and guidance for educators', career guidance and mentoring of students. 'Databases of literate volunteers, retired scientists/government/semi government employees, alumni, and educators will be created for this purpose' (ibid.: 3.7).

In fact, NEP 2020 has taken giant strides in 'synergising' the role of private and government players. In its proposed school complexes and mega-universities across the country, there is to be a twinning/pairing of one private with one government institution so that they can collaborate, share assets and introduce 'the best practices of private institutions' in the government ones (ibid.: 7.10).

This has been made acceptable merely by re-naming Public Private Partnerships as 'Public Philanthropic Partnerships' as the PPP strategy had not provided quality education but in fact increased exclusion and exploited the developing commercialisation of education. Now it will be merely a matter of time before the 'best practices' of types of fee imposition will be introduced in government schools and salaries of teachers will be pegged according to management decisions to 'incentivise' appointments and promotions. The creation of an administrative and financial 'cadre' to head institutions rather than selecting principals from among senior academicians also downgrades faculty. Yet, NEP 2020 claims that teachers are at the centre of its revival strategy (ibid: *Introduction*).

The WB has consistently advocated a market-oriented *model of knowledge*, with greater emphasis on 'learning outcomes' than on 'inputs', and a merchandised *model of education delivery* that involves the privatisation, commercialisation and corporatisation of education.

The STARS programme is designed to accelerate this process as it promotes greater involvement of 'non-state actors' and hence shifts the financial burden of education onto individual students instead of holding the state responsible and accountable. The effects of such a strategy will be disastrous. The National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO) most recent survey on education (71st round) already reveals a *pattern* in the exclusion that is effected in education. Only 6 per cent of young people from the bottom fifth of the population attend educational levels above higher secondary and less than 10 per cent SC/ST/OBC, minorities especially Muslims, complete Class XII and become eligible for reservation quotas.

NEP 2020 also shares the WB's model of knowledge. To make knowledge market-friendly it has to be reduced to 'competencies' and 'outcomes'. NEP 2020 is firmly committed to shifting classroom transactions 'towards competency-based learning and education. The assessment tools (including assessment "as", "of", and "for" learning) will also be aligned with the learning outcomes' (ibid.: 4.6). The proposed multiple exit and entry points are also based on the identification of skill levels. 'Specific sets of skills and values across domains will be identified for integration and incorporation at each stage of learning, from pre-school to higher education' (ibid.: 4.4). This makes it clear that the strategy is primarily one of facilitating exits from the formal system of education as any re-entry is dependent on possessing a specified set of skills and does not allow for choice from a wider range of options.

Knowledge as a resource for critically comprehending the contemporary world, society and value systems is now treated as being 'too heavy' for current teaching-learning methodologies and curricula to handle. A functional assembly of performance-oriented qualities defines the basic unit, module, topic of learning. These skills-units can be easily monitored, measured, graded and readied for the market. The 'learning outcome' too is predetermined. Developing 'standardized' assessment mechanisms to monitor the achievement levels reached for predetermined sets of 'outcomes' further degrades the teaching-learning process from being a diverse and complex interactive relationship to merely functioning as a conveyor transmitting pre-set modules of 'information' from teacher-facilitators to student-recipients.

This process of depriving students of the 'content' of learning which develops fundamental disciplines, critical thinking and creativity to oppose social injustices, to innovate and overcome forms of discrimination, makes a mockery of all learning as it cultivates conformism in thought and produces persons fitted only for being cogs in the economic and technological machine.

IX. Education for Equality is a Social Responsibility

A vibrant national system of education has to be transformational and emancipatory; it cannot reproduce and strengthen existing hierarchies and disparities. The real challenge for the education system lies in transforming a heterogeneous and diverse population into a rich learning source for the development of sensibilities that are not marked by conformism and prejudice but are open to critical self-questioning. This cannot be left to the vagaries of the market where profit rules and private players respond accordingly.

Still less can it be left to a policy that that seeks to homogenise people and knowledge through authoritarian governmental dictation. NEP 2020's repeated declarations in favour of 'one nation, one tradition/one pedagogical methodology/and one digital platform' run counter to the diversity of India's peoples, languages and sociocultural histories. Respecting and celebrating this *diversity* has led to our unity as a nation through the struggle against British colonialism and in overcoming the tragedy of the partition. In a democratic environment, such as that provided for in India's Constitution, liberties and rights are *enabling conditions* in the ongoing politics of *democratically negotiated nationalism*.

In the continuing struggle for creating a modern society and nation in which every citizen's right to a life of dignity must not only be protected but advanced, the education system right from the pre-primary stage up to higher education, has a very significant role to play.

Notes

[1] Saville Marriot, Commissioner of Revenue in the Deccan, and later Member of Council, Government of Bombay, in a letter to Sir R. Grant (16 January 1836).

[2] Hali (1837–1914) wrote one of the earliest works of literary criticism in Urdu, *Muqaddamah-i Shay'r-o-Sha'iri*. Its critical Preface, 'the Muqaddima-i-Sher-o-Shairi', led the way to literary criticism in Urdu literature.

[3] A uniform definition of literacy for British India was adopted beginning with the 1911 Census—an individual was recorded as literate if he or she could read and write a short letter to a friend. Although officials point to certain problems with the post-1911 enumeration such as enumerators on occasion adopting school standards, they do indicate that 'the simple criterion laid down was easily understood and sensibly interpreted' (Census of India 1921, Volume I – Report, Chapter VIII).

[4] 'Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday deliberated on the reforms required in the education sector, including the National Education Policy (NEP). Special emphasis was given on the use of technology in the education sector and enhancing learning and adapting by the use of technology such as online classes, education portal and class-wise broadcast on dedicated education channels.' *Hindustan Times*, 2 May 2020.

[5]A 2015 report of the International Labour Organization (ILO) puts the number of child workers in India aged between five and 17 at 5.7 million, out of 168 million globally. More than half of India's child workers labour in agriculture and over a quarter in manufacturing. Children also work in restaurants and hotels, and as domestic workers. Child labour rates are highest among tribal and lower caste communities.

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