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CONTINUITY AMIDST CHANGES: LONGUE DURÉE OF EDUCATIONAL APARTHEID IN INDIA

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Abstract

The central government has officially adopted the National Education Policy 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While social activists and the teaching community have denounced several retrograde measures being ushered in by the policy, the ruling political party has so far remained immune from their sharp criticisms. Even the opposition parties have not been too vehement in their criticism of the policy, a policy which is going to drastically transform the education scene in the country. Curiously, there has also been an absence of outrage among the common people, and the sharp reactions of activists and the teaching community to the policy can easily be contrasted with the largely apathetic response of the public.

It will be argued in this article that the education policies in India have largely remained exclusionary despite the pronouncements of political leaders and educationists to the contrary. It is in the context of the long history of the exclusion in education that such normalisation of inequality in education has emerged as the definitive response of a large section of the common masses. The argument also highlights the various retrograde tendencies which permeated the leadership in the anti-colonial movement, how such tendencies manifested themselves in certain educational schemes and policy measures that were launched in the postcolonial period, and the overall historical process through which inequality in education has come to be normalised in many respects.

Keywords: exclusion, Dalits, hierarchy, inequality, differential access

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The decision of the union government to finally approve the National Education Policy, 2020 came amid the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. when the parliament was not in session. It was approved surreptitiously at a time when all the educational institutions in the country were

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shut, owing to which the protests against its retrograde measures were minimal. Sensing the opportune time for finally giving it a nod, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)-led government at the centre proceeded with its agenda to finally abdicate its responsibility of providing quality public-funded education to the masses. The draft policy was already in the public domain and it was vehemently criticised by students, teachers, academics and activists, among others. A powerful, sustained movement against its enforcement was not seen due to the generalised phenomenon of lockdown/unlock restrictions, and the long-term normalisation of general populace towards inequality in education.

The NEP 2020, in simple words, will worsen the already pathetic situation of education in the country. The policy has incorporated the interests of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the industry-cum-corporate sector, and of the dominant classes. It correspondingly seems to subordinate the interests of the people. Instead of tackling the real issues aimed at bringing inside a vast section of those hitherto outside mainstream education, with measures such as increasing the number of formal educational institutions, the NEP also seeks to provide a policy framework to the existing ad-hoc measures and practices that are rampant in the education sector and have been reproducing social and economic inequalities. It seems that NEP 2020 simply intends to formally announce and facilitate the state's renunciation of its role.

The policy has led social activists and teaching fraternity to denounce what can easily be viewed as conservative measures. However, the ruling political party has so far remained immune to the sharp criticisms of activists and the teaching community. Even the opposition parties have not been too vehement in their criticism of the policy which is going to drastically transform the education scene in the country. Such inuring from the well-placed criticism of the policy has been possible because of the absence of outrage among the people. Indeed, the sharp critiques of the policy can easily be contrasted with the largely apathetic response of the general public to it. This is worrisome but understandable, given the long history of the exclusion in education, which has over the years become so normalised that a large section of masses is trapped by the dominant view that there is bound to be inequality in education as the state cannot provide for the education of all. In this way, even the measures being brought in by the policy are not easily registered. Considering these points, one needs

to look at not just the policy to understand the various regressive measures, but also the antecedents of the new policy, which too, are far from being progressive.

It will be argued in the paper that the education policies in India have largely remained exclusionary despite the pronouncements of political leaders and educationists to the contrary. The argument also highlights the various conservative tendencies which permeated the leadership in the anti-colonial movement that imbibed the hegemony of the elites. The aspirations of the common masses failed to materialise in the postcolonial period, reflecting the failures of the left and national-popular movements to erode the hegemony of the elites (Joshi and Josh, 2011). The hegemony of elites and the historic failure of the nation to come to its own (Guha, 1982) found manifestation in the educational schemes which were launched in the postcolonial period and in policy measures. In this regard, I also trace the historical process through which inequality in education has come to be viewed as normal.

I. Education in the Colonial Period

It is well known that education in the pre-colonial times was exclusive, as only the upper-classes were able to pursue it to a large extent (Crook, 1996: Introduction; Veeraraghavan, 2020: 76). The actual education systems might have differed across the subcontinent, but this was the prevalent motif. Prior to the colonial conquest and subsequent rule over the Indian subcontinent, there existed a traditional system of education which was highly decentralised. For example, in Bengal there was a system of higher learning which consisted of Persian and Arabic schools called *madrasah*s and Sanskrit schools called *tol*s. The pupils were generally from the upper-castes and leisured classes, who had sufficient time and resources to devote to educational pursuits. It was a highly decentralised system in the sense that there was no set curricula, system of examination, etc. which was followed by the traditional higher learning institutions. The mode of functioning of *madrasah*s and *tol*s was largely determined by the teachers and these centres of higher learning were patronised by wealthy benefactors and *zamindar*s. The course of study at *tol*s was Hindu logic, law and literature, while at *madrasah*s it comprised of Muslim law and Islamic religious science (Acharya, 1978).

Apart from these schools of higher learning that were chiefly attended by the leisured classes, there were *pathshala*s or village schools, which were patronised by the trading and agricultural classes. Here the curriculum largely consisted of three 'R's i.e. reading, writing

and rudimentary arithmetic. Though these schools too were dominated by the traders and agricultural castes, a significant proportion of the students in these schools was from 'lower' castes. It is significant that in Burdwan in the early 19th century, more than 50 per cent of the scholars in *pathshala*s were from lower castes (Acharya, 1978).

However, in the colonial times changes were made in the education sector which informed the later developments and crystallisation of ideas about education in the colonial period. One of the earliest debates in the early colonial period arose on the issues concerning education between the Orientalists and Anglicists. The grounds of debate between them was related to the importance to be accorded to indigenous education or to English education. However, even this ground was premised on the real aims of governing a 'different' people. The Orientalists and Anglicists both held a certain view of Indian society; concerning which they suggested education policies that, according to each, best helped govern it. The Orientalists called for understanding and promoting the study of Indian texts, for people were best governed according to their own rules which were contained in their texts. For the Anglicists, the obverse was true. They wanted to introduce English language education in India, for it entailed the creation of a class which would appreciate the 'richness' of English culture and this in turn would create grounds for British rule being strengthened in the country (Upadhyay, 2012).

These formulations of the Orientalists and Anglicists were to lay grounds for the developments in education in the succeeding decades. However, it needs to be emphatically remembered that the policies of the colonial rulers were geared towards what they regarded as the leisured classes i.e. the upper-castes and classes, who were seen as harbouring the necessary will and intellect to be accorded an education. For the rest, especially for the lower classes, the education would have to be filtered down through the literate classes. The education policy of the colonial state was based on downward filtration theory, and efforts were only made to provide education to a miniscule minority, comprising the sons of *raja*s and *nawab*s, and those belonging to the upper classes (Veeraraghavan, 2020: 77). No effort was made to provide mass education. Despite the differences in their thought and advocacy of policies related to education, the Orientalists and Anglicists had a common ground inasmuch as mass education was deemed an impossible and unworthy task.

Thus, as early as 1823, Holt Mackenzie, an Orientalist and the Secretary to the Bengal government, wrote that 'to provide for the education of the great body of the people seems to be impossible'. He further thought that 'the natural course of things in all countries seems to be that knowledge introduced from abroad should descend from the higher or educated Classes and gradually spread through their example' (Upadhyay, 2012).

The sense of educating a section of Indian society while denying education to the rest was informed by a class attitude. It can be observed in the dispatches of John Stuart Mill which reinforced the approach of his father. He explained:

> As we strive for an equal degree of justice, an equal degree of temperance, an equal degree of veracity, in the poor as in the rich, so ought we to strive for an equal degree of intelligence… It is absolutely necessary for the existence of the human race, that labour should be performed, that food should be produced, and other things provided, which human welfare requires. A large proportion of mankind, that labours, only such a portion of time can by them be given to the acquisition of intelligence as can be abstracted from labour… There are degrees, therefore, of intelligence, which must be reserved for those who are not obliged to labour (Vishwanathan, 1989: 149).

The ruling idea, therefore, was to give a smattering of education to the Dalits and the oppressed, which only enabled them to keep to their stations in society. In line with such a policy came Macaulay's Minute in 1835, who as the Law Member of the Governor-General's Council and the President of the Committee of Public Instruction, denigrated the 'vernaculars' and called for promoting 'English education alone' (Ramachandran and Ramkumar, 2005). Thereafter, there were some lukewarm attempts to spread school education (ibid.), with efforts being chiefly directed towards spreading English education through higher learning institutions. In the process, the British destroyed whatever indigenous system of education the masses had accessed, without of course replacing it with anything meaningful (Acharya, 1995).

While the emphasis was on the education of upper classes (which primarily meant upper-castes and those in positions of power and status), the colonial rulers exhibited a drifting concern with the education of the Dalits and lower castes. The Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850 and Wood's Despatch of 1854 can be seen as non-committal utterances that half-heartedly aimed at overcoming the inordinate dependence on upper-castes, and the opposition to the education of the Dalits by the upper-castes. However, these were cautionary

approaches which can be evinced by the restraint advised by the Hunter Commission in going ahead with the policy of opening government schools to all classes. While emphasising that 'no boy be refused admission to a Government college or school merely on the ground of caste', it added that 'even in the case of government or board schools, the principle must be applied with due caution' (Nambissan, 2002: 81).

The consequence of such a lopsided policy was that a large section of population remained outside the sphere of education, chiefly those from the exploited and oppressed sections.

Table: Disparity in the Level of Education among Different Strata of Population around c. 1923

Classes of Population	**Primary Education, Students per 1000 of the population of the class**	**Secondary Education, Students per 100,000 of the population**	**College Education, Students per 200,000 of the population**
Advanced Hindus	119	3000	1000
Mahomedans	92	500	52
Intermediate Class	38	140	24
Backward Class	18	14	Nil (or nearly one if at all)

Source: Upadhyay, 2012

The education policy of the colonial rulers, therefore, only served to excessively broaden the educational difference between the upper classes and those from oppressed sections. Indeed, in studies such as that of Philip Constable (2000), it has been amply shown that even the few Dalits who enrolled in schools were discriminated against, and for lower-caste students education continued to remain a discriminatory experience due to the active connivance of British officials who looked for the support of the local dominant castes. In this context, the blame can be put squarely on the nature of colonial rule over the Indian people. Since the colonial education was geared towards its own agenda—that of ruling over the masses—it

devised policies catering to such an aim. However, nationalist politicians despite their anti-colonial stance were not very different from the colonial ruling elite in this regard.

II. Attitude of the Anti-Colonial Leadership

Historical evidence amply highlights the evolving attitudes towards mass education among Indian politicians in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was one of the early anti-colonial leaders who spoke about the need and feasibility of educating the masses. In his Free and Compulsory Education Bill presented before the Imperial Legislative Council in 1911, he argued that free and compulsory primary education was a possibility, citing a modest earmarking of colonial government's resources for the purpose. Though the Bill was rejected, it highlighted the feasibility of the provision of compulsory education, which even in independent India was to be delayed till as late as 2009.

However, Gokhale's was a largely lonely voice among the nationalist leaders when it came to the question of mass education. Even among the early social reformers, mass education was not counted as a possible cause. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's pronouncements in this regard serve as examples of elitist tendencies even among the Indian social reformers, which are not wholly different from those of colonial administrators. Talking about the education policies of the colonial government, Vidyasagar remarked:

> …it seems almost impracticable in the present circumstances of the country… the government should, in my humble opinion, confine itself to the education … on a comprehensive scale… mere reading and writing and a little of arithmetic, should not comprise the whole of this education. Geography, History, Biography, Arithmetic, Geometry, Natural Philosophy, Moral Philosophy, Political Economy and Physiology should be taught to render it complete…. *By educating one boy in a proper style the government does more towards the real education of the people, than by teaching a hundred children mere reading, writing and a little arithmetic*. (Qtd. in Ghosh, 2012: 44, Emphasis added)

Moreover, when confronted with the possibility of upper-castes refraining from sending their children to Sanskrit College—if castes other than Brahmans and Vaidyas were admitted—Vidyasagar expressed his opinion thus, 'I see no objection to the admission of other castes than the Brahmans and Vaidyas, or in other words, different orders of Sudras in the Sanskrit

College. But as a measure of expediency, I would suggest that at present Kayasthas only be admitted' (Qtd. in Ghosh, 2012: 45). On the issue of mass education, Vidyasagar remarked:

> An impression appears to have gained ground both here and in England, that enough has been done for the education of the higher classes and that attention should now be directed towards the education of the masses... An enquiry into the matter will however show a very different state of things. *As the best, if not the only practicable means of promoting education in Bengal, the government should, in my humble opinion, confine to the education of the higher classes on a comprehensive scale…* (Qtd. in Acharya, 1995: 671, Emphasis added)

Though attempts have been made to celebrate the legacy of Vidyasagar as a stalwart of Bengal Renaissance, his stance on mass education reflects the bias against lower-castes and classes which pervaded the psyche of elites or 'Bhadraloks' in Bengal.

Even among Gokhale's contemporary nationalist leaders, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was vehemently opposed to any policy advocating mass education. Though regarded as one of the tallest leaders of pre-Gandhian era, the leader's take on mass education was far from salutary, and exhibited caste, class and gender biases—all of which underline the elitist tendencies of an entire generation of leaders.

The overriding concern for this group of nationalists was to defend the system of caste; they viewed reforms as loss of nationality or *rashtriyata*. The group around Tilak included Vishnushastri Chiplunkar and V.N. Mandalik. They declared that 'the institution of caste had been the basis of the Hindu society and undermining the caste would undermine the Hindu society'. Claiming themselves to represent Hindus, they termed Lokhitwadi and Phule as 'traitors to the nation-*rashtra*', who advocated the abolition of caste-based inequalities (Rao, 2009).

The campaigns for compulsory primary education by Gokhale and non-Brahman leaders such as Phule were vociferously challenged by Tilak. He devised various arguments against compulsory primary education and argued that teaching Kunbi (peasant) children to read, write, and learn the rudiments of history, geography and mathematics, would actually harm them. Rather, for him the peasant's children were better taught traditional occupations, for the curriculum meant for the children of upper-castes and classes was unsuitable for them.

According to him, if:

> You take away a farmer's boy from the plough, the blacksmith's boy from the bellows and the cobbler's boy from his awl with the object of giving him liberal education ... and the boy learns to condemn the profession of his father, not to speak of the loss to which the latter is put by being deprived of the son's assistance at the old trade (*Mahratta*, 22 March 1891: Editorial).

Tilak was also opposed to any augmentation of the educational infrastructure and viewed any expenditure on the same as a waste of resources. He wrote:

> Whatever the eloquence of the facts and figures of Mr. Gokhale, we stick to our view and say that the leaders of public movement are committing serious blunder in insisting upon government to continue to maintain and manage institutions, the utility of which is disproportionately too small compared to the cost they entail and in which hardly any scope for development (*Mahratta*, 16 March 1890: p. 2).

He criticised the effort of the colonial government to bring education to the villages, and encouraging the peasants' children to take up education. He argued that by supporting the extension of 'liberal education for the masses the reformers were committing a grave error' as 'English education encouraged the people to defy the caste restrictions and the spread of English education among the natives will bring down their caste system' (*Mahratta*, 15 May 1881: p. 3).

III. Nai Talim or Basic Education Scheme of Gandhi

Post the First World War, with the promulgation of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, the Government of India Act, 1919 was enacted. In the provinces of British India, the portfolio for education was entrusted to Indian ministers. Following this, different provinces enacted legislation for compulsory elementary education in selected cities and towns. After the Karachi Congress in 1931 and the formation of Congress Ministries in eight provinces in the 1937 provincial elections, the programme of primary education received some attention (Veeraraghavan, 2020: 79). It was in this context that Gandhi came out with his Basic Education programme (Nai Talim), which was largely envisaged by him in the 1930s and came to be formulated in the Zakir Husain Committee Report (1938).

Based on Gandhi's socioeconomic policies of the self-sufficient village community, his Basic Education Scheme was premised on free and compulsory education along with craft-based

learning which was to be taught in the native tongue of the students. The curriculum was to be so devised that it was related to the craft in every aspect. Nai Talim as per Gandhi's formulation was:

> […] whatever is taught to children, all of it should be taught necessarily through the medium of a trade or a handicraft… instead of merely teaching a trade or a handicraft, we may as well educate the children entirely through them. Look at *takli* [spindle] itself, for instance. The lesson of this *takli* will be the first lesson of our students through which they would be able to learn a substantial part of the history of cotton, Lancashire and the British empire… How does this *takli* work? What is its utility? And what are the strengths that lie within it? Thus the child learns all this in the midst of play. Through this he also acquires some knowledge of mathematics. When he is asked to count the number of cotton threads on *takli* and he is asked to report how many did he spin, it becomes possible to acquaint him step by step with good deal of mathematical knowledge through this process. And the beauty is that none of this becomes even a slight burden on his mind… While playing around and singing, he keeps on turning his *takli* and from this itself he learns a great deal (Gandhi's address at the Wardha Education Conference, 22 October 1937).

The Gandhian formulation of Nai Talim can be seen as propagating a new kind of learning based on practical education or what can be called in latter-day terminology 'vocational education'. Emphasis on holistic learning based on dignity of labour has led to support for this scheme in the present day, when we are confronted with an education system which lays undue stress on performance, rather than learning. Instead of talking about its perceived merits, which if implemented would bring about a revolution in the pedagogy and education, based as it is on a holistic approach, i.e. of integrating head, heart and hand, emphasises the essentiality of the mother tongue, and the principle of self-support (Sadgopal, 2014), one needs to look at the way in which the question itself is wrongly posed.

The schools in the colonial period were themselves based on a deeply hierarchical model. The masses, especially a majority among the untouchable community and the lower classes, were without resources and thus were condemned to learn skills without any opportunity whatsoever for entering formal education or higher education which would lead them to better-paid occupations in the labour market. What was envisaged as holistic education based on crafts, was already a bleak reality for the masses, for without any means of gaining formal education they were left to reproduce their labour generationally, and this often meant that they remained tied to stigmatised occupations.

Of a remarkably similar scheme of vocational education for African Americans in the southern states of United States of America, noted African American educationist and social activist, W.E.B. Du Bois remarked (1973):

> There comes a distinct philosophy of education which makes the earning of a living the centre and norm of human training and which moreover dogmatically asserts that the subject matter and methods peculiar to technical schools are the best fit for all education. This doctrine is fundamentally false…. We must give to our youth a training designed above all to make them men of power, of thought, of trained and cultivated taste; men who know whither civilization is tending and what it means.

Thus, the insistence of the Nai Talim on learning crafts and basing it as the foundation for a self-sufficient village community, can be juxtaposed with the vehement criticism of a similar policy received by one of the most noted African American activists of Gandhi's time. In India, the Nai Talim scheme was put to work in the Modified Scheme of Elementary Education or Rajaji scheme which was brought in the erstwhile Madras state in 1953 by the government of C. Rajagopalachari.

IV. The Stance of non-Brahman and Dalit Leadership on Mass Education

While a section among nationalist leaders was opposed to the general education of the masses, efforts were made for mass education by non-Brahman and Dalit leaders as well. Phule in his memorandum to the Hunter Commission argued for the need for expansion of government-funded primary and higher education for the lower classes and women (Phule, 2002). The leaders of non-Brahman movement, especially in the Madras and Bombay presidencies, led movements for educational opportunities for the oppressed and exploited sections and pressed for creation of schools. Indeed, even in certain Princely States like Travancore, organised resistance of Dalits on questions of access to educational opportunities were visible. It is said that the first ever strike of 'untouchable' agricultural labourers of the Pulayar caste, led by the radical social reformer Ayyankali, was triggered around 1907 when a Pulayar girl was denied enrolment in the government school (Ramachandran, 2000: 103–06).[1] This strike soon galvanised the Pulayar community on other issues of livelihood and dignity, forcing the Travancore state to remove discriminatory provisions in its schooling system.

Despite the gradual expansion of government-funded schooling system in certain parts of the country, the overall number of schools remained miniscule and the masses remained excluded from education. Even till the late 1920s, the small section of Dalits and other so-called lower-caste students who acquired access to education were largely confined to primary education and industrial schools. The concentration of the Dalits and lower-caste students in industrial schools is particularly telling, as instruction in such schools only fed them into a hierarchical labour market, where there was intense competition for premium jobs. Moreover, even entry into such institutions was highly competitive and aspirants from lower-castes and the untouchable community were made to compete for the very limited number of seats available (John, 2018:16).

The non-Brahman and Dalit leadership while pressing for the need of making education accessible to the majority, envisaged measures which catered to a miniscule minority, thereby reimposing the notions of merits and competition within the untouchable community and subordinate castes. Consequently, just a small section of Dalits and lower classes was able to enter formal education. For example, in a report prepared by the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bombay, dated 23 July 1928, it is noted that a recurring provision of Rs 9000 was made in the budget of 1928 for grants-in-aid to hostels for Depressed Class students under private management. The largest part of this provision was to be used to launch a scheme envisaged by B.R. Ambedkar and another non-official member of the Bombay Legislative Council, for the establishment of hostels in different parts of the Presidency proper for boys of the Depressed Classes who were attending secondary schools. The scheme was based on *competitive* examinations, and promoted education for a select group of students from within the untouchable community. Such schemes, it should be noted, were also based on the notion of *proportionality* wherein seats were reserved in institutions as per the proportion of Depressed Classes in the population. Due to a meagre number of seats in these institutions reserved for them, a large section of masses and lower classes was excluded and remained trapped in circumstances wherein they continued to perform stigmatised labour in agrarian and other traditional occupations (John, 2016).

This can be contrasted with the opening of factory schools in many provinces where a large section of children from the marginalised and Depressed Classes were employed as child labour. In provinces such as Bombay there was a stark convergence between the reformers

who called for educating children who worked in factories, the employers and the colonial governments. Various legislations were enacted in the course of late 19th and early 20th centuries which called for the reduction of work-hours of child labour in factories, which was vehemently contested by the employers' lobby. However, among both the critics and supporters of child labour the idea remained intact that the child was a future worker. For both the social reformers and employers' lobbies the befitting education that could be imparted to the child workers was vocational or technical education. Such education, it was believed, would inculcate industriousness and 'dignity of labour' in them. Such arguments were used as an expedient to set up factory schools in order to impart training to the child workers that was, more often than not, a mere ploy to keep children within the factory, easily accessible for factory work (John, 2018).

At a time when the larger untouchable community had scant resources for education, such schemes only served the interests of a very small section of Dalits who had resources for investing in education, and had the required wherewithal to corner a section of skilled jobs in the labour market and in the government sector. The memoirs of Ramchandra Babaji More (2019), a communist leader from the Dalit community, and the principal organiser of the historic Mahad Satyagraha, are especially telling in this regard. The memoirs very forcefully describe the experience of financial and social difficulties for a majority among lower-castes and Dalits, which made it especially difficult for them to invest in education. More's account of his struggle of gaining admission in the local school at Mahad highlights the socio-economic conditions that the wider section of lower-castes faced. In this context, the schemes of Dalit and non-Brahman leadership—wherein education was envisioned for only a section of the children from lower castes—clearly appears problematic as it paved the way for the larger body of children from these communities to remain out of school and trapped in exploitative working conditions, such as in factories in Bombay as child labour (John, 2018).

In this context, it becomes obvious as to why in postcolonial India the ruling elite failed to incorporate the right to education in the Constitution. The Constituent Assembly—brought into power by an election based on property franchise—framed the Constitution of India whilst failing to incorporate the aspirations of the masses regarding education, despite Ambedkar playing a major role in it. Despite the popular yearning for equality exemplified by the Satyashodhak current in Bombay presidency, Namasudra movement in Bengal, lower-

caste movements in Bihar and elsewhere, anti-feudal struggles in the Andhra region and Kerala, etc., the right to education was not consecrated as a fundamental right. Instead, it was inserted in the Directive Principles that are not mandatory for the state to follow, and which noted commentators on the framing of the Constitution have termed 'a veritable dustbin of sentiment' (Dhawan, 2008). It is significant that an advisory body—Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE)[2]—in its report *Post-War Plan of Educational Development in India* (1944:3), also known as Sargent Plan, declared 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. In the first place, therefore, 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.

However, instead of making education a fundamental right in line with the interest of the masses, it was relegated to the non-mandatory part of the Constitution. This exposes the pretentions of the elite who only paid lip-service to the aspirations of the masses. Unfortunately, the motives of the early postcolonial state have not been aggressively questioned in this regard, and many uncritically hail the initial efforts of the early postcolonial period.

V. Basic Education Scheme in Action: Madras, 1953

After Independence, while there was no formal education policy regarding school education, one of the most important controversies erupted in Madras state on the nature and content of school education. The controversy revolved around the Modified Scheme of Elementary Education which was sought to be implemented by the government of C. Rajagopalachari in 1953. The principal features of the scheme were: (a) reduction in the number of study hours in elementary schools in the panchayat villages of the State, from five to three per session, (b) introduction of two three-hour shifts in schools, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, and (c) enabling children to learn a craft or trade at home or in a workshop in the village during leisure hours. The second session in which the students would be out of school

was to be utilised for obtaining the objectives of the basic education system—learning through living and training in self-reliance (Veeraraghavan, 2020: 85).

The scheme was devised to ostensibly provide education to the students on the basis of Nai Talim. Though some of the critics of the scheme were Gandhian educationists such as J.C. Kumarappa, it was largely supported by Dr Zakir Hussain and G. Ramachandran (ibid.: 91). However, non-Brahman political leaders and the communists raised serious objections about the kind of education it envisaged, based as it was on the notion of learning *hereditary* crafts and occupations. Thus, instead of providing avenues to the students to get out of exploitative caste-based occupations, the scheme was seen as a move aimed at strengthening the caste hierarchies.

Various state-level campaigns against the scheme ultimately made the Madras government back down, and the scheme was eventually withdrawn in 1954 by the government of K. Kamaraj. However, while the contentions of the leaders condemning the scheme were taken as valid, the experiment itself was seen to be a well-intentioned, though abortive example of the Nai Talim scheme. The Gandhian Nai Talim has been seen as a radical departure from the Brahmanical-cum-colonial paradigm, but the Modified Scheme of Elementary Education based on it was rightly perceived as promoting 'Kula Kalvi' (casteist education) (National Focus Group, 2007). A conundrum, therefore, arises as to the reason for the dichotomy in lofty ideals of an education policy and the disastrous consequences of it being implemented. The reason can be gauged in the absence of policy measures which aimed at creating equality in independent India.

VI. Postcolonial Education Policy

The early decades of educational development in postcolonial India ignored an *actual* policy thrust on elementary education (Bhatty, 2014). The University Education Commission and the Secondary Education Commission were constituted in 1948–49 and 1952–53 respectively for looking into the scene of higher education and secondary education. The Education Commission under D.S. Kothari constituted in 1964 was the first to provide a comprehensive review of the education scene in the country.

It has been noted that the anti-colonial leaders envisaged an education policy which did not question the link of education with the labour market. In this vein, the call for vocationalisation in secondary and higher secondary education dates back to the Indian Education Commission / Kothari Commission (1964-–66) whose recommendations were readily absorbed in the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974–79). The Commission recommended vocationalisation of education for laying the ground for a meaningful, purposive and practical school-level education. On close reading of the Kothari Commission one can find that common schooling is only given as a gesture at incorporating the aspirations of the masses, while it is mainly silent on the concrete measures to be taken for its implementation (Bhatty, 2014: 102). The result is reproduction of existing inequalities between the elite and the masses. While vocationalisation became a norm for educating the masses, the academic stream remained reserved for the elites.

The implementation of this recommendation has only served to reproduce the prevailing inequalities between the rich and the poor. It has been argued that this has been possible for two reasons. The primary reason is that the vocational stream is mainly pursued by students coming from working class background, or they are rather pushed into it, while the rich students hegemonise high-level professional jobs by opting for the academic stream. While students from lower classes 'opt' for formal vocational education, the upper-class youth (studying in expensive private schools) engage with vocational studies merely in the form of industrial art classes and Socially Useful Productive Work (SUPW) camps. The second reason for the reproduction of inequality through vocationalisation is 'the lack of cross-migration and cross-fertilization between the academic and vocational streams' (John, 2012: 51).

The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, criticised the earlier National Policy on Education, 1968, which was based on the recommendations of Kothari Commission. In its review of the NPE 1968, the NPE 1986 criticised the lack of financial outlay for implementing the measures envisaged in it. It was argued that it resulted 'in compounding the problems of "access, quality and utility of education" to "massive proportions"' (Bhatty, 2014: 102). However, the NPE 1986 itself remained tied to the presumption that there was lack of demand for education among the poor and marginalised. Consequently, though boost was given to access in the government schools, the overall paradigm remained that of

providing poor quality education for the poor and marginalized. The policy also talked about excluded groups such as Schedule Caste (SC), Schedule Tribe (ST), minority, women and 'handicapped' students and came up with various measures to ostensibly bring the excluded groups into mainstream education. These measures included incentives for SC, ST and other educationally-backward students, emphasis on recruitment of women and SC teachers, and reservation for SC and ST students in Navodaya Vidyalaya, among others.

The policy measures facilitated by the NPE 1986 continued to perpetuate inequality by only catering to a handful of children from socio-economically disadvantaged sections to pursue quality education through 'model schools' such as Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas.[3] The students from well-resourced Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs), Sainik Schools and Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs) across the country receive an education, which is way beyond the means of labouring masses. The people sending their wards to these elite government schools are typically wealthier sections of the peasantry in the case of Navodayas and middle-class professionals in government service in the case of KVs and Sainik schools. These model schools provide quality public-funded education to a miniscule section of students while the general education scene remains pathetic. Such model schools have left unresolved the challenge of educating the masses through the network of regular neighbourhood government schools 'where most of India's children and almost all of its children from socially and economically weaker sections were being sent' (ibid.). Typically, model government schools have been based on the premise that they would enable those with greater 'merit' to pursue quality education and to tap their potential that would otherwise be unrealised in the regular government schools. The expenditure per student in these schools is way above that expended on regular government school students. 'In government schools the average per child expenditures was Rs. 4,269 (2011-12); whereas in the Sarvodaya Vidyalayas it is in the range of Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000, and in Kendriya Vidyalayas as high as Rs 13,000 – three times the amount spent in a regular government school" (ibid.).

For the masses, the NPE 1986, especially its modified version in 1992, only succeeded in providing poor quality education. Instead of prioritising financial boost to schools, the cost-cutting measures implemented under the policy such as setting-up of Education Guarantee Centres (EGCs) and the recruitment of para-teachers that were not required to conform to the

established standards of educational quality and teaching, served to alienate the masses from the ostensible plan of the policy to achieve 'education for equality'.

Coupled with the phenomenon of hierarchy in public schooling system, private schools have progressively increased in the country. The earliest recommendations made for Common School System by Kothari Commission did not lay down any concrete measures for creation of such a system, which resulted in cementing of dual system of education, i.e. 'government-run free schools for the subordinated people and an elite private system for the powerful' (Saxena, 2012). Studies have highlighted the differentiated educational regimes which exist in the country from elite residential schools to resource-poor government schools. Such differentiation, it has been argued, 'further disadvantages the already underprivileged by reinforcing, instead of reducing, existing social and economic inequalities, as the pupils of these widely disparate institutions are endowed with very uneven qualities and quantities of economic and social wherewithal' (Majumdar and Mooij, 2012).

The phenomenon of private schools co-existing with government schools has served to make way for the rich to corner seats in premier higher educational institutions and thereby monopolise higher segment jobs, while majority of school-going children simply find themselves locked into lower segment and exploitative jobs due to poor quality of instruction rampant in government schools. However, the government school system contains deep divisions within itself. This division within the public school system has perpetuated hierarchies of access to public-funded education.

In this context, it is appropriate to look at the Right to Education (RTE) Act passed in 2009, which made it mandatory for the governments to provide compulsory primary education from ages 6 to 14. The RTE 2009 had a catch inasmuch as it did not contest the existence of inequality in education. In fact, it instituted 25 per cent quota for admissions in private schools for the students from the economically weaker sections (EWS), thereby making way for a miniscule fraction of students from marginalised backgrounds to enter private schools; this in turn obliterated the issue of unequal dual system of education existing in the country. This measure has provided a fillip to normalisation of inequality in the school education sector.

The growing phenomenon of tuition and coaching centres further widens the gap between the masses and the elite by fuelling the 'successes' of students of elite private and government schools. There has been an absence of government policy regarding the tuition and coaching centres which mushroomed in the country, especially since the 1980s and 1990s. Becoming an important component of the market with the coming of big-scale formal coaching establishments in various metropolitan cities, and development of some cities as hubs of coaching centres for various competitive examinations, the coaching industry was worth 40 billion dollars in 2015. Also, the annual money spent on coaching for premier institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and National Institutes of Technology (NITs) was 1.5 lakh crores i.e. way above the annual budget for all IITs and NITs put together (Moudgalya, 2015). These coaching institutes serve as conduits to premier universities and plush jobs in the government and private sector, and serve to keep the youth from lower classes at a disadvantage so that they are in no position to compete with students from private schools who have had access to the best coaching institutes due to their higher financial status.

Contrast this picture with that of common government schools in the country which have none of the facilities which the private schools and the elite government schools enjoy. The students in regular government schools are fortunate if the government ever employs the required number of teachers. Needless to say, the government actively ignores the needs of these students. Even if these students try to fill the gap by studying harder, their efforts can never amount to much in the entrance examinations of various higher educational institutions, which favour elite students who have had access to quality education and the best coaching institutes. This effectively mars the efforts of the majority of students from deprived backgrounds to enter the premier higher educational institutions.

The NEP 2020 can be seen as forming a logical continuum which is in line with the developments in the education policy of successive regimes post-Independence.

VII. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and School Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

The NEP 2020 envisages early childhood education with no plan to implement it. In place of any concrete plan to achieve the objective, the policy simply relies on the frontline anganwadi workers who are responsible for implementing government schemes aimed at immunisation, food provision, primary healthcare, pre-schooling and other such services to children below six and their mothers through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). The NEP 2020 does not call for employing elementary teachers for the purpose of providing pre-school education to the children. Instead, it only advocates expansion of the network of ill-trained anganwadi workers. According to the policy, the existing anganwadi workers with 10+2 qualification would be given a tokenistic six-month training to enable them for the purpose. Moreover, those with lower educational qualifications shall be given a one-year diploma programme covering early literacy, numeracy and other relevant aspects of ECE. The training of anganwadi workers at present is ad-hoc, and it is unwisely expected by the government that the existing workers would receive adequate training through online mode, while running the anganwadi centres.

Moreover, across the country, private play schools and pre-schools have proliferated which cater to the needs of the middle and upper classes. While private ventures in education are being promoted, the policy clearly eschews the need to bring in more sufficiently trained elementary teachers to cater to the needs of the vast majority of the children of the country who are currently dependent on pathetic anganwadi centres and ill-trained, ill-paid, contractual anganwadi workers. Thus, the policy measure on this point is merely a hogwash which amounts to a deft evasion of the issue.

Informalisation of education at school level

The policy talks at various places about the students from socially and economically disadvantaged sections (SEDGs). The policy mentions Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for various grades since the RTE 2009. GER for grades 6-8 was 90.9 per cent, while for grades 9-10 and 11-12 it was only 79.3 per cent and 56.5 per cent, respectively. Though these GERs are themselves inflated, the policy aims to achieve 100 per cent GER by 2030. However, such

lofty motives stand betrayed when one peruses the measures which are sought to bring about such GER. One of the most important reasons for the decrease in GER after grade 8 is the widespread tendency of government schools to shove the students into informal mode of education such as National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), or simply refuse to take them in. One of the telling examples of such tendencies are the Delhi government schools, much celebrated over the country for being so-called models of good education, which have seen drastic reduction of student enrolment over the years. A total of 9.96 lakh students were enrolled in state government schools in 2011–12, the enrolment fell to 8.97 lakh in 2014–15, 8.77 lakh in 2015–16 and 7.41 lakh in 2018–19 which amounts to 17 per cent drop (NDTV, 2019).

The Draft National Education Policy 2019 (DNEP 2019) had suggested that RTE would be extended to cover the age group 3–18 (DNEP, 2019: 72). While this was a positive measure, it has been removed in the final version, and the final version slyly absolves the government of expanding the RTE by simply stating that the goal is to achieve 100 per cent enrolment from pre-school to secondary level by 2030. This measure also frees the government of its bounden duty to increase the public educational infrastructure by advocating informalisation of education. It simply aims at shoving students into open schooling systems such as National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), where the facilities and infrastructure are dismal, and which had a mere 31 per cent passing rate for Grade 12 in 2018. The NIOS and State Open Schools would be expanded to have a greater number of students enrolled in it, after the formal mode schools are closed and merged. Instead of massively increasing the infrastructure so that the majority of the students who are dependent on public-funded education have access to formal education system, emphasis is laid on the provision of education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Mode. The buzzwords used in the policy such as 'technology-enabled', 'online', etc. are aimed at freeing the government of its commitment towards the goal of providing formal mode education to all, since such ODL and online mode education cannot be a substitute for proper schooling. Clearly, the emphasis on online and ODL modes only paves the way for massive informalisation at the school level.

Entry door to the NGOs and private bodies

One of the main causes of inequality in the country is lack of access to public-funded quality education. While there is an urgent need to open more schools and establish a common school system, the government has declared its intention to promote the opening of private schools in a massive way. Moreover, to pave way for private investment in public education, the public–private partnerships (PPP) model is to be promoted. Likewise, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which thrive on government funds and serve to make education a commodity which is to be doled out according to their whims, are being promoted. This would usher in privatisation in a big way and would serve to debar a majority of Dalits, tribals, minorities, women and those from lower classes from formal mode education.

An excessive reliance is placed on private bodies and crowd-funding to even provide the learning resources such as textbook materials to the students in schools. Such a stance serves to abdicate the government of its responsibility to provide education to the masses, and instead ropes in private players to mint profits. Further, private bodies are to be encouraged to set up schools, and thus leave the government free from its task to ensure equality and education for all.

Preparing grounds for entry of school students into informal labour market

There is much emphasis on vocational education in the NEP 2020. It has been the declared aim of the government to bring in vocational education from early school grades. What in effect would be just a superfluous subject for those studying in private schools, would serve as a trap for students from deprived sections in so far as it would impart skills which would ensure their early entry into the informal labour market, and thereby preclude a majority from entering higher education. Moreover, the policy envisages massive entry of students in the informal labour market by citing its intent to expose at least 50 per cent of the students to vocational education by 2025 i.e. in the next five years.

According to the statistics given by Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank', the MHRD minister in February 2020 in Parliament, the dropout rates of students in Class 9 and Class 10 had crossed almost a fifth of the total enrolment rate in 2017–18. He also specified that in as many as 11 states, the dropout rate in secondary school was over 20 per cent. In Assam, about

a third of the students dropped out and in Bihar, it was 32 per cent despite an improvement of the previous years. The dropout rate in Bihar was 39.7 per cent in 2016–17 (Radhika, 2020). The students who drop out in classes after 9 invariably belong to the most deprived and marginalized sections of society and are forced to enter the informal labour market as child labourers. The policy states, 'the students will be given increased flexibility and choice of subjects to study, particularly in secondary school—including subjects in physical education, the arts, and vocational crafts—so that they may be free to design their own paths of study and life plans'.

Thus, instead of ensuring measures to retain the students in formal education system, the overarching emphasis on vocational education is only meant to provide cheap and skilled labour to the highly exploitative informal sector in the country.

Opportunities and encouragement to only a few

The policy has also laid down a lofty need to encourage 'talents' in government schools under the section 'Support for Gifted Students'. It is a well-known fact that the government schools which provide education to the vast majority of school-going students in the country are in a pathetic condition. Consequently, there is an urgent need to provide more and more resources to these schools. Instead, the government is openly abdicating its duty by only providing for selection of few 'talented' students in schools who will be encouraged, while leaving the majority to fend for themselves. The policy aims to encourage students that show particularly high performing strong interests and capacities in a given realm. Moreover, it has been enjoined upon the teachers to 'encourage students with singular interests and/or talents in the classroom by giving them supplementary enrichment material and guidance and encouragement … through specific funding allocated for this purpose'. Furthermore, even the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) will develop guidelines for the education of 'gifted' children. Furthermore, such 'talents' would be promoted through 'rigorous merit-based residential summer camps', implying that only a selective few would be fostered while the commitment to the majority remains dispensable.

In all, such measures would encourage a handful number of students to go for higher studies, which in conjunction with vocational education for the majority would end up perpetuating a hierarchy of employment, and thereby increase inequality in society.

Closure of schools and decline in standards for setting up of schools

There is a growing phenomenon of the government 'rationalising' school education in recent years through the closure of schools that are deemed to be less attended. State government run schools have been closed in massive numbers in various states across the country, Delhi and Haryana being the most notable examples. As such, the policy reinforces such measures by providing for such rationalisation by integrating schools in school complexes and clusters. What in effect such a measure would mean is closing of schools and degradation of the existing. The policy further envisages lowering of specifications for setting up of schools and openly advocates for the physical and infrastructural requirements to be made 'more responsive' to realities on the ground, e.g. regarding land areas and room sizes, practicalities of playgrounds in urban areas, etc'. It allows for 'these mandates to be adjusted and loosened, leaving flexibility for each school to make its own decisions based on local needs and constraints'. This relaxation of specifications for setting up of schools, will only expedite the process of compromise on ensuring quality educational infrastructure to cater to the needs of the vast majority of the students of the country.

The needs of Persons with Disabilities (PwD) and students from Socio-Economically Deprived Backgrounds forsaken

The policy expresses at various points its concern for the students of the socio-economically deprived sections. However, the measures only amount to providing opportunities for the handful, while denying them to the others. Point 6.16 provides for fee-waivers and scholarships for 'talented' and 'meritorious' students, thus creating a category of students for whom there would be no fee-waivers. The policy skilfully evades the need of creating and expanding the educational infrastructure so as to enable access to quality education for all.

Further, the need to develop infrastructure is de-emphasised in point 6.19 which stresses the need for a change in school culture. The purported aim is to produce empowered individuals by sensitising the school staff and students towards the notions of 'equity, inclusion, and the

respect, dignity and privacy of all persons'. How the lofty notions of 'equity' are to be ingrained without even ensuring equal access to quality education for all remains unstated.

Likewise, for Persons with Disabilities (PwD), a large majority among whom belong to socio-economically deprived sections, no concrete measures have been proposed. The quality of education for the PwD requires dedicated funds for their special needs and it is very likely that the government will transfer all the responsibilities to the NGOs or will simply make no efforts to put up basic infrastructure to ensure access to education as the policy does not set a timeline. Also, PwD students and their parents need to be active participants in the execution of any policy aimed at them. But there is no mechanism in the policy for consultation with the stakeholders at the level of school to ensure the specific concerns and interests of PwD students.

The teachers and fellow students play an important role in empowering PwD students throughout their academic life. By advocating distance learning and schooling through NIOS, the policy contradicts the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act that recommends disabled students to be educated along with students without disabilities.

Importantly, while NEP 2020 will enhance unequal access to quality school education and efface completely the imprint of common schooling from the country's educational policy framework, it will also further consolidate the rampant inequality in the access to quality higher education. Let us turn to the existing realities of hierarchy and unequal access in higher education.

VIII. The Issue of Inequality in School Education and Access to Quality Public-Funded Higher Education

It has long been a liberal assumption that one of the primary purposes of university courses is to train students into becoming broad-minded, tolerant and self-reliant citizens. While this assumption continues to prevail, the vast majority of students and parents seek higher education as it is seen to enhance employability. The same is observed by the Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education (2009), chaired by Professor Yashpal:

> As more youngsters from different segments of society enter the universities, they look at higher education as a means to transcend the class barriers. Consequently, university education is no longer viewed as a good in itself, but also as the stepping stone into a higher orbit of the job market, where the student expects a concrete monetary return (Yashpal Committee Report, 2009).

Nevertheless, the existing dual system of education, i.e. private schools coexisting with public schools, has led to strengthening of the hold of the privileged students even on elite higher education institutions such as central universities and technology and management institutes like IITs and IIMs. Meanwhile the majority of students from lower classes are pushed into second grade and poorly-funded regional universities and colleges, B-grade private institutes and Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions run by public-funded universities. It also needs to be remembered that the majority of youth is pushed out of formal higher education altogether. The premier public-funded institutions which are liberally funded by the government stand in contrast to the run-down second tier regional universities and fund-starved ODL institutions. The premier institutions nurture a culture of exclusivity by maintaining a limited number of seats that are easily monopolised by privileged sections of the country's youth. While these students gain quality, subsidised higher education, scores of students who are products of the government school system are compelled to pay full tuition fees in ODL institutions and skyrocketing fees of B-grade private institutes (John, 2020).

How exactly premier public-funded institutions exclude the marginalised students can be gauged by admission policies of universities such as Delhi University (DU) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). In DU, every year about 3 lakh students apply for admission. However, seats in regular colleges being around 70,000, almost 2.5 lakh students are denied admission. A majority of the students who are denied admission in the regular colleges of DU comprises students who have passed out of regular government schools. These students are compelled to take admission in DU's School of Open Learning which is an ODL institution or in Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), the largest open university in India.

A university like JNU has of course often been showcased as a model for a more inclusive admission policy. It has long been seen as following a progressive policy of awarding

Deprivation Points to students coming from backward districts, wards of Kashmiri migrants, female and transgender candidates. The said policy has apparently led to the diversification of the composition of the university students. According to the 49th Annual Report 2018-19[4], of the total 7821 students in JNU, 1147, 600 and 2565 are from Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) categories, respectively. This trend has been hailed by some commentators as a positive development which has brought the hitherto marginalised into the mainstream, and has changed the political discourse in JNU (Ranjan, 2016; Kumar, 2014). However, despite the achievement of diversity in student intake, the JNU admission policy remains ridden by class blindness—a crucial blind spot in its envisioning and defining of 'deprivation'.

According to the JNU Admission Policy and Procedure 2020-21[5], Deprivation Points are awarded to candidates residing in Quartile 1 and 2 districts of the country[6], the districts having been categorised based on their literacy status, productivity per hectare and proportion of workers engaged in non-agricultural work. These points are also awarded to wards of Kashmiri migrants, female and transgender candidates. These points are awarded to the candidates in addition to the reservation quota earmarked for them by the central government. This policy compensates a candidate for her/his deprived conditions, so that s/he may be able to attend the university. However, the policy remains oblivious of certain basic structural class-based factors behind unequal access to quality school education.

Looking closely at the categorisation of districts into Quartile 1 and Quartile 2, we can find that the conditions in these backward districts are far from same for everyone. For example, Darbhanga which is included in the list of Quartile 1 districts, has some well-equipped private schools, which charge exorbitant fees from their students. These schools have facilities not only for different sports, but boast of providing their students an 'all-round development', which include music and swimming classes. Now, the students from these schools though studying in backward areas do not share any of the deprivations that students from Government schools have to suffer from in these same areas. Even, the students from state-run Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs), Sainik Schools and Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs) in these areas receive an education, which is way beyond the means of labouring masses of these areas. The people sending their wards to these private schools and elite

government schools are the elites of these areas, and majority among them are lawyers, government officers, clerks, big shopkeepers, rich farmers, contractors, etc.

The students residing in forward areas and excluded from Deprivation Points list have to face far worse conditions in the government schools, in contrast to private school students of backward areas. Let us take as an example a Government Senior Secondary School in Badarpur in Delhi, which can be taken as a paradigm for the situation in government schools in forward areas (which obviously do not include KVs, JNVs and Sainik schools). Now, this school in Badarpur has none of the facilities which a private school student in backward area enjoys. The students here are fortunate if ever the government employs the required number of teachers. Needless to say, the government actively ignores the needs of these students. Even if these students try to fill the gap by studying harder, their efforts can never amount to much in the JNU entrance examinations, where the elite candidates from backward areas easily out-perform them. However, sadly this is not counted as a deprivation which is to be compensated for with Deprivation Points in the JNU entrance examinations. Thus, the model of Deprivation Points has allowed the urban and rural elites of various regions to monopolise the seats in the institution which is otherwise celebrated for 'fuse[ing] excellence with non-elitist character' (Joshi and Srinivas, 2019).

Complementing such skewed policies of admissions in premier institutions is the glaring phenomenon of informalisation of education through the ODL institutions, which is related to the existing policies and which the NEP 2020 seeks to nurture. It is known that a large section of population in metropolitan cities comprises the labouring masses. The students from deprived working class and lower middle-class families do not get admission in the premier seats of learning that are located in these cities such as Delhi University, Mumbai University, Calcutta University etc. Most of the students passing out of Grade 12 from regular government schools in these metropolitan cities have to necessarily get admitted in ODL institutions of the dual-mode premier universities or the open universities, as they are denied seats in regular courses due to very high cut-offs and limited number of seats.

The idea of private study/self-study through radio talk shows and correspondence courses was first mooted in the First Five-Year Plan. Though it was not immediately implemented, the Kothari Committee recommended that distance education be imparted to the large section

of students who could not avail of regular college education. The recommendation was first implemented by Delhi University, where the Bachelor of Arts course began to be offered in the correspondence mode in the School of Correspondence Courses and Continuing Education. Subsequently, the Kothari Commission (1964-1966) drew attention to the pilot experiment in DU and recommended that by 1986 at least a third of all students could be enrolled in a non-formal alternative system of higher education offered through correspondence courses and evening colleges (John, 2020). The establishment of open universities and correspondence department in the regular mode universities over the years had provided a boost to the informalisation of education on an unprecedented level. According to the Distance Education Council (now District Education Bureau), by 2005 the percentage of students in distance education was approximately 20 per cent of the total students enrolled in higher education. It has increased even further in the last decade. IGNOU, in fact, has seen an increase of 248 per cent in the enrolment of SC students and 172 per cent in enrolment of ST students (Gohain, 2020). With the NEP 2020, which is building on the actual policies of successive governments of promoting informalisation in higher education, it will be the future of these students more than anyone else which will be in jeopardy.

Looking at the skewed admission policies of the premier public-funded higher education institutions, one can easily surmise the bitter irony in that the less privileged who are products of up to 12 years of government schooling are precisely the ones who are excluded from quality higher education imparted in the regular mode of public-funded universities. The educational inequality which the mass of students inherit from regular government schools, paves the way for denial of education to them in the premier public-funded higher education institutions. On the other hand, the wealthy students passing out of elite private schools and armed with privilege and 'good marks' end up outpacing government school students in securing seats in premier universities such as DU and JNU; thereby easily transitioning from top-quality education in private schools to affordable, quality education offered in the premium public-funded universities (John, 2020).

VIII. Conclusion

The educational apartheid which has been bred by the policies of successive postcolonial governments in India has drawn little criticism from the critics who vociferously denounce the current education policy, and who have been critical of privatisation of education. It is ironical that the issue of privatisation of education institutions at the school and higher levels has garnered criticism, but the pervading inequality in school education which paves the way for differential access to higher education institutions has been largely ignored. Such a dubious stance on the issue of inequality has only served to give root to the impression that early postcolonial ruling elite, who were thought of carrying forward the legacy of the anti-colonial struggle, were largely benign in their motivations, and the rot has only set in post the neoliberal policies which were brought in the 1990s.

Indeed, in this vein it has been argued by some that the current unequal structure of the education systems in the country has been a result of neoliberal reforms which were ushered in India in the early 1990s (Kumar, 2014). Scholars published in the edited volume *Education, State, and Market: Anatomy of Neoliberal Impact* provide a backdrop of changes which contextualises the neoliberal assault on education. The editor of the volume emphasises the boost which the neoliberal policies of self-regulated market and diminished role of the state have given to the dismantling of the public education system in India. This has been achieved by eliminating the notions of social justice and of education being a public good. It has been followed by commodification of education and closing of 'debates on a Common School System' and even the 'possibility of equality in elementary education or higher education' (ibid.).

Such analyses ignore the intimate *historical* connection of education policies with the segmented labour market which has perpetuated the elitist bias against quality mass education, and has been a factor in denying the masses equality in education since colonial era. The education system in the country has evolved hierarchically even prior to the so-called neoliberal phase, and contributes to the reproduction of labour for a deeply segmented job market. While a large section of society equipped with primary education remains tied to the basic subsistence labour and extraction work, a minority with secondary (including

vocational) education pursues simple processing, and a miniscule section armed with elite education in private schools and premier universities lands well-paying jobs in research intensive industries with a large science and technology components, and in management and highly specialised education sectors (John, 2012). Thus, the hierarchical system only reproduces the class structure and inequality which prevails in society (Bowles and Gintis, 2011).

Moreover, glossing over the fact that the anti-colonial leadership and postcolonial ruling elite were largely dismissive of quality mass education, only serves to obfuscate as to why the response of the general public towards the new education policy has been muted. The faint response can only be comprehended by locating the issue of normalisation towards inequality in education that has been achieved over the decades by education policies, and the fleeting criticism which these policies have garnered from so-called critics. So-called critics from the mainstream left or Dalit-Bahujan movement conveniently ignore the inequality at the school level which has been instrumental in creating a hierarchy of 'merits' that pits the disadvantaged against the privileged few—a process that has simply allowed the privileged to easily monopolise access to higher education. One can understand the blind spot in their criticisms as majority of these 'critics' are themselves largely products of elite private schools. However, critics and intellectuals from even marginalised backgrounds who denounce inequality have no qualms in sending their children to private schools (Hunt, 2014: 135), now that the aim of establishing 'common school system' has been endlessly deferred. In this respect, the Bengali Dalit writer, Manoranjan Byapari has rightly observed an emerging gap between *dalitta* (Dalit-ness) and *daridrata* (poverty), due to the creation of a new class of privileged out of the creamy layers of backward castes, who are oblivious of the real conditions and needs of the majority of their brethren (Byapari, 2018; Chakrabarti, 2019).

In the bid to criticise the new NEP 2020, it then becomes imperative that the intimate link which education policies have had with the prevailing structure of hierarchy in society, and their role in perpetuating such hierarchy, be emphasised. The elitist class bias of the anti-colonial leadership and postcolonial regimes also needs to be unmasked so as to dismantle the

dubious criticisms which spring from blind spots, and to surmount the challenges posed by the new policy.

Notes

[1] There are varied opinions on the date of the said strike, with some dating it to 1915.
[2] CABE was first established in the year 1920, but was dissolved later. It again came into existence in the year 1935. It is the highest and the oldest advisory board for the governments in educational domain. Source: https://www.icbse.com
[3] Kendriya Vidyalayas were set up in 1963 to provide education to the well-paid employees of central government and armed forces. Navodaya Vidyalayas were set up in 1986 to provide education to the rural students with facilities at par with the best residential schools. Both of these have gone on to exclude the students from urban and agrarian poor backgrounds, and have thus become examples of centres of exclusion, and facilities for the elite.
[4] JNU 49th Annual Report 2018-19 can be accessed at: https://www.jnu.ac.in/sites/default/files/annual_report/49AnnualReport_Eng_0.pdf
[5] JNU Admission Policy and Procedure 2020-21 can be downloaded at: https://jnu.ac.in/admission/Admission%20Policy%20Final-2020-21.pdf
[6] Quartile List of Districts can be downloaded at: https://www.jnu.ac.in/adm/Quartile%20Districts.pdf

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