

The missing links in NEP 2020

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The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) champions many ideals which, if realised, can truly transform our declining education system. However, it does appear to be somewhat limited in the operational details and some of its analysis.

Apart from “fundamental literacy and numeracy” and “overall cognitive development”, the NEP envisions “imparting 21st century skills”, “well-rounded character building”, “critical thinking”, “holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion-based and analysis-based hands-on learning”, “greater flexibility in choice of subjects” and “learning through innovative and experiential methods”. It also emphasises “scientific temper and evidence-based thinking; creativity and innovativeness; sense of aesthetics and art; oral and written communication; health and nutrition; physical education, fitness, wellness, and sports; collaboration and teamwork; problem solving and logical reasoning; vocational exposure and skills; digital literacy, coding, and computational thinking; ethical and moral reasoning; knowledge and practice of human and Constitutional values; gender sensitivity; Fundamental Duties; citizenship skills and values; knowledge of India; environmental awareness including water and resource conservation, sanitation and hygiene; and current affairs and knowledge of critical issues facing local communities, States, the country, and the world”. In a very welcome step, it also talks about strengthening of the Anganwadis and the mid-day-meal scheme. It, however, falls short in identifying what exactly have been preventing us from achieving these ideals. It also fails to evaluate the risks in some of its recommendations.

First, it is not clear how such transformations may be brought about in a society, which has little respect for argumentative discourse, and instead treats education synonymous with examination. We have made an industry out of ‘coaching’, ‘tuition’, ‘notes’, ‘practice problems’ and ‘finishing the syllabus’. Even our elite institutions often fail to acknowledge that marks after all are random samples drawn from unmodelled probability distributions, and, as such, sorting them in order for ranking or admissions through competitive examinations – without any calibration or even any well articulated admission objectives – is conceptually flawed. It appears unlikely that mere changes in syllabus or even structure can bring about fundamental changes in the mindset. Something more ingenious may be required for introducing greater ‘scientific temper’ in our education system.

Second, the NEP has failed to boldly address the two main problems that plague our society and education system – inequity and inequality. Though the NEP addresses the issue of dropping out of schools at some length, and suggests strengthening infrastructure and accessibility as a remedy, it does not investigate the structural causes of dropout that may be rooted in inequality and discrimination.

The NEP advocates that early education should be in one’s mother tongue. This welcome suggestion, however, should not result in underemphasising English, which is a great equaliser in our

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society and opens up the world for many. That may turn out to be discriminatory for some because the privileged will learn English anyway. There are similar risks with the seemingly innocuous and welcome step of introducing optional vocational training in schools, and it should not turn out to be merely an exit route for the underprivileged. Both require careful balancing to avoid unforeseen behavioural adaptations, causing them to end up as tools of exclusion and denial of opportunities.

Also, reservation has undoubtedly worked wonders in our country and has empowered many over the years. However, it has not been all smooth sailing, and there are some manifest structural problems. On the one hand, it is undeniable that it curbs opportunities of choice to many ready, eager and qualified young students which is absolutely undesirable in any free society. On the other hand, it projects some students assessed to be at handicap by extant evaluation systems into environments which are often insensitive, disparaging or discriminatory, and which continue to use the same yardsticks of evaluation – often blindly – without any structural changes or effective remedial measures. The NEP needed to address this headlong.

Third, education is a state subject in our federal structure, yet the NEP approach is suggestive of over-centralisation. It may be all right for the NCERT to provide broad curricular and pedagogical suggestions, but the guidelines should not become overbearing. Otherwise, there may be definite risks of stifling local cultures and contexts in the curricula. Indeed, the exposure to fundamental science and engineering concepts in our schools has become somewhat hand-me-down and bookish, and it is imperative to fall back on local experiential contexts and heritage – at least at the initial stages – for innate understandings to develop. Perhaps, the same holds true for history, civics and sociology as well.

Finally, the NEP has not effectively addressed the over-specialisation that happens too early even in our college education. As a result we not only have many students of science, engineering and medicine devoid of any understanding of social and political contexts, but also have many students of the social sciences and humanities without even a rudimentary understanding of the sciences, mathematics and computing. Both are severely limited for the modern world, and this cannot be easily fixed by just adding some ‘liberal arts’ type of courses in the curricula of disciplinary silos. Also, introduction of advanced specialised concepts too early – sometimes even from grade 9 in school as the NEP envisages – often makes real assimilation difficult. What we perhaps require is at least two years of common broad-based college education where a larger number of students can learn about the basics of everyday sciences, foundational engineering, literature and ethics, mathematics, computing, history, sociology, economics and political science interspersed with socially oriented hands-on projects, surveys and field work. That should prepare some of the students adequately for gainful employment and some others for more specialised follow-up education in the sciences, humanities, law, social sciences, mathematics, computing, engineering and medicine.

The NEP is a tremendously important exercise. It is important that the initial conceptualisation is refined further through an inclusive process of feedback and wide public consultations involving communities, regional representations, school and college teachers and also the general public.