

New Education Policy and the Continuing Contentions

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A critical reading of the Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy underscores the continuing contentions in India. The article analyses these contentions in terms of how systemic misadventures are collaterally damaging the existing complexities of education in the present-day choice discourse in the country.

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India's education policy ideals have historically been "instrumentalist" in nature. This is evident in terms of the ministerial confidence to treat education as human resource development over the years. This resource-based economic mis/understanding has neither been questioned nor even widely debated so far. Consequently, "national policies on education have been shaped by the political and economic contexts within which they were formulated and these in turn defined the espousal of specific policy goals" (Dewan and Mehendale 2015: 16).

In the light of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led cultural nationalists being in power, the Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy (Subramanian committee report), chaired by T S R Subramanian, has done the job of what is "expected" at present. Theoretically, the prescriptions are functionalist in nature. Against this backdrop, it is essential to understand

that the policy process has predominantly been a bureaucratic exercise, hierarchically controlled by the ruling political elite in India. This is further complicated by external influences of socio-economic policies.

The complex set of contentions with "noble" intentions has often been producing notable documents with an unimpressive record in implementation. Thus,

we do not have a comprehensive document which reviews what worked, what did not, why, and possible key issues that require a policy response in the light of constitutional goals, to plan and allocate resources more effectively and have workable action plans. (Dewan and Mehendale 2015: 16)

Systemic Critique

In India, systemic issues have often resulted in terms of keeping up with international goals. This has been pushing the global agenda into the diverse realities of a national context where the system of education has initiatives like the District Primary Education Programme and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, without a sense of contextual vision in their project mission documents. The result can be observed in the role of the state, increasingly becoming a "crisis manager" in the country. Thus, instead of making a systematic assessment of the problems, "the HRD ministry and Smriti Irani have put

in place a process that emphasises issues that are not concerned with education at all” (Bhatty 2015).

In addition, centre–state relations in educational planning and administration have been neither genuinely committed nor are they even clear. Consequently, practical issues have often been shuttled between legal clauses and hidden in the concurrent list of confusions. In the light of the responsibility-shifting, often the mammoth size of the sector gets overlooked.

Although the realpolitik of diverse regimes in the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is understandable, the myopias of the apex bodies are worrisome. This could be due to the lack of a fieldwork tradition, furthered by the educratic or bureaucratic world views on the ideals of education. An instant example can be observed with the condition of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) Library in New Delhi. Though it houses a mass of relevant literature, it has been neither utilised nor even properly cared for by the educationists. This

shall also be seen taking into account the systemic failures of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) in the NCERT campus (MHRD 2016: 166).

In this grim reality, although the Subramanian committee report rightly points out the “mediocrity” of the system (MHRD 2016: 136), it relies on the earlier recommendation of the National Knowledge Commission in establishing the Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE). In continuance with the tradition of fashionable recommendations, the report advocates additional layers to the existing complexities. It proposes the establishment of a Council for Excellence in Higher Education (CEHE), National Higher Education Fellowship Fund, Central Bureau of Educational Intelligence, and the constitution of a Standing Education Commission. These endless newer structures and statutes, like the National Law for Higher Education and the National Higher Education Promotion and Management Act, fail to deconstruct the prevailing complexities. Instead of operationalising the existing

ideals of the available National Curriculum Framework, the report suggests that “the NCERT will have to undertake preparation of a new curriculum framework” (MHRD 2016: 159).

Collateral Damages

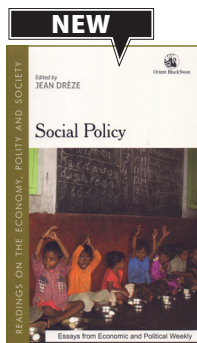
Education is a contested political site in the knowledge economy. The neo-liberal democracy in India has been witnessing changing colours of ideologies. Consequently, one can observe polarisation of scholarship, consolidated according to political convenience. Given its focus on the everydayness of society, humanities and social sciences (HSoS) is the first victim of this partisanship. This has not allowed the opposing camps to critically engage with each other; even mainstream academic narratives failed to intervene.

The political contestation of the present government can be observed in its rush in appointing institutional leaders belonging to right-wing ideologies over the past two years. For instance, the manner in which the Indian Council of Historical Research has been restructured has to be mentioned. Though some of the

Social Policy

Edited by

JEAN DRÈZE



Pp xiv + 478 | Rs 795
ISBN 978-81-250-6284-4
2016

The reach of social policy in India has expanded significantly in recent years. Facilities such as schools and *anganwadis*, health centres, nutrition programmes, public works and social security pensions are reaching larger numbers of people than before. Some of these benefits now take the form of enforceable legal entitlements.

Yet the performance of these social programmes is far from ideal. Most Indian states still have a long way to go in putting in place effective social policies that directly address the interests, demands and rights of the unprivileged.

This collection of essays, previously published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, has been clustered around six major themes: health, education, food security, employment guarantee, pensions and cash transfers, and inequality and social exclusion. With wide-ranging analyses by distinguished scholars brought together in a single volume, and an introduction by Jean Drèze, *Social Policy* will be an indispensable read for students and scholars of sociology, economics, political science and development studies.

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intellectuals have rightly expressed their concerns on this regressive restructuring, an important point is the self-imposed silence when the previous governments appointed their own list of defenders. Though rightist forces are troublesome due to their polarising politics and divisive tactics, the crucial concern is the nature of HsOs scholarship itself.

The partisan manoeuvring by diverse political affiliations furthers the normative standpoints. The obsessive ideologies often negate the organised scepticism where deliberative democracy is being victimised. In the spirit of free speech, these delusive patrons often fail the hapless commoner in whose name the drama gets played. This is similar to the scholarship on gender justice in public and the ill-treatment of women in private lives. These moral disengagements have increasingly been visible in recent years. Against this backdrop, universities are becoming a service station for neocapitalism. In contrast, the “organic” intellectualism of the HsOs is known for its un/critical critique of crass capitalism in India. This can be observed in extreme ideological stands that highlight a tradition of vanguardism, where engagements with the ideological opponents are seemingly unnecessary.

However, one notices an increasing trend of a self-imposed silence with regard to immediate realities by these nihilistic corners. These corners are known for their disengagements. For instance, the “critical” voices often take pro-state positions in opposing the market in education. In contrast, one finds their personal choice as having favoured private schools for “quality” in their real lives. Thus, the disengagements between their public voice and private choice have increasingly widened over the years.

In the light of these disengagements, one needs to conceptualise academic activism in the country. On the one hand, there is the reality of deep-seated political and economic forces that shape syllabi; the mainstream scholarship, on the other hand, is known for its limited role in the realm of free thinking because of its ideological backpack. This highlights the mutual mistrust between the developmental triad of the state,

market, and civil society, while the politics of scholarship underscores the mixed forms of academic freedom and accountability.

As a result, the under-representation of alternatives can be observed in terms of the absence of political diversity in the profession, and “groupthink,” where uncomfortable questions get suppressed. Groupthink causes some questions not to be asked, and some answers not to be overly scrutinised. This can also be observed in the academics’ enduring abilities to impart (un)updated radical theories that purport to answer the universal problems of humanity. Thus, protests by academics begin appearing as professional and highlight the self-certitude of the scholarship, which fails to generate new compelling ideas to grapple with complicated national realities. In this knowledge regime, an educated student is redefined as an employable one, where learning becomes a process of alienation.

Misadventures

Educational governance in India is historically known for its trailing to the government of the day. This in/voluntary submissiveness is often performed without official qualms. A cursory analysis of the functional relation between the apex bodies, like that of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the MHRD among others, reveals their political conformity over the years. The ongoing misadventures by the BJP government to curtail alternative world views can be underlined in view of the “nationalist” crack-downs. The ministerial muddle, for instance, was being displayed in the controversies of the Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) in the University of Delhi. The UGC exposed its “abilities” to manoeuvre its own policy decisions with the change of governments. This is similar to other arms of educracy where the nature of policies are swiftly “rationalised” according to the moods of the ministers.

Thus, the role of educracy, over the years, confirms that they are merely the administrative arms of the political party in power, rather than for public service. Their inabilities even to record a note of dissent against the majoritarian decisions

are setting a wrong precedence. This shall be understood in the light of the new-managerialism, where institutions are left with senior academics, who often lack administrative acumen. The result is the emergence of educrats who practically mis/handle the complexities.

At the institutional level, most universities in HsOs (with rare exceptions like the Jawaharlal Nehru University and other “islands of excellence”) are known for their uncritical scholarship. Consequently, one often finds a stereotypical understanding of social complexities. This shall be further understood considering the increasing powers of the educrats in higher education. It is against this backdrop that the nature of student movements has to be conceptualised. Generally, the nature of studentship is not promising, as it is often carried away by ideological rhetoric. Consequently, organised scepticism is a faraway dream where the HsOs scholarship is Eurocentric and unidirectional in nature (Alvares 2011). Though there are few critical voices which fearlessly question the status quo in line with the established professoriate, students are seemingly submissive to their immediate realities. At times, the criticality to the immediate lifeworld becomes a luxury, which the postcolonial student movements cannot afford (EPW 2015).

Choice Discourse

In the neo-liberal economic order, mainstream literature predominantly considers education as public good in India (Tilak 2004; Jha 2005). However, the merits of these arguments do not stand in the present reality where the general populace (including most of the educationists themselves) sends their children to private schools. As discussed earlier, quality is the reason for the “personal” choice; the essential point is the gap between public voice and private choice. Against this backdrop, the elite’s exodus from government schooling and their reverse immigration in higher education have to be conceptualised in terms of quality “desperations” for employment outcomes.

In a hierarchical society like India, the educational exclusion shall not be

burdened by profit-seeking “edupreneurs.” This truism is crucial even considering the parental disillusionment with government schools (Watkins 2000: 112). It is critical as the government schools cater mainly to the needs of the underprivileged and the poor at present. In addition, the stark national reality also reveals the absence of policy perspectives (Tilak 2004) where diverse layers of education receive financial allocation according to the “perceived” economic rates of return. For instance, in the reform period, the policy elites have been favouring one layer of education at the cost of the other. There is no w/holistic approach where it gradually becomes a “sector” of elementary, secondary and higher education.

Thus, financial allocation by the state has been dwindling between the sectors. Due to this, school education, for instance, has been encouraged to introduce para-teachers in the reform period. The consequent casualisation of teaching has been “rationalised” in terms of fiscal planning even at the cost of the ideals of a knowledge society. Against this backdrop, it is unfortunate to notice the increasing decrease of enrolment despite continuous claims of the governments’ fee-free schooling. The inferior quality has been pushing the children out of schools, in spite of the free textbooks and lunches over the years.

Inaction of the government and its rhetoric on education over the years signals that the policymakers are evasively reducing the role of the state. The obvious reasons are due to the neo-liberal political economy at present. The neo-liberal paradigm in education, under “structural adjustments,” facilitates this pull-out. In this dynamic political economy, citizens are often regarded as “consumers” where education becomes a tradable “commodity”. Bearing this in mind, the Subramanian committee report’s “nationalistic” twist of conceiving the fellow citizen as a “product” (MHRD 2016: 11) signals the enduring tradition of commodification. The “knowledge-economy” debates often legitimise this as a newer paradigm. This altogether places India, as “a distinctly awkward case, often standing outside the frame of the leading paradigms, and seeming to constitute a

case by itself” in development studies (Harriss 1998: 288).

In the light of this peculiar position, the committee argues for the enhancement of quality in higher education in terms of its concern on employability. It is in sharp contrast to the educational ideals of enhancing the quality for the sake of knowledge that one finds the report’s advocacy for the Gross Employability Ratio of graduates (MHRD 2016: 125). This shall further be seen in terms of its reference to the accreditation, where the committee fails to go beyond the bureaucratic rituals of the human capital approach in education. In addition, the official controls of the edocracy have to be seen in terms of its role in systemically changing the voluntary nature of accreditation into a mandatory one over the years. This new-managerialism regrettably has been overlooked in the mainstream literature in India.

Against this backdrop, neither is the NPOE concerned about this gradual shift nor does it even feel the necessity to remedy it. In contrast, it does argue for the mandatory accreditation of all the higher education institutes in the country (MHRD 2016: 128). This, altogether, highlights the report’s reliance on new-managerialism, as it insists on revamping the regulatory regime. This shall further be seen in the light of its natural referencing of the concerns of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) on the educational “quality” in India (MHRD 2016: 127-157).

Conclusions

Thus, in view of these complexities, it is not clear how the report has engaged the systemic nuances in its mammoth exercise and how the stakeholder deliberations have been consolidated within the short span of a few months, as claimed in its timeline. In general, the report is seemingly rushing to simplify the systemic complexities. In this rush, though it has rightly pointed out few relevant factors like the “absence of teachers; lack of incentives; and low academic standards in government schools” (MHRD 2016: 29), it has not avoided the trap of

stereotyping the usual correlation of the rise of the private sector being traced to the inefficient state system. This is crucial as the emergence of private players may also be tracked in terms of the favourable public imagination and other systemic developments.

Furthermore, concepts like “values” have not been adequately operationalised. Contrary to the ideals of student-centric learning, the report lauds the teacher-centric system of the “guru–shishya” tradition of the past (MHRD 2016: 1), where universities are conceptualised as “temples” of learning (MHRD 2016: 174). Thus, the overall failure to engage with relevant literature and previous policy documents by the committee underscores the possibility of political abuses. It is not clear “why [the policy document] was given to mostly retired bureaucrats, rather than academics and experts, to prepare” (Panda 2016), in spite of the fact that the country has a galaxy of scholars who have impressive professional records on educational complexities.

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