

Politics of the Guarded Agenda of National Education Policy 2015–16

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The overall framework of the new national education policy has been pitiable in addressing the aspects of structural and infrastructural discrepancy, economic inequality, social injustice, and cultural homogeneity. The extremely constrained scope and guarded nature of the framework of the new NEP is a strategy for subverting the possibility to voice fundamental issues, to legitimise and bulldoze predetermined agenda of the dominant classes and to reproduce the iniquitous social order. The consultative framework of the current official drive is problematic being imbedded within the ideas of “minimalist expansionalism” and “tapered inclusionism.”

The present paper uses the context provided by the drive for the formulation of the new national education policy (NEP) 2015–16 to outline some prominent issues of school education in India and to outline a specific perspective. For this, it attempts a hitherto missing detailed analysis of the basic approach of the consultation framework of the new NEP.¹ It contextualises the deliberations on the new NEP within the larger discourse on educational inequality, as evident in scholarly writings, civic struggles and judicial verdicts, and the reports of previous committees and commissions. Through this exercise, the paper seeks to unmask the politics of the guarded or constrained agenda of the new NEP to reproduce a non-egalitarian social order. Since the flawed approach of the new NEP consultative framework will have serious implications for the final version, the present paper underlines various questions that the policymakers need to address for ensuring greater educational equality.

The consultative framework of the new NEP appears to be imbedded within the ideas of “minimalist expansionism” and “tapered inclusionism.” Therefore, the present paper is an attempt to restore the lens or the doctrine of equality as a parameter for the finalisation of the new NEP. As a background paper, it should aid the scholarly, administrative and political deliberations leading to the enactment of an effective instrument for combating the glaring levels of educational inequalities that exist in the country today.

However, a careful examination of the major areas of silence, points of added emphasis, and leading questions in the consultation framework of the new NEP—as underscored in the present paper—cautions us against the optimism for a fundamental transformation of the educational sphere to be achieved through the current drive.

Envisioning transformative potentials of the new NEP consultations is difficult without a massive sociopolitical and scholarly intervention seeking substantive alterations of approach on the question of the current educational crisis. Therefore, though the present paper builds on the historical sketch of continuities and changes in the consultative framework of educational policies during 1966–92, and the contemporary challenges before the new NEP as described by Hridaykant Dewan and Archana Mehendale (2015), it sharply diverges from their concluding optimism. For, as shown below, the overall framework of the new NEP leaves very little room for it.

Similarly, the present paper at times broadly reverberates the analytical line taken by Arun Kumar (2015) and Kumkum Roy (2015), but it examines the aspect of school education,

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where Kumar and Roy have been concerned with the plight of higher education. Many of their arguments regarding higher education are, of course, applicable in principle to various aspects of school education as well, because both sectors are organically linked with each other. Nonetheless, both sectors have their specificities and details too.

The argumentative logic of the present paper is close to Rohit Dhankar's (2015) and John Kurrien's (2015) critique of the consultative framework of the new NEP. However, it carries forward their intervention by expanding the list of issues identified by them, by providing concrete examples of the lacunas in the new NEP consultative framework, including the Draft NEP 2016 released by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) for public inputs (MHRD 2016b), and by situating the NEP deliberations within available scholarly, judicial, and activist perspectives. It offers various details that have so far remained absent in the published commentaries on the drive to prepare the new NEP. It brings into the picture diverse perspectives on various aspects of the educational discourse in India; of course, with a specific political objective. The objective is to bring the question of educational inequality to the centre stage of the discourse on the new NEP and to find its redressal within a rigorous adherence to the vision of substantive equality as the driving force towards overall improvement.

Flawed Claims of Democratic Procedure

To start with, the MHRD constituted a four-member non-representative committee to prepare the draft of the new NEP, instead of a full-fledged commission with representatives from different sections of society and educationists on such a vital social issue of parliamentary legislation. The MHRD has been claiming that it has engaged in consultation at the "grass-roots level," but consultation was sought largely through a well-defined official structure that excluded the larger society. The accumulation of online feedback remained within the one-sided format of twitter-like comments of 500 characters, leaving no space for entering into larger educational debates, and keeping it as not viewable by the public until quite recently (Dhankar 2015). It did not ensure countrywide live dialogue with concerned individual citizens, and the unions and organisations of stakeholders.

It is different, for instance, from the Hunter Commission, Kothari Commission, and Sachar Committee, which undertook extensive tours and held meetings at public places (GOI 1883; MOE 1966; and GOI 2006), where, besides collecting the representations, they directly witnessed the voices of the participants, and wherever required, they went beyond the official structures to seek public feedback.

Of course, according to the website of the MHRD, the government received about 28,388 suggestions by September 2015 (MHRD 2016c), and, according to the "CEO" of the portal MyGov, which is being used for online consultations on the new NEP, it received more than 8,300 suggestions as early as 21 March 2015 on the themes and questions released for this purpose (MHRD 2015a). Besides this, MHRD announced that it will conduct 2,55,604 consultations at state, district, urban

local bodies, block and village levels for school as well as higher education. However, only 44% of these consultations are reported to have been conducted (MHRD 2016c). Still the evidence produced by these 1,14,956 consultations would be a huge source with which to engage. It would obviously necessitate adequate time and deployment of sufficient human expertise, which was not possible within such a hurriedly completed exercise of a small committee.

Moreover, it is noteworthy here that the classification of issues for the new NEP was such that it left very little scope for voicing opinions on many fundamental issues. Therefore, if expressed, the probability of these voices finding space in the final draft of the new NEP was very low (Dhankar 2015; Kurrien 2015); or, if included, it would be completely at the arbitrary discretion of the bureaucrats. Further, the very process of formulating themes and questions for the new NEP continues to be a mystery; even the committee was formed 10 months after the announcement of the consultation framework. Besides this, given the schedule of different levels of consultations that were to be continued up to December 2015, the unrealistic deadline that was set at first for submitting the draft of the policy by the committee by 31 December 2015 (practically meaning only two months) could be understood either as a result of immaturity of the plan, or as a heavy reliance on technical compilation of human aspirations and feelings, or in terms of a ready availability of a predetermined outline to be relied upon.

Of course, the four-member T S R Subramanian Committee submitted its report (MHRD 2016a) four months after the deadline, but given the mammoth size of this exercise, it seems unpalatable that it would have systematically scrutinised the available evidence. Following this, sidelining the T S R Subramanian Committee Report, the MHRD (2016b) released a shorter document of 43 pages for public feedback in July 2016, which nowhere refers to the public feedback received during these national consultations. Nonetheless, 5,933 submissions were made as inputs on this Draft NEP 2016 at the MyGov portal by the deadline of 30 September 2016 (MHRD 2016c). In addition, many others mailed their suggestions on the official email ID, many of them quite exhaustive. It shows the keenness of respondents owing to nationwide concern on the issue. However, if the prevalent reluctance of policymakers to engage with massive feedback, including fundamentally alternative voices, continues, it is difficult to hope that these responses would make a substantive difference to the overall design and intent of the next draft of the NEP.

Non-participatory Objectives of Education

The MHRD released on its official website a document containing the rationale and objectives of the new NEP, and the questionnaire on school education also made the point of redefining the objectives of education at regular intervals in terms of rapidly changing conditions (MHRD 2015a: 16). However, contradicting the same logic, the NEP consultation framework did not enable the respondents to share their choices pertaining to the objectives of education; there was no place in

the questionnaire where they could have articulated their perspectives on this issue. It is otherwise pertinent to discuss this aspect, because, whilst educationists and people at large might like the social agenda of education to stay, the Birla–Ambani report (GoI 2000) wanted us to renounce seeing education as a “component of social development.”

We have to fundamentally change our mindset—from seeing education as a component of social development to realising that it is a means of creating a new information society, resplendent with knowledge, research, creativity and innovation. (GoI 2000: Preface)

Similarly, the Draft NEP 2016 refers to the phase of “India’s political, social and economic development which necessitates a robust and forward looking education system” (MHRD 2016b: Preamble). It means that the neo-liberal political economy now requires an appropriate and subservient policy on education, and that respondents cannot demand for reorienting this political economy itself in favour of a meaningful education system.

Missing Focus on Inequalities

The new NEP framework also avoided examination and deliberations on structural inequalities as far as these reproduce social inequities, except for on electricity for information and communication technology (ICT) and a minor reference to accessible infrastructure for “children with special needs” (MHRD 2015a: 16, 20). However, due to a variety of reasons, it is essential to probe this aspect.

First, stratifications within the system of education are being rapidly augmented by co-opting factions of pupils of different backgrounds and abilities in separate/exclusivist institutions, and relegating the most marginalised children in each of these groups (who actually form the majority) to the poorly maintained “mainstream” schooling (Gupta 2014). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 (GoI 2009) tried to address the problem of differential schooling for various groups of Indian society by instituting 25% reservation for the economically weaker sections (EWS) in private schools. However, as we shall see below, apart from other limitations, this conception of inclusion tends to overlook the fact that both the government and private sectors are marked by various kinds of internal stratifications and such measures cannot be expected to bridge them.

Second, thanks to the surveys conducted by the District Information System for Education (DISE), we have a plethora of information about the continuance of poor infrastructure of education within the government as well as the private sector in the country. Despite the enactment of the RTE Act, no drastic change has occurred in the prevailing infrastructural conditions. Moreover, after five years of the implementation of the RTE Act, even the “Norms and Standards” provided in the schedule attached with it should have been reviewed. For, while there are scholars and activists (Gupta 2012, 2013; Niranjana Radhy 2011; Sadgopal 2010, 2011)² who complain of their inadequacy, there are lobbies of the managements of “budget schools” who want to get out of the mandatory requirement to comply with them in the first place.³

Third, the Supreme Court of India pronounced a judgment in 1993 (*Unnikrishnan P J and Others v State of AP and Others* 1993), which galvanised public opinion and the state machinery to uphold education as a fundamental right of children in 2001 through Parliament passing the 86th constitutional amendment, and in 2009 through the enactment of a full-fledged legislation, called the RTE Act. Like the Unnikrishnan judgment of 1993, the Allahabad High Court’s direction to state employees and beneficiaries to send their children mandatorily to government schools (*Shiv Kumar Pathak and 11 Others v State of Uttar Pradesh and Three Others* 2015) is generally seen as an important intervention albeit contentious. The demands to get it ratified by the Supreme Court for the entire nation have already emerged alongside speculations that the Uttar Pradesh government or other vested interests might challenge this verdict in the appellate court (Sharma 2015); so far the government has pushed it under the carpet.

It is true that this judgment has been pronounced six months after the release of the themes and questions for the new NEP. However, the core issue of the judgment—the common public provisioning of education—is nothing new. It has been there since the report of the Kothari Commission (MoE 1966) and the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968 (MoE 1968). The NPE 1986 (MHRD 1986) also did not discard the idea, though it diluted it by instituting newer layers within the system of education. The Government of Bihar too constituted the Common School System Commission (2007). Yet, we did not find any echo of this issue in the consultations for the new NEP, or in the Draft NEP 2016, because these have altogether avoided questions pertaining to structural inequality reproducing social inequity.

It is otherwise politically desirable that the policymakers explore implications and possibilities created by the judiciary, an organ of the state and an important pillar of democracy particularly when they are drafting legislation on a social issue of universal relevance, such as education. Moreover, education is a subject on the Concurrent List, where states and the centre both are entitled to legislate. Therefore, the centre must take cognisance of the developments taking place in states. However, the Allahabad High Court verdict or other provincial developments could have inspired the MHRD to immediately take its cognisance and specify an additional question in this regard with the view to seek public opinion, if only real equality would have been on the agenda, and not merely some talk of inclusion as a buzzword.

Instead, the Draft NEP 2016 seeks to augment and expand further the layers within an already stratified system of school education (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.4, Clause 5, 7). Further, it recommends that norms for learning outcomes be developed and applied uniformly to both private and government schools (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.3). On the other hand, “local norms, appropriate for local conditions, will be evolved, if necessary through amendment in RTE Act, for “alternate schools” which offer educational interventions for specific categories of very deprived and migrating children, and those living in difficult circumstances” (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.3, Clause 2). Such a provision is likely to serve as a safety valve to exempt schools

incapable of adhering to the “Norms and Standards” prescribed in the RTE Act in the name of local variations. Infra-structural inequality is being augmented and allowed to exist under legal safeguards, while a uniform standard is being proposed to measure learning outcomes. In the resultant paradoxical situation, it would be easier to close down the institutions scoring low, merge them, or hand over such public institutions to the private sector.

Ranking and Accreditation of Institutions

Though the new NEP consultative framework did not permit the discussion of structural and infrastructural issues, it nonetheless revived the non-egalitarian proposal of the Birla–Ambani report (GoI 2000) for the ranking of educational institutions. It was proposed (not interrogated) that there is a need to put in place a School Quality Assessment and Accreditation System (MHRD 2015a: 19). Now, the ranking system has been recommended in the Draft NEP 2016 (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.13).

Within a system of ranking and accreditation, some schools are bound to remain at the top and the rest of the majority on the lower rungs of the hierarchy, thereby geared to reproduce inequality. Within the system of ranking and accreditation, either the institutions at the lower levels gradually phase out, making space for big corporate houses, or, if they survive, they help the branding of top institutions and thereby aid the process of the reproduction of the social order. After all, measures respecting and augmenting the hierarchy cannot achieve social equality in education. Instead of building a vision where each institution would provide equitable quality education to all, the framework of the new NEP attempts to further legitimise, sanctify, and augment the hierarchy of schools.

Lacking Questions to Political Economy of Education

Various aspects of the political economy of education have been widely discussed in the recent educational discourse on questions such as public funding versus privatisation of education, the public–private partnership (PPP) model, budgetary allocation, NGO-isation of schools, and corporate social responsibility (CSR).⁴ The growth of the private sector in education has its supporters as well as detractors. While the supporters ground their arguments in comparative studies of students’ learning gains in the non-state- and state-run schools, its detractors ground their arguments in the social justice discourses and the essential role of the state to ensure equitable distribution of quality education to all children. The supporters of privatisation view education as predominantly a private good, and the detractors view it as a public good (Muzaffar and Sharma 2011: 4).

However, the debate is in no way settled in favour of the neo-liberal political economy of privatisation of school education. It shows that even the term “quality” needs to be defined carefully in order to engage systematically with the supposition that the education provided by private schools is really superior. In fact, the same Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)

surveys that highlight the quality deficit of government schools also contain data that reveals (though not emphasised by Pratham) that even the private schools are not doing much better in this regard. Moreover, this debate clarifies that both the private and the public sectors are not internally homogeneous; they are marked by stark stratifications of every kind.

The supporters of privatisation of school education also need to refine their methodology for analysing the cost aspect of government schooling, as the expenditure from the state exchequer feeds into private schools as well. Hence, given the lack of consensus amongst experts of the political economy of education, it should have been made part of the new NEP consultations. However, that did not happen.

Besides this larger debate on the nature of the political economy of education, there are two specific questions that necessitated the consideration of the new NEP consultative groups. (i) The quantum of financial requirement for the implementation of the RTE Act: All successive governments have failed to execute the recommendation of the Kothari Commission (MOE 1966) to allocate 6% of the gross domestic product (GDP) for education. We would, perhaps, need more now due to cumulative gap since then. On the contrary, the present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has further reduced it to much below the estimates worked out by National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA; now the National University of Educational Planning and Administration [NUEPA]) (NIEPA 2005) for the implementation of the RTE Act. It is superfluous to dub the public system of education inefficient and to promote profit-making private investment in this sphere without adequately nourishing the former directly from the state exchequer. However, the Indian state has been doing precisely this as is evident from the concept note of the MHRD on PPP (MHRD 2007), the midterm appraisal of the previous five year plan (Planning Commission 2010), and the report of the current five year plan (Planning Commission 2013).

The MHRD questionnaire also did not give any space for citizens to express their opinions on such topical issues of educational finance, budgetary allocation and fee hike, except for a question regarding the extension of PPP into secondary education (MHRD 2015a: 6). Nonetheless, like earlier policies of the GoI on education, the Draft NEP 2016 has recommended 6% of GDP to be allocated for education. However, it seeks to encourage investment in education by private providers through philanthropy and corporate CSR and to adjust their share within this 6% expenditure (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.21) without realising that no other agency but essentially the state is the guarantor of people’s substantive rights, and that the fulfilment of these rights cannot be left to the models of charity and voluntarism.

(ii) The safeguard against excessive fee hike: The RTE Act passed by the central government made superfluous legal safeguards against greedy motifs of private institutions, such as excessive fee hike, arbitrary termination of teachers, and protection of their equitable salaries wherever these existed earlier. The Delhi School Education Act, 1973, for instance, contained these provisions. The outcry against rapacious commercialisation of

education is so profound that even while avoiding this question in the questionnaire, the Draft NEP 2016 (MHRD 2016b) is compelled to note it in the section on “Governance and Management” by stating that commercialisation is rampant both in school and higher education sub-sectors as reflected in the charges levied for admissions in private educational institutions. It also notes that the proliferation of substandard educational institutions has contributed to the diminished credibility of the education system. However, instead of combating commercialisation of education, the Draft NEP 2016 intends to co-opt radical opposition to the privatisation of education by the proposal to regulate it. Besides co-option of radical counter-voices, regulation framework might favour the bigger corporate over smaller ones. Moreover, it might open further scope for PPP and, thereby, for the drain of public funds to religious and corporate houses.

Garb of International Partnership

The MHRD questionnaire asked the states to highlight the areas in which they seek international partnerships (MHRD 2015a: 4). The Draft NEP 2016 too not only emphasises internationalisation of higher education, but its recommendations will impact school education as well (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.5, 4.11, 4.16, 4.18, 4.19, 4.20). While the Kothari Commission (MoE 1966) underlined the need to channelise education for national development, the new NEP consultations have been concerned about internationalisation. Astonishingly, the question of international partnership was asked in the section on “Ensuring learning outcomes in Elementary Education” (MHRD 2015a: 4). How can international partnership help produce better learning outcomes? Do we really need a policy shift for using advanced techniques of teaching–learning, browsing latest scholarship, and networking with foreign scholars?

As students of the discipline of education, we have been reading relevant materials wherever they may published in the world. We have been adapting and adopting it as per our own requirements. As research scholars, we also have been networking with foreign intellectuals through conferences, committees, and commissions. Any educationist with some credentials will testify that the teacher training courses of various universities and other institutions, as well as the entire work of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and its regional-level equivalents have been informed by major scholarly interventions from across the globe. In fact, their problem is not so much related to their unawareness of international paradigms, but in working out an effective schema of pedagogically engaging with the local through a synthesis of micro and macro perspectives.

This democratic international partnership in the scholarship on education is not a new phenomenon. Neither is this the cause of disagreement. Internationalisation is seen as a problem when it becomes a cloak for promoting global corporate interests in education and for withdrawing the direct role of the state from this sphere. This is being sought in the name of “innovation,” “cutting-edge technology,” and “quality education,” without objectively establishing the reasons for such a choice.

Some prevalent forms of internationalisation are the outsourcing of the functions earlier performed by governmental bodies, allowing multinational profit-making corporations to open schools, awarding certificates recognisable in similar other institutions overseas, seeking support from CSR provisions to meet social justice requirements, and sending selective schoolteachers for foreign trips, etc.

Though the critics of the neo-liberal ideology of education, examples of alternative practices from around the world, and massive struggles against this model in different countries are fairly known now, the policymakers in India do not seem to be inclined to debate this framework in public. There seems a favourable consensus on this issue amongst both major political groups at the centre, the NDA and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The previous UPA government chose Pearson—not the NCERT, State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERTS), or District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs)—for outsourcing pedagogic innovations (Kumar 2012). Similar seems to be the aspiration of the current NDA government to facilitate the entry of global corporate houses, when it recorded the suggestions that the corporate and industry sector must be encouraged to fund various activities in education through CSR, research and innovation activities should be exempted from taxation, and overseas Indians should be requested to adopt schools (MHRD 2015b).

Tapered Framework of Inclusion

The MHRD questionnaire and Draft NEP 2016 touched on the issue of the inclusion of specific communities, such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), religious minorities, “differently abled children,” and women (MHRD 2015a: 20–21; MHRD 2016b: Section 4.6). However, there was no place for sharing our views with regard to the challenge of poverty in education, which all of these sections have to face. Without addressing this aspect, inclusion becomes a mere buzzword. History tells us that one of the reasons of the failure of the Basic Education Scheme was the absence of political will for simultaneously reorienting the focus of the economy (Sadgopal 2012; Sykes 1988). How can we be optimistic about the drive to prepare the new NEP when it remains detached from discussing not only the larger economic policy, but also the political economy of education?

Like poverty, gender and disability could be two other examples of this horizontal and intersected phenomenon of exclusion. Though it brought together the plight of differently excluded groups within a single chapter, the new NEP consultative framework still failed to recognise horizontal existence or interconnections among different forms of exclusion. It reduced the question of inclusion to a specifically dedicated chapter, rather than making it a core lens through which investigation and consultation on each of the themes and aspects of the new NEP would take place. Further, the NEP consultative framework remained quiet about the plight of homeless children, children of migrating families, orphans, children of imprisoned or undertrial parents, children living in conflict zones and border areas, and transgender persons.

The discussion about caste discrimination in the section “Inclusive Education” in the Draft NEP 2016 is very bleak. Discrimination of Muslim children also does not find any space in the Draft NEP 2016. The discussion of inclusive education in the MHRD document does not mention anywhere a time-bound commitment and a road map to make every school infrastructurally accessible for children with physical, visual or mental disabilities.

Further, the kind of potent language to combat power relations of gendered perceptions and experiences in education, deployed, for instance, by the Justice Verma Committee (GoI 2013: 383–410), are nowhere echoed within the questionnaire and the Draft NEP 2016. Hence, it was weak in terms of sufficient preparation and will power to combat patriarchal domination. Though not explicitly invoked by the Justice Verma Committee, one aspect of this gendered experience is the widespread structural phenomenon of segregating girls and boys in formal education during a formative stage of their development by relegating them to single-sex or sex-exclusive schools, which exist in good number alongside some co-educational institutions, particularly within the government and aided sector in the country. It is regrettable that even while deliberating the idea of inclusive education for different sections in the 21st century, the MHRD did not feel the necessity of revisiting the question of mixed or segregated schooling (Gupta forthcoming a). The gender issue is reduced to the question of employment alone in the Draft NEP 2016.

Erroneous Premises for the Expansion

The chapter on “Secondary and Senior Secondary Education” in the MHRD document on themes and questions for school education opens with an extremely erroneous presumption: “With Universal Elementary Education (UEE) becoming a reality, near universalisation of secondary education is a logical next step” (MHRD 2015a: 5). It amounted to a poignant disregard of the DISE data available, which, every year, shows in clear terms the prevalence of high levels of dropouts in elementary education. Even the figures for dropouts are different for different social groups, the historically excluded sections marking larger rates in comparison with others. Besides this, there are also the issues of actual school attendance (Ed CIL 2007). It is, therefore, naive to believe that universal elementary education has become a reality when 42% of children dropout by Class 8 and one-third of the enrolled students do not attend classes as per official statistics.

Weaning Humanities

The new NEP consultative framework failed to show any concern for learning in social science subjects while discussing the expansion of secondary and senior secondary education (MHRD 2015a: 5–6). Similarly, the section on “New Knowledge, pedagogies and approaches for teaching of Science, Maths and Technology in School Education to improve learning outcomes of Students” asked, “What needs to be done to improve student participation in Science and Mathematics subjects?” and, “What can be done to overcome shortages in qualified teachers

for Science and Mathematics? How can we engage with DST engage to address the needs of science and Maths teachers for both primary/secondary education?” (MHRD 2015a: 6) No similar questions were provided for improvement of learning in the social sciences or humanities and commerce streams. The MHRD justified this stand by reporting that “poor science and maths education (and English) accounts for 80% of total students who fail in Tenth Board Examination” (MHRD 2015a: 17).

However, it would be naive to assume that other disciplines—social sciences and commerce streams—are taught any better (Shrimali et al 2013). The commerce stream is not listed at all. How many schools in the country have separate social science rooms with the required teaching–learning aids? The number of students failing in the Class 10 board examination in social sciences is lower because they are able to write with more ease in these subjects, than in the natural sciences where the language is more technical and further distanced from outside reality. The challenge of language in the social sciences could be even greater than what students face in the natural sciences. However, they are able to manage, because of the bookish nature of the knowledge that is tested. Moreover, the difference is not simply due to good or bad teaching. The difference is also caused by the differential requirements and availability of infrastructure.

Contracted Idea of Vocationalisation of Education

The MHRD questionnaire refers to the intent of the National Skill Development Mission to revamp our education system to make skill development an integral part of the curriculum at all stages. It appears from the reading of the documents of the new NEP consultations that “skill development” and “vocation-alisation” are going to be the main thrust of secondary education in the days to come, swapping not only the conventional style liberal education, but also distorting alternative visions—propagated, for instance, by John Dewey and M K Gandhi—where “learning by doing” has been conceptualised as a pedagogic strategy of knowledge formation and social reconstruction, not merely to make schooling work oriented (Chatterji 1999: Vol 1, 756–836; Dewey 1966; Gandhi 1939; Kumar 2004; Sadgopal 2012; Sykes 1988). The MHRD questionnaire states, “Some States have been effectively integrating vocational education in mainstream education. How can these be adopted or adapted across other States?” “Should VE subjects be the best of five or six subjects for Class XII or Class X scores?” Linking vocational education with liberal education is seen important “to address the issue of weak synergy with industry in planning and execution.”

Without a doubt, education should enhance professional skills of students. Even if the ascendancy of a technocratic approach to the study of science and mathematics might create an employable workforce, for that reason, we cannot afford the weaning of social sciences and social objectives of education. Without a critical awareness of their social surroundings, perhaps the scientist would also find it difficult to explore the worth of their calling. Alternatively, they would not investigate it altogether and would work like machines on others’ dictum.

Moreover, the new NEP consultations, including the Draft NEP 2016 captured a very narrow idea of employable workforce: the corporatist view of education has been so dominant that it explores only the “synergy” between vocational education and industry, but not with agriculture, artisanal crafts, forestry, and the dairy sector.

Disguised Revival of Literacy Approach in Adult Education

Of course, the MHRD referred to Saakshar Bharat, the new variant of the National Literacy Mission, which is stated to include, alongside literacy, basic education (equivalency to formal education), vocational education (skill development), physical and emotional development, practical arts, applied science, sports, and recreation (MHRD 2015a: 14). However, notwithstanding the above-noted broad components of adult education, the themes and questions of the new NEP only propose to expand the Open School System without exploring the roadmap for transforming its present nature. The NEP questionnaire explores the possibility of harnessing the skills of school students for adult literacy (MHRD 2015a: 14), which is fundamentally different from the commitment to provide trained human resources as designated regular functionaries of the mission.

Moreover, the ideas of making adult education programmes instruments of “social reconstruction” and “critical consciousness” or “conscientizacao” (Freire 2005) were missing here. Thus, the framework of the new NEP adheres only to the approach of “minimalist expansionism” of literacy. It is regretful that after 69 years of independence, the official agenda is to provide mere literacy, instead of transformative education, to the overwhelming majority of our adult population: rural women, SCs, STs, and religious minorities.

Inimical Approach towards Teachers

In the entire section on “Revamping Teacher Education for Quality Teachers” in the questionnaire on school education, the issue of “enhancing the status of teaching as a profession” is mentioned only in passing (MHRD 2015a: 11–12). The questionnaire and the Draft NEP 2016 maintain silence about the work and service conditions of teaching and non-teaching cadres of educational establishments, parameters for fixing their minimum number, and permanent or contractual tenure of their jobs. The absence of additional staff to be involved in the Mid-day Meal Scheme and other administrative functions of schools have increased the non-teaching workload on teachers, but the new NEP framework ignores it completely.

The new NEP eschews discussion of the growing country-wide problem of teacher recruitment procedures. It has most tragically unfolded in Uttar Pradesh since September 2015, where more than 40 contractual teachers, who were thrown out of job following a high court order, have committed suicide. Considering the upheaval thus produced, the Supreme Court decided to stay the order of Allahabad High Court in December 2015, which continues till date (*Kamlakant v State of Uttar Pradesh and Three Others* 2015; *Priyanka Mall v State of Uttar Pradesh and Five Others* 2015; *ToI* 2015).

However, wherever the MHRD wanted to forcefully bulldoze its convictions, it did not hesitate to state those parts of the issue in unequivocal terms. For instance, it was interested in knowing whether teachers’ performance assessments can make them accountable and whether promotion of teaching faculty should be in conjunction with their performance (MHRD 2015a: 11–12). Since the government was thinking of instituting performance assessment tests for teachers and linking their performance with promotion, the Draft NEP 2016 recommends that periodic assessment of teachers in government and private schools will be made mandatory and linked to their future promotions and release of increments (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.10, Clause 13).

The proceedings for the setting up of the Education Commission presided by W W Hunter in 1881, and its provincial reports with evidences and testimonies reveal that as part of the grants-in-aid system, the colonial state had introduced in certain parts of the country the scheme of Payment by Result for aided schools. Following the uproar about narrowly defining the term performance in relation to the teaching profession, the scheme was discontinued. Do we want to commit the same blunder of narrowly defining the performance of the most crucial link of the learning process—the teacher—following perhaps externally available models of measurement, as happens, for instance, in the industry? Would it not be wise to diagnose objectively the causes of demoralisation of teachers—not a general phenomenon, but wherever found—and structural factors obstructing proper discharge of their duties as a policy question, instead of viewing it as a pathology emanating from individual deficiency? Why are the teachers disinterested? Should we not bring into our inquiry the dereliction of duty, or lack of interest in the educational bureaucracy to supervise, guide and empathise with teachers?

The Draft NEP 2016 not only completely overlooks very important issues affecting teaching practice and profession, but also demonstrates a hostile attitude towards teachers, the most vital link of the educational transaction, through its sole focus on supervision and control.

Apathy to Multilingualism

The NCERT discussed in detail in a focused group paper at the time of the preparation of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 2005, the idea of “multilingual education” (NCERT 2006). However, the section on the promotion of languages in the MHRD questionnaire clearly directs the respondents to state the difficulties in encouraging education in the mother tongue and multilingual education in schools. The MHRD asked about the difficulties in implementing this (MHRD 2015a: 23) and did not wish to know the possible advantages. Its decision to list poor teaching of English as one focus area (MHRD 2015a: 17) is crucial for combating the increasing reliance on market support for acquiring proficiency in this language. However, promotion of English as the medium of education amounts to disregarding the established truth that languages could be learned without necessarily imposing them as the medium to learn everything.

The Draft NEP 2016 of course provides some space to the idea of “mother tongue as the medium of education situated within multilingual context” but without making it mandatory, as precisely the same happened in the NCF (NCERT 2000) and the RTE Act (GoI 2009). In fact, the Draft NEP 2016 reduces even this weak provision to Class 5 from Class 8 (MHRD 2016b). Any careful diagnosis would reveal that this hierarchy of the academic levels, up to which mother tongues are considered viable and beyond which English is conceded to as the only possible medium, has been historically the main source for the marginalisation of Indian languages.

Recent expansion of English as the medium of elementary education makes it apparent that such a weak provision would be inadequate to combat neo-liberal perpetuation of the mania for this foreign language. The desire to learn English has been one of the important phenomena, perpetuated and utilised by the neo-liberal market of private schooling in the name of choice. On the other hand, without linking the aspect of language with the need to democratise the nature of educational knowledge, even the support for the mother tongue would bolster the orthodox right-wing position on this issue. The new NEP consultative framework as well as the Draft NEP 2016 stay away from discussing this question too. Besides this, although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2005 recognised sign language as a proper language, and India has ratified this convention, there was nothing of the sort in the MHRD questionnaire on school education and in the Draft NEP 2016.

Overriding Minority Status

The MHRD intended to reopen the issue of exemption granted to minority institutions from the purview of the RTE Act. The agenda of the union government led by BJP on such a complicated issue of policy seems predetermined: the MHRD questionnaire did not ask an open-ended question: should minority institutions be excluded or included within the purview of RTE Act and why? It did not ask how to make schools friendlier for the children of minority communities. Instead, it asked, “By excluding minority establishment from RTE what are the pitfalls?” (MHRD 2015a: 21) The Supreme Court had relied upon constitutional safeguards while restoring this exemption (*Society for Un-aided Private Schools of Rajasthan v Union of India & Anr* 2010), which were earlier overlooked by the 2009 parliamentary legislation (GoI 2009). The exemption could have been seen, if at all, as a challenge in the path of building a common school system—capable of bridging inequalities and optimising diversities while being governed in a decentralised and participatory manner—only when such a task would have been on the agenda, but that is no way the case at the moment.

There could be apprehensions that private school managements might convert themselves into minority trusts for taking advantage of the exemption from the provision of admitting 25% of the children from EWSs under the RTE Act. This could be another reason for the government to initiate a nationwide dialogue on the matter. However, such a problem

could have been addressed through a stronger mechanism of supervision. Now, the Draft NEP 2016 has recommended: “The issue of extension of Clause 12 (1) (c) of RTE Act to government-aided minority institutions (religious and linguistic) will be examined in view of larger national commitments towards the economically weaker sections” (MHRD 2016b: Section 4.4, Clause 2).

It is ironical that eliminating educational segregation along the lines of class, sex, ability, and ethnicity is low on the agenda. However, purging constitutional protection available to minorities is being prioritised in the name of national commitment. Moreover, the questionnaire and the Draft NEP 2016 nowhere takes cognisance of the recommendations of the Sachar Committee (GoI 2006), including easily its most agreeable suggestion that each institution should maintain a diversity index: better facilities for learning Urdu in government institutions should be provided, particularly for Urdu medium primary education in areas with a majority of Urdu speakers, and the disaggregated view of communities as “socio-religious communities” (SRCs) should be utilised while discussing the plight of the minorities. The Draft NEP 2016 recommends in Section 4.11 that facilities for teaching Sanskrit at the school and university stages will be offered on a more liberal scale, but shows no concern for Urdu.

Steamroller of Homogeneity

The new NEP consultative framework does not discuss the challenges in the path of ensuring secular scientific orientation of education, even within a scenario where the nation has witnessed a radical upsurge of fundamentalist forces. Even its specific focus on science and mathematics does not evoke the traditional argument of their significance as disciplines that are generally regarded as especially capable of producing rationally thinking human beings. In principle and potentials, education in each subject is capable of promoting ethical values. Yet, the MHRD asks, “How can we explore the way forward so that Ethical education can become mandatory?” (MHRD 2015a: 25) It was, thus, another leading question limiting the possibilities of independent answers, as it did not encourage the respondents to underline the difficulties, or, in fact, the undesirability and unfeasibility of having a separate course of this kind. It did not promote the respondents to engage in questioning as to whose values and which ethics are to be taught.

Proceeding on the same lines, the Draft NEP 2016 states in Section 4.11, Clause 4 that “Ethics education will be integrated at all levels.” It is also worth noting here that the language of this section is based merely on compassion and respect for weaker and downtrodden sections (including women), instead of focusing on their historical marginalisation and equal rights.

The annual and quinquennial reports of public instruction for the late 1880s show that following the recommendations of the Hunter Commission (GoI 1883), the idea of introducing compulsory value education as a separate discipline was discussed, debated, and rejected on the grounds of its unfeasibility and undesirability by the provincial and central wings of the

colonial state. M K Gandhi too rejected it in his scheme of Basic Education in 1938 (Kumar 1991: 169–70). The question of religion and values in education was also discussed by the Sri Prakash Committee in the late 1950s and by the the NCERT in the late 1970s, without actually resulting in any significant change in the curriculum and syllabus.

The earlier NDA government revived this discourse through the deliberations around the NCF in 2000 (NCERT 2000) as a cloak for its religious agenda of right-wing Hinduism. Therefore, the current revival of the discourse on “ethical education” by the NDA under the new NEP consultation, if seen in terms of this history—as briefly sketched here—also implies another attempt to push Hindutva ideology through education. For, it was often underlined those days in the media reports that the objective of such a programme is to inculcate in the students ancient Indian values (*prachin Bharatiya mulyon*), as if nothing worth emulating happened during the medieval period, a phase of Indian history often wrongly portrayed as a Muslim period. (Even the historical sketch presented in the Preamble of Draft NEP 2016 completely excludes medieval period of Indian history.)

Mostly the references to ancient values in the NCF prepared under the NDA’s auspices were directed to religious texts and figures, and seldom to secular symbols of values (NCERT 2000: Section 1.4.7). The NCF 2000 preferred to use the term “social cohesion” instead of pluralism, and recommended education about religions in order to promote value education (NCERT 2000: Sections 1.1, 1.4.1, 1.4.4, 1.4.7, 2.2, 2.6, 2.8.8, 2.8.9). Thus, instead of appreciating the diversities that exist amongst different religio-cultural groups, as entailed by the modern, secular and political understanding of the concept of difference and equality, which is also enshrined in the Preamble, Part III, and Part IV of the Constitution, the NCF 2000 (NCERT 2000) moved to underline the need for cohesion and appreciation of common religious values.

The NCF 2000 on the one hand discussed the existence of the feeling of “otherness,” instead of the prevalence of concrete material differences and discriminations. On the other hand it also emphasised the point about “common spiritual and cultural heritage,” but not pluralism, the core emphasis of the NCF 1975 (NCERT 1975), which is about recognising and appreciating multiple identities and allegiances. Both elements perfectly fit into the right-wing theory of the Hindu *rashtra*, where recognising the “other” and simultaneously suppressing it by emphasising the “common spiritual and cultural heritage” is essential in order to distinguish Hindus from non-Hindus, who could then be compelled to assimilate themselves within the Hindu fold. A Hindu is the one whose *pitribhu* (fatherland) and *matribhu* (motherland) is the same as that of his ancestors. Hinduism in this conception is a way of living, a cultural code of the original inhabitants of the country, wherein the “others” will have to assimilate themselves, surrendering their specific identities (Savarkar 1969; Gupta 2014).

Another instrument for swiftly pushing this ideology across the country with a single stroke could be the institutionalisation of the singularity of textbooks. During the colonial period, the

provincial textbook committees prepared lists of books in each subject to be studied by students. The early post-independence nation state discovered that in many states textbooks contained objectionable material. The NCERT was established for preparing model textbooks on progressive lines to be emulated by the state governments. State boards began prescribing single textbooks in each subject and very often simply adopted the NCERT textbooks (Gupta forthcoming b).

In the minutes of the meeting held on 21 March 2015, chaired by the HRD minister, one recorded proposal was that the NCERT books with a uniform syllabus could be made applicable to all schools in the states (MHRD 2015b). There is no realisation that this process of officialisation also implies the state’s complete control over the notion of “worthy knowledge,” that it does not augur well with the idea of epistemological autonomy of learners, educators, and writers; and that it is antithetical to the diversity of Indian society’s long-standing features of our shared past! The Draft NEP 2016 recommends in Clause 3 of Section 4.5 that “For science, mathematics and English subjects, a common national curriculum will be designed. For other subjects, such as social sciences, a part of the curricula will be common across the country and the rest will be at the discretion of the states.” Hence, the Draft NEP 2016 intends to take away the right of the states to have fully their own curriculum for social sciences and other disciplines. They will have to only insert some parts within the overall framework dictated by the centre. On the other hand, this monopoly of the centre would be absolute in natural science, mathematics and English. Thus, it also wrongly implies that in natural sciences and mathematics, the local context does not matter at all.

This process of homogenisation, officialisation, and centralisation of curricular knowledge has historically consolidated the contest of identities, rather than opening the sphere for democratic rational engagement (Gupta 2012). Therefore, the framework of new NEP seems a perfect but sad legitimisation of a paradoxical blending: one language, one curriculum, one textbook, one community, and many classes, fee structures, and schools!

Conclusions

The issues underlined in this paper are not inadvertent omissions and points of overemphasis that can be resolved through an additive approach while preparing the draft of the new NEP, but require a substantially different handling, mindset, and politico-ideological commitment for their resolution. The paper shows that the overall framework of the new NEP has been pitiable in addressing the aspects of structural and infrastructural discrepancy, economic inequality, social injustice, and cultural homogeneity. Rather than resolving them, the paper shows how the new NEP framework will legitimise and augment these problems. The paper makes it clear that the extremely constrained scope and guarded nature of the framework of the new NEP is a strategy for subverting the possibility to voice fundamental issues, for channelising the responses in specific directions, and for co-opting some of the discursive

threads likely to be created in this process to legitimise and bulldoze the predetermined agenda of the dominant classes, and to reproduce the iniquitous social order. In this sense, it is anti-poor and adversarial to the interests of most women, Dalits, Adivasis, disabled, and religious, linguistic, or ethnic minorities, which form the bulk of the majority of the class of “have nots.”

An already weak programme for addressing social inequalities is further watered down owing to its disregard of the class phenomenon of poverty, and due to its non-recognition of the internal heterogeneity and power relations existing within each community. The framework of new NEP seeks to provide “minimalist” and segregated education to the impoverished masses in each community. It is at best capable of serving only the immediate interests of the upper stratum within different excluded groups and higher classes in general. It is an essential prerequisite for the co-optation of community elites in the politics of hegemonic classes. Since the agenda of the new NEP champions the politics of cultural uniformity, it is also adversarial to all forms of diversity. It revives the model of “integrationalism” with the added flavour of religious “majoritarianism” of the 1950s and 1960s, and the cultural revivalism of the 19th century. It only uses the technological facade to create the illusion of its democratic nature and proclaims to have entered in “grass-roots” consultations within a stiff structure and predetermined and constrained agenda so that it can continue to serve the interests of the dominant classes.

The close resonance between the Birla–Ambani report (GoI 2000) prepared by two corporate giants of the nation, and the MHRD questionnaire for the new NEP indicates one important

element in the evolution of this exclusionary framework. This resonance coincides with a detachment of the official agenda from the discourse contained in print journals, newspapers, scholarly monographs, useful recommendations of different committees and commissions, and judicial verdicts. It is also non-receptive to the valid concerns and aspirations of the impoverished masses and other stakeholders evident in their grass-roots struggles wedged from the hinterlands to Jantar Mantar, organised time after time by the unions/organisations/associations of teachers, students, parents and civic rights activists. Though not systematically undertaken in the present paper, these concerns can be tapped in the sources available in social media (internet), the campaign materials (pamphlets and leaflets) and representations on educational issues given to various authorities by the stakeholders and their collectivities. These detachments of the policy framework from the voices and the plight of stakeholders call for a serious examination of the nature of governance itself.

While the above-sketched foundational weakness, at best, the drive of making the state “an invisible hand,” as the father of mercantilism, Adam Smith, conceived in 1776 (1976: 709–10) might be continued within the current framework of “minimalist expansionism” and globalisation, the hope for a substantive transformation of the sphere of education is completely belied at the outset. The anguish is so profound that on 10 December 2015, a very renowned and senior professor of political science urged a national gathering at Jantar Mantar to form a “people’s commission on education,” which drew full endorsement from the participants. However, since such a commission will also appeal to the government, therefore, what matters ultimately is the role of the state.

NOTES

- 1 The documents of the new national education policy (NEP) deliberations examined in this paper are uploaded on two official websites of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and Government of India (GoI) at <http://mhrd.gov.in/nep-new> and <https://mygov.in/group/new-education-policy>, respectively, viewed on 25 December 2012.
- 2 Also see the website of the All-India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE), <http://www.aifрте.in/>, viewed on 25 December 2012.
- 3 See the website of the National Independent Schools Alliance, <http://nisaindia.org/data-on-school-closures>, viewed on 25 December 2012.
- 4 For example, James Tooley, P Dixon, S V Gomathi, Pankaj Jain, Ravindra Dholakia, the Center for Civil Society and Pratham have been favouring privatisation, public–private partnership (PPP), voucher schemes, the NGO-isation of school education, and the “School Choice Campaign,” (Tooley et al 2007; Tooley 2009; Jain and Dholakia 2009, 2010; also see the website of the Center for Civil Society at <http://ccs.in/> and Pratham’s ASER Reports at <http://www.aser-centre.org/Keywords/p/276.html> [viewed on 10 October 2016]).

On the other hand, Anil Sadgopal, Padma Sarangapani, Vimala Ramachandran, Manish Jain, Sadhana Saxena, Sunil Mitra Kumar, Archana Mehendale, the Lok Shikshak Manch and the AIFRTE have been differently opposing this neo-liberal model of the political economy of education (Ramachandran 2009;

Jain and Saxena 2010; Kumar 2010; Sadgopal 2013; Sarangapani 2009; the Lok Shikshak Manch, New Delhi 2013; and the website of AIFRTE [see note 3]).

The classification is made on the question of privatisation of education, otherwise, there could be internal differences amongst people grouped together within each of these spectrums. Teachers working in government schools in Delhi and associated with the Lok Shikshak Manch have shown the ill-effects of the involvement of NGOs in their schools in a detailed case study of the Nanhi Kali Project (Lok Shikshak Manch, New Delhi 2013). The negative implications of CSR in education have been underlined by the present author and Reva Yunis (Gupta 2014; Yunis 2012). Further, Kiran Bhatti, Anuradha De, Rathin Roy, and Vivek Vellanki have underlined various methodological problems in the findings and arguments of the supporters of private education (Bhatti et al 2015; Vellanki 2015).

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