

New Education Policy: A Critique and a Submission

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Abstract

After the formation of the NDA government in 2014, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) announced its decision to frame a New Education Policy (NEP), thus placing India's education requirements in the correct direction. A fresh approach was desperately needed as the last time the nation's education policy had been reviewed was in 1986 which was revised in 1992 keeping in mind the changed economic scenario that had ushered in an era of globalisation and neo-liberal policies. Since then many significant changes have taken place. To usher in a new policy, the MHRD announced plans for a nationwide consultation, outlining 13 themes in school education and 20 themes in higher education. The Ministry sought suggestions from different sections of society—from Gram Panchayats upwards to national stakeholders. The MHRD claimed that during last one-and-half years since this process started, over 250,000 consultations took place and 25,000 written suggestions were received. To consolidate these recommendations and evolve a draft NEP, a five-member drafting committee was constituted. But the reality is that the process of consultations was neither participatory nor inclusive. For instance, pre-primary education and the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 were not given their due place in the themes or in the consultation process. Civil Society expressed serious concerns and submitted its collective views through the RTE Forum to the drafting committee. A majority of the submissions requested the retaining of the RTE Act, 2009 as a legal entitlement for children, central for the universalisation of school education. Although the committee finalised its draft report and is now available in the public domain, the MHRD still has to officially release it.

Keywords

New Education Policy, RTE Act 2009, MHRD, drafting committee

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One of the foremost tasks undertaken by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) since the new government took charge in 2014 was initiating a process to formulate a New Education Policy. Since more than two decades have passed since the last education policy was articulated in 1986, later amended in 1992, this was seen as a welcome move by most people engaged with the education space in India. A draft report, put together by the five-member Subramanian Committee and containing recommendations to the MHRD for the evolution of a New Education Policy, is already in the public domain. But it is yet to be officially tabled by the MHRD.

The process adopted by the MHRD for the formulation of the policy has been unique in itself. The Ministry announced an elaborate bottom-up process, which, according to its website, included 2.5 lakh consultations with those at the grass-roots, including parents at the village *panchayat* level, followed by consultations at the block, district, state and national levels. In addition, suggestions were also invited online. While many thought this was an ambitious process, given the tight deadline for the policy, 31 December 2015, the Ministry seemed determined to take the process of policy-making to the 'people' who, it claimed, had otherwise been excluded: consultations, they felt, had usually been done only with the so-called 'experts'.

To give structure to these consultations the MHRD uploaded certain documents on its website around which discussions were to be focused. Later in the year, a five-member committee, headed by former Cabinet Secretary T.S.R. Subramaniam, was constituted. It was responsible for compiling the numerous recommendations and suggestions that were received on the basis of which a draft of the New Education Policy was to be made.

The website of the Ministry reflects, as of 16 February 2016, the exact numbers of consultations that were held at various levels. To date the process is far from complete and the current status of the final policy also remains unclear. This commentary attempts to analyse the approach adopted by the MHRD to formulate the New Education Policy, especially on the themes it has chosen around which the policy is to be focused, and examine the manner in which the Ministry proposes to incorporate the 'voices' of the people. It also presents a submission made by the Right to Education (RTE) Forum to the drafting committee on behalf of civil society.

Policy Process

The documents on the MHRD website regarding the New Education Policy state 13 themes for school education and 20 themes for higher education around which nationwide consultations and meetings are to take place. Since no other paper has been released by the Ministry, apart from these themes, it is fair to assume that the final policy will be focused around them. These topics are supported by a list of pre-formulated questions that are expected to generate discussions. It is essential to understand the themes that seemed to guide the policy-making process.

It is important to note that any policy-making process related to education must begin by outlining the current challenges being faced education in India, analysing the progress made by previous policies and scrutinising what has worked and what has not. Unfortunately, the documents of the MHRD do no such thing. They are silent on key concerns of equity and quality that seemed to plague the current system of education. In addition, they do not refer to critical documents like the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 and the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The RTE Act is much more than a scheme; it stems from a Constitutional amendment. One can argue, therefore, that the absence of the RTE Act within these documents reflects a lack of seriousness of the government on the critical issue of school education. Naturally then, any discussion on strengthening India's higher education system becomes irrelevant. Issues of early childhood education, strategies to strengthen state institutions of education and crucial questions related to the financing of education are mentioned only superficially.

Indeed, the designated themes seem to concentrate primarily on developing skills based on the requirements of the market. While producing a skilled labour force should definitely be on the agenda of every country, especially a developing one, a nation's education policy should not be based solely on serving the market. The broader discourse related to the purpose of a comprehensive system of education, constitutional values that stress equity and social justice seem to have been overlooked in these documents.

In fact, when the questions accompanying the themes are examined closely, it is impossible to miss their biased nature. Most of them appear to be based on pre-determined positions that have been already taken by the MHRD, especially regarding accountability of teachers, a no-detention policy and the use of Information, Communication and Technology.

As far as including 'voices' of the people is concerned, at face value a commendable thought, it is important to understand the profile of the people who are involved in these consultations. Who are these representatives of the voice of the country? The fact is that the involvement of parents is restricted to *panchayat*-level meetings. The Ministry seems adamant on keeping the views of academics and educationists out of the process. It appears as if the Ministry is certain that the positions taken by experts and parents will differ, and that since the position taken by parents is better their thoughts should be included in the policy.

Submission by the RTE Forum

During the process of compiling suggestions received for incorporation into the new policy, the Drafting Committee also met with members of civil society as also some eminent educationists to listen to their views on the new policy. As a part of the process, the RTE Forum, a national collective of NGOs, INGOs, teachers' union members, educationists and rights-based activists, working across 19 states across India, was invited to give its recommendations. The following suggestions were submitted by the RTE Forum to the Drafting Committee.

RTE Forum's Submission

After Independence, India started on its journey of socio-economic transformation with a well-thought-out document prepared by stalwarts after nearly a three-year-long deliberation. It was called the Indian Constitution and it bound us to a value system outlined right in the Preamble. When we failed to provide free and compulsory universal elementary education and create an equitable and just social order with basic amenities for everyone, there was clearly a need to change course and a necessity for a targeted policy framework was strongly felt. A comprehensive exercise was undertaken by a Commission, led by Dr D.S. Kothari, which resulted in the Education Policy of 1968.

Among other things, the 1968 policy sought a higher outlay of 6 per cent of the national income to support education; a uniform 10 + 2 + 3 structure across the country and the establishment of a national system of public education through a Common School System. But except for the introduction of a uniform structure, no substantial change was brought about. About two decades later and under the influence of economic reforms, another policy was formulated—the New Educational Policy, 1986. It was reviewed by a Committee headed by Acharya Ramamurti but summarily disposed of by the Reddy Committee, and a revised version was put forward in a Framework of Action in 1992. The dilution of the constitutional vision and the weakening of institutions were compounded by a half hearted implementation of this new framework. However, two important things remained in all these documents—the allocation of at least 6 per cent of the national income for education and a emphasis on the establishment of a state-funded common school system as a tool that would provide equal opportunities to all children. Unfortunately, neither of these goals was achieved and consequently what we have presently is a fragmented system of education based on the paying capacity of parents.

In 1993, the country witnessed a historic judgement when the Supreme Court of India stated that the RTE is directly linked to the Right to Life and providing elementary education is the responsibility of the state. In 2002, through the 86th Constitutional Amendment, Article 21 A conferred the status of a Fundamental Right on elementary education in the age group 6–14 years, which led to the Right to Education Act, 2009. The Act was adopted unanimously by both the Houses of Parliament, indicating a nationwide political consensus on this crucial right of India's children.

Unfortunately, over the last three decades, the whole scenario as well as the policy, regards education has changed. It should be noted that more than 20 years ago the country's economic policy was also redefined and the market somehow acquired primacy over state institutions. This led to the weakening of state institutions and the growing commercialisation of education. It is now universally recognised that school education, preferably for 12 years, is a public good which must be provided by the government. The UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in its last session in Geneva which, among other issues, states that 'Growing privatisation and commercialisation of education constitutes a danger to the realisation of the right to education'. It did so because the state alone is capable of assuming legal responsibility in this behalf and can be held

accountable to the Parliament for discharging this responsibility. It is unrealistic to believe that the private sector can either assume or be held legally responsible for universalising education within a time-bound framework. This has not happened anywhere in the world. Wherever education has been universalised this has been done through publicly funded and state-run schools.

Parents prefer private schools as they feel that their children will have a better chance to score high marks in subjects that will get them admission to institutions that will help them get good jobs. But learning performance, measured in quantitative terms, is a very poor indicator of the fulfillment of the basic purpose of education. It ignores other purposes of education, such as providing a space for socialisation that helps in building a nation and the formation of social capital; second, developing a capacity for lifelong learning; third, learning in order to realise one's full potential and lastly, learning to know others, identify with others and work with others.¹

The assumption that government schools are by definition incapable of providing quality education is not borne out by current research and a grassroots experience. The reality on the ground is that a vast majority of private schools do not deliver quality education. On the other hand, there are numerous examples where government schools are providing education of excellent quality. The obvious examples are the Kendriya Vidyalayas. Our position is that the government should muster the political will to bring every government school up to the standard of a Kendriya Vidyalaya. We urgently need a system that guarantees equitable and quality education for all children.

At this juncture, when a New Education Policy is being formed, it will be presumptuous to say that no new policy is needed: at the very minimum it calls for a review of past policies and programmes as also an extensive, and patient, consultation on a variety of issues. While the idea of a broad-based consultation with a bottom-up approach is a welcome idea, the RTE Forum has reservations about its adequacy, transparency, and feasibility, particularly within the designated time-frame. Only two sections are covered, school and higher education, which limits the number of issues being brought into discussion. The choice of questions and the format of responses, with their predetermined nature in many cases, further limit the meaning and scope of consultation. These and other flaws can be partially removed by extending and opening up the process after the preparation of a draft.

The RTE Forum, as a civil society collective working in 19 states of the country, has been advocating the complete implementation of the RTE Act, 2009, for the last five years. The Forum has closely tracked the implementation of the Act on the ground and regularly shared its recommendations with appropriate authorities.

On the basis of its collective strength and experiences of its members who have been closely associated with school education for decades, the RTE Forum would like to draw attention to the following recommendations regarding the New Education Policy:

1. A broader perspective of education as an instrument for social transformation and source of nation building should be incorporated in the vision of

- the policy. It is imperative that the vision also emphasises on values of social justice, inclusion, equality and egalitarianism already ascertained in India's Constitution.
2. The policy should clearly acknowledge that education is a public good and that the state will take the responsibility of educating all children. As reiterated by preceding policies, this policy must also commit at least 6 per cent of the country's GDP towards financing the education system.
 3. Elementary education is a constitutionally mandated responsibility of the government, which cannot be bartered away. In fact, this right ought to be extended to pre-school children below the age of 6 years, and to secondary education up to the age of 18 years. The stress on skills, a welcome idea, needs to be institutionally secured at the secondary level.
 4. The policy should not dilute existing legislation; instead it should strengthen it. It should chalk out a roadmap for the universalisation of school education and complete implementation of the RTE Act. The deadline of achieving all norms and standards prescribed in the Schedule of the RTE Act, 2009, has already expired. It cannot, should not, be postponed further, and with enhanced financial provisioning completed in a year. Work on the secondary level can then be pursued with larger resources. However, merely ensuring the availability of basic facilities is not enough; schools must be developed as institutions with identity.
 5. Enrolment, attendance, retention and completion of school education for all children, from pre-primary to the secondary level with a certain standard of quality, should be the core of all planning efforts and must be brought under a comprehensive policy framework with legal entitlement.
 6. Uncalled for debates need not be triggered. The constitutional principle that primary education should be given in the mother tongue is a pedagogically sound idea, and does not need to be raised. Likewise, the present is not the right time for revisiting the potentially divisive language policy. Some of these debates are market driven, or born out of directive managerial principles. Decentralisation and democracy should be the governing principles for school education, while the quality of ideas may also be related with our national agenda at higher levels.
 7. The RTE Act, 2009 must be implemented in a comprehensive manner—a piece-meal approach will be counter-productive. For example, the no detention policy, without proper implementation or continuous and comprehensive evaluation, has already created confusion. Learning and assessment go hand in hand and there is no evidence that retaining a child in the same class leads to an improvement in levels of learning.
 8. Action must be taken to ensure that all teacher vacancies are filled by professionally qualified and motivated teachers. Efforts must be made to immediately institutionalise fully functional, adequately staffed and a fully funded academic support structures for teachers across the country. Gaps in the capacity of teachers must be addressed and in-service training provided to teach first-generation learners. Child-centric, pedagogic practices must be encouraged and teacher-training programmes need to be urgently aligned with present challenges.

9. Private entities must be regulated in the education sector and a comprehensive, central legislation should be framed. This legislation should also cover private teacher training institutes that have mushroomed across the country. The results of the Teacher Eligibility Tests, at the time of recruitment of teachers, reflect on the poor standards of training provided by these institutes.
10. An overall accountability of the system must be enhanced. The policy should clearly indicate measures to strengthen the monitoring and grievance redressal mechanism.

It should be kept in mind that a policy paper needs to be a comprehensive document, covering all relevant areas, starting with a vision, enunciating aims and objectives incorporated into a framework for action, including financial and monitoring plans. The structure of the draft paper, does not speak of a new policy, and so its end purpose remains unclear. Additionally, we recommend that once the draft is prepared and before the policy is finalised, a minimum time of six months should be allotted for wider deliberations and debates on the draft throughout the country.

Note

1. The last three purposes of education are among the five pillars of learning outlines in the Delors Commission Report, submitted to UNESCO at the beginning of the new millennium.