

NEP should be thanked for including research as a concern

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The recent National Education Policy (NEP) is perhaps first to outline a research Eco system for the country. Never before such a policy on research was enunciated as a part of national education policy. While that is a welcome initiative, there is mix up of the two dimensions of knowledge society as some kind of two sides of same coin that is education and research. The components on research in this policy deserve equally serious consideration on its own as the education policy.

The NEP 2020 has provided for a National Research Foundation (NRF) to consolidate research endeavours in the country and as part of the panacea for revamping the education system in the country. The NRF is expected to build research capabilities across academics and consolidate research needs of the ministries in a pooled way. This initiative is to boost "research culture" in the country. This is indeed a very timely and laudable initiative. In fact, the 2019 union budget had explained the initiative based on the then draft report of national education policy and even provided initial funding for the NRF. That was the enthusiasm of the govt. to push through the proposal.

Despite being world's third large education sector, with 1000 million students, 1.4 million schools and over 5000 higher education institutes, India stands nowhere on research and academics globally. None of our universities stand apart globally until recently. Our pass-out students continue to flock-out of the country. Majority of scholars in India prefer going out for further research or studies. Many of those who had gone out of the country made a mark globally as innovators and inventors. 70 per cent of the patents shown here, for example, are of NRIs.

Even in the case of research establishment we did not lag. It is their functioning and outcome that is the dilemma. Many of the research establishments in the country are of fifty-year-old. Many of them are in a quandary today for want of a direction and neglect of the State. They were set up to offer research and R and D support. But as societies, outside the govt., to maintain certain autonomy. There are more than fifty national institutes under various ministries. In the case of one ministry there are more than thirty research labs for example, there are more than 30 tribal research centres and such specialised institutes. Funds for many of these institutes were cut in October 2020 is a different issue. They are all being funded by the govt. What has been their outcome? what difference they made? What kind of linkage any of them had with the academics? Research faculties in India stand at cross roads or we could say in crisis, that being the case it is timely that the new national education policy took cognisance of the vacuum.

Status and standing of research calls for serious relook and repositioning. But the academics are languishing lack of research faculties. Standards are on decline. The concerned Ministers had indicated how PhD research is becoming copy-cats and how plagiarism is crippling. With future of UGC in doubt for a couple years now, things have come to a stand-off. That is when This situation is expected to be addressed by the New Education Policy. And, yet this policy had no benefit of discussions with any concerned or functionaries or independent experts.

This NRF, as provided in the NEP, hints at integration of research efforts of various Ministries and assimilate, fund, promote, prioritise and coordinate. The National Foundation is proposed to be chaired by the Prime Minister. The NRF implies centralisation of research in the country and bring all research under Government's grip where the govt. decides the very scope and priorities of research endeavours in the country under the guise of "relevance" and a "national agenda". What we need is an independent research echo system, not govt. directed. How do we expect to promote innovations and think beyond culture otherwise?

The funding function under this new policy shifts from ministries and UGC to NRF. This new initiative under NEP shifts from DST, ICMR, ICSSR, UGC, for example, to NRF. They are already part of one or other Ministry. That is these are being shifted from bureaucratic clutches to politically – dictated mechanisms. And independent research and evaluation in the Government is being discouraged and even budgets have been curtailed as never before.

The new education policy provides for hundred universities with focus on research. This should have happened decades ago. Never too late for a good idea. But what has been the track? The number of high end institutes created for research and development by way of academic institutes, research labs, centres, councils etc. Even outside the govt are impressive. It is not whether or not we will be able to build hundred universities focussing on Research by 2023 as indicated even if special funding is provided. But, how can they make a difference unless opportunities for research become free, transparent and merit based?

Earlier, two years ago, the govt. declared 20 universities as "eminent" to excel in research. Nearly half of them were private and a couple of them did not even take off at that point in 2018, What has been the initiatives these “eminent universities” have taken in the last two years before Corona epidemic halted or slowed is least known. Now, in three years the education policy envisages 100 universities with focus on research?!

The standards of research have declined has been expressed by many including the successive Ministers. Union HRD Minister two years ago expressed concern for decline in the quality of research in academics. He mentioned increasing plagiarism and reminded how copycatting in academic research is gaining. Acute shortage of academicians has been a recurring problem even after the salary structure was

improved significantly some years ago. As a corrective, the Government had even come up with leadership program called LEAP with three weeks special training, including one week at a USA University. But the intention is to post them as departmental heads of premier academic institutes. For this the government proposes to “specially hand pick”. The Government had in 2018-20 increased the number of research scholarships several fold and also the amount of scholarship. But only 135 opted and those continuing are on disgust or distress mood. Some IIT professors already expressed their concern about quality of students being attracted under this scheme. On Jan 16, 2019, 2000 students and researchers converged and protested in Delhi in front of HRD Ministry when 700 of them were even detained. What does all this indicate? Has there been any discussion? Do not we want the national policy to first consolidate, support and rejuvenate relevance of research and assure autonomy of institutes as was originally envisioned and ensure that the country has independent cadre of research to critically appraise where the country is heading.

Repositioning and shift in the research paradigm comes from larger perspective than merely from renaming or abolishing long standing ones or shifting controls and by centralising funding with a national agenda of the govt. of the day? Research culture requires an environment of freedom and participative provisions and recognition for individual merit and potential including right to own patients. And of course with in a system of checks and balances with transparency and provision for validation.

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