

## **Can a centralised policy empower people, particularly an educational policy?**

Dr N Bhaskara Rao  
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The National Education Policy 2020, which took five years and two panels to come up with, is still waiting a take-off. It is almost a year since the Prime Minister took a meeting with the vice chancellors and higher echelons of educational bureaucracy. A national policy, expected to last for much beyond a decade, requires wider consultations particularly with political parties. A national policy should get support of all sections of people. Covid-19 compulsions now have more things to consider in the policy. We need to make best of Covid period as an opportunity and we are already gearing up with e-learning, online classes, etc.

The policy should be complimented for considering 3 to 5 age children of preschool and nursery with special concerns. This policy could as well have been titled "Empowering Education Policy". But four different Ministries are involved in the implementation. As we are already witnessing, ANMs in Anganwadis are in distress for terms of their employment and interrupting the services in many states. As such hoping Anganwadis to attend to learning needs of 3-5 may be ambitions. This policy has recognised play, stories, interactivity and self-discovery based activities. The responsibility to develop these tools for this age group is also entrusted to NCERT.

The policy gives much needed emphasis on vocationalisation. But opening the option from class 6, or from age 11, may be too early particularly since we are trying to build a knowledge society. Also, this option however should not lure children of some economically weaker section to opt out too early, before 8<sup>th</sup> class itself.

The policy rightly reiterated a resolve to bring in much needed substantial changes in the educational system. It reminded that "education must build character, enable learners to be ethical, compassionate and caring while at the same time prepare them for gainful and fulfilling employment". The policy should have further elucidated that education is not only knowledge but also wisdom and concerns. And that, it should no longer be employment oriented and geared up for job opportunities and limited to pass-failure system more specifically. This "gainful and fulfilling employment" is a tricky idea and perpetuates fallacy about education as for "jobs".

It is good the NEP has reiterated commitment of six percent of GDP for education. Since Kothari Commission had first suggested in 1968, governments have been talking about it without making an earnest effort. But, an analysis of budgetary allocation and expenditure in the last few years does not offer confidence for achieving six percent level (It vacillating between 2.6 to less than 4 percent expenditure). In what specific way of spending, we would reach six percent is not indicated. For example, hardly five percent of the education expenditure so far is for bettering quality in education.

Changing the name of the Ministry back as “Ministry of Education” contradicts what is claimed. Much before becoming the Prime Minister, on his appointment as Minister for Education in 1985, the first thing P V Narsimha Rao did was to change the name of the Ministry as “Human Resource Development” (HRD). He rightly felt that education is much more than the process of acquiring knowledge and gateway for “jobs”. He viewed it as a holistic process than ever before. Even this NEP 2020 takes such a view but why it has changed the nomenclature of the Ministry back to Education is not evident. But it indicates about ambiguity.

Also with frequent change of guard at the ministry can we be consistent in the pursuit. For example, the Minister was changed three times in less than five years. And each time without any specific thrust evident in the process. By calling "school leaders and teachers" to work collaboratively in the annual national meet of CBSE the Minister Pokhriyal on December 7, for example, had referred to “school leaders” separate from school teachers, when the need is make the teachers the focal point and responsible for quality and learning outcomes. Two concerns are widely felt lacking. For example, on quality, studies including my own, have reiterated that book reading at early age makes difference both for school accomplishments and future options, that have not received the attention in the new policy. Although this new policy rightly recognises the value of school library, it does not go beyond. We now have more than one annual assessment. The independent ASER for more than a decade and Ministry’s own NEEPA. Both offer a number of insights for correctives on learning outcomes. If Proof of pudding is what should matter, there is no evidence so of taking cognizance by way ground level initiatives. Perhaps it is too early to expect.

Another example even more important one is regarding teacher appointments. The number of vacancies have been increasing last couple of years. The Parliament has been told more than once last couple of years how too many schools continue short of trained teachers in public schools in many states. If private schools are also considered the vacancy situation will be alarming. Even the Supreme Court

intervention in the last couple of years made no difference for filling the vacancies or bettering teacher training. Some states had taken to temporary "teachers" with no training and paying much lower salary. Without hard decisions in this regard, quality and outcome cannot be expected to be addressed. At the same time the number of unemployed teachers continue in many States. Telangana is an example.

It is known that education system today suffers from local link. Without parents and local community taking interest in educational facilities and functioning of schools, nothing better can be expected. Because of a initiative taken earlier by way of elected school committees, the process has become political. I argued that party based electoral practice should end at the gross roots. Now how "special educational zones" are going to catch up with the mainstream schools is not evident either. This national policy is all out for centralisation of education despite that it is a concurrent subject. And implementation requires States owning the proposal and their focussed efforts. The policy implies control at one place of funding, standards and accreditation from preschool up words.

Prime Minister Modi has been emphasising skill development as a national concern. The spirit of it is rightly reiterated in this policy. But this is linked to job or employment creation as an objective. The significance of this contradiction is because of craving for jobs as an all-out priority of governments. The policy should cannot ignore this contradiction.

The new policy adds to an important dilemma that education in the country is suffering from, with recent spread of private and corporate schools and their impact on the values and relevance of education. The policy is ambiguous in this regard. The policy formalises private education and even welcomes foreign entry across all levels of education. And yet *atmanirbharta* claim continues to be a slogan.

Although universal access is a feature of the policy, it is not specific on affordability of education by economically weaker sections. The recent revelations as to increasing migration to private schools from public and increased lobby powers of the corporate schools in various respects particularly the trend of increasing school fees is not addressed. Despite dearth of data on private sector schools, no initiatives are evident to bring parity between public and private schools.

Also, concern about content priorities of television channels and social media in the context of 3 to 8 age group children in particular is not evident in the policy despite it is known that children constitute more than one-third of total television viewers in the country. And what has been the experience of special school channels that different state have taken. No study has been made? No reference has been made as to how television channels could support the objectives of NEP.

Impressive national policies make not much difference on ground as we had seen with the much hyped Right to Education policy in the last three decades. This policy deserve to be implemented more seriously. It is parents, teachers, civil society, corporates and the states who eventually decide the fate of an education policy. They should be brought to centre stage for the implementation. The success of the policy eventually depends on governments being sensitive to apprehensions. Particularly political ones as they are today.

*This article is in memory of Kakani Venkataratnam who died on December 25, 1972 in the midst of leading a separate Andhra agitation. His memories continue for his Yeoman service for the cause of School education (1953-56) as President of Kishna District Board and later, for milk revolution in coastal districts as Minister of Agriculture (1969-72).*

**Dr N Bhaskara Rao is a New Delhi based longstanding analyst of public policies.**

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