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IMPLEMENTING NEW EDUCATION POLICY: COMING TO TERMS WITH DREAMS, PASSIONS AND REALITY

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Education cannot be anachronistic but relevant to the times, which is why very often we talk and chalk out a National Education Policy that is reflective of the current challenges and emerging opportunities. From being seen one time as the global source of knowledge and learning, India has fallen off the radar and it is time to put it back on the screen and within the top few globally. In order to achieve the goals, education cannot be seen in a piece-meal fashion; only holistically.

PRELUDE

A few would have imagined that 2020 would turn out the way it did. The coronavirus pandemic not only brought about memories of the “Great Depression” in the west but also struck a reign of terror worldwide, including in the realm of medicine, disease and much beyond. Not a single aspect of life including education has been spared. Even after one full year, there is still no end in sight to the dreadful virus; if anything, it is coming up with a deadlier streak in parts of the world. But in the midst of a debilitating year for India, the silver lining is the New Education Policy–2020 (NEP), a document that seeks to put in place a framework of action that has long been overdue, at least for more than three decades. And, coming in the midst of the pandemic, the NEP–2020 drives home an important message: education, even in the worst of times, cannot lag or be held hostage to events beyond one’s control.

‘Rome was not built in a day’, says the adage. Likewise, education or fine tuning the different aspects of education cannot be realised in a day or phase. In a developing country like India, the concept of education has had its various twists and turns over the last seven

decades-plus. Still, we are at a point of time where a vast majority of our youngsters have not seen the portals of schools or colleges even as our nation's visionaries are looking at ways in which the country should evolve educationally in the short and longer-term points of view. And with this comes the bottom line: Education cannot be anachronistic but relevant to the times, which is why very often we talk and chalk out a National Education Policy that is reflective of the current challenges and emerging opportunities.

WHAT THE NEP-2020 ENVISAGES

The NEP, according to a predominant perception, is an attempt to chalk out an education scenario in the country that has the right mix of quality institutions with a focus on research and innovation that fills the ever-challenging needs of the market forces by way of providing what is needed for a changing world. Somehow, from being seen one time as the global source of knowledge and learning, India has fallen off the radar and it is time to put it back on the screen and within the top few globally. In order to achieve the goals, education cannot be seen in a piece-meal fashion. In a political system where the states zealously guard their turfs in law making, the NEP-2020 drives home the point that in the realm of education there is nothing like state or federal rights but only national interests. In other words, the new NEP-2020 is seen as being inclusive, participatory and holistic.

The rationale for the latest NEP-2020 or the key drivers of change are manifold. The higher education system in India is highly fragmented with rigid separation of disciplines and with limited access. The question of autonomy is highly limited to students, teachers and institutions. There has been a lot of talk on research and publications but little action on the ground. Questions abound on institutional leadership and governance; the issue of a regulatory system where much is to be desired with some of the agencies seen to be working in cross purposes or with over lapping jurisdictions; and then the subject of universities going around proliferating affiliation of colleges, including the so-called autonomous ones, bringing into the serious question the enhancement of quality of education.

On the face of it, the NEP–2020 has the potential to transform the educational sector, seeking to put in place a world class education in the pursuit of excellence. The consensus is that the document as put forth and passed is well drafted, researched and consultative with more than two lakh inputs or comments taken into account. It paves the way for a system that seamlessly weaves in a child from kindergarten to postgraduation. The policy raises many larger questions such as the need for an affiliation system that ropes in at times some 10,000 institutions in one umbrella awarding degrees. The NEP–2020 also seeks to revamp the existing regulatory framework ensuring that elements of access, equity, quality, accountability and transparency are continuously and adequately addressed. The new proposed framework also has the required accent and potential to drive aspects of speed, efficiency and academic diversity in higher education space.

THE NEP–2020: DREAMS VS REALITY

The NEP–2020 of 2020 and the policies that evolve around it may on the surface look like a big dream but the basic question is: Why should we not dream big? The NEP–2020 is not just about numbers or how much the country should crowd the portals of higher education. Of course, nothing is perfect, can or would be perfect. But this does not seem to be the time to find fault or deficiencies in a new system that has not even been tried out. Rather the NEP–2020 should be seen as a challenge to leaders and administrators of education keeping in mind the simple and yet critical assumption: the NEP–2020 as envisioned is student-centric and with a simple realisation that changes happening in the international system are so rapid that education cannot be anchored in the past but pushed towards the future with an eye on the principal stakeholder—the student.

There is the belated acknowledgement that today’s education cannot be confined to academics alone; rather it should have a fusion of industry, government and society along with and education that gets beyond classrooms to include laboratory sessions and perhaps on the job training. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind

that the deliverables and choices are essentially left to the student to be able to maneuver as institutions are finding it difficult to deliver the desired goods in any one fixed scheme. In the realm of academics the NEP-2020 – or Education 4.0 – offers a variety of not only three and four year degree programs, but a choice of modes of education through offline, online or mixed, a multi-disciplinary approach that would enable a student to cut across disciplines and specialisations. The use of vocational courses and credits for award of general degrees and the promotion of internationalisation are also collectively an objective. If there is one major take away from the NEP, it is flexibility.

Quite naturally the NEP-2020 as envisioned has identified a number of priorities not just in the realm of academics that would include research but also in the fashion as to how regulatory bodies would have to function in order to give a new and more meaningful thrust to achieving the objectives. There has been late realisation that the earlier regulatory bodies lacked the synergy and hence the commitment to deliver the goods; and also that manageability of a crucial sector like education does not come about by increasing regulatory mechanisms with overlapping jurisdictions that naturally downgrades the functioning of boards. Also, the NEP-2020 realises the need to take a close look at the affiliation system, and removing it as a result of the demerits involved. But the dismantling of the system cannot be done overnight, rather it would be taken in a graduated fashion over a period of around 15 years.

The NEP-2020 offers many things in a changing landscape and some of it specifically addresses the problems faced by education such as affiliation. For instance, student-centric NEP-2020 shows the way, for instance through the Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) of moving away from a homogeneous style of learning to a more heterogeneous system in which a student can chase not only her/his dream but also her/his passion. The entry-exit points are clearly defined along with whether a student can graduate with a degree, diploma or postgraduate diploma, all of their own choices. Students are given the option of shopping around for credits in different institutions, putting them all together with the option of selecting an institution from which to

graduate. The NEP–2020 understands and accepts that a ‘one size fits all’ strategy for education is not the way to go about; instead, the boundaries would have to be flexible.

For instance, a student who has dreamt of being an instrumentation engineer and has a passion for music would not have to sacrifice one for the other. The facilities to tailor a degree or constituents of it must be in the hands of students not regulators. Likewise, the ABC would also have to give the option of multiple points of entry and exits along with flexibility of credits. A student entering a three or four-year college/university program would have the freedom and luxury to complete her/his studies in a fast or slow mode without any stigma and equivalence challenges attached to it.

The student-centric ABC would be the ideal for many who currently have the inability to juggle between courses and credits along with a desire to dabble with different institutions. The suggestions that is being talked about is that with the ABC an academic program, one could be more flexible; credits could be taken in different institutions; credits can be multi-disciplinary; and credits can be in India or from foreign institutions; but at the end of it all a student can have a regular Degree or a Bachelor’s in Liberal Education that would entail the desires of a fulsome student. The ABC within the confines of the New Education Policy is not just about a routine degree in a prescribed time frame and in a rigid academic format but about a young mind being able to flag down her/his dreams with a passion and in whatever design desired by them.

It is laudable that the NEP–2020 looks at increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from the current 26.3 per cent to 50 per cent by the middle of next decade; in sheer numbers, some 3.5 crore students are expected to be added in higher education. But even here educationists and administrators would have to analyse the challenges that have come about as a result of the COVID-19. Education itself is a burning issue which has been crying out for reforms has taken a backseat again due to the COVID-19; but the bigger challenge is in scheduling classes that have been physically shut off for the last more than a year or so or in providing technology to a student in the online mode that is affordable or cost effective.

The problem is not just with providing laptops to students who do not have them or cannot afford them, but also in ensuring that they have enough money for data charges for the entire day of classes. It is evident that education cannot be divorced from technology for the latter has changed all frontiers of the world. Information Technology is bringing about unprecedented changes in higher education in this pandemic and one that has to be carefully factored into the system and sustained on a long-term basis.

There is no doubt that the general transformation in education as put through in the NEP-2020 is driven by new technologies where future education, including examinations, would need to be handheld by changes in technology through smart classrooms, biometric eye tracking, 3-D printing, cloud technologies, collective learning through social networking, holograms, augmented and virtual reality, artificial intelligence, game-based learning and LCD Desks, to mention a few. But for the student NEP-2020 presents a profound transformation in framing a degree that will have flexibility and quality as central planks when choosing faculty, courses, timings, mode and even taking examinations 'on demand'. The versatility of this higher education would hence move away from a single-track silos approach to a more broad-based system that would make education a desire for lifelong learning. The same goes for examinations where many of the technologies listed can be used more flexibly, away from the rigidities of the past, to create a system that enables students to go for open examinations that too in a time frame which is comfortable to them.

On the financial front, one of the pillars of the NEP-2020 is to set apart 6 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product for education, which for a country like India is impressive indeed. Currently, the annual spending on education is less than 3 per cent of the GDP. But overall outlays of spending on education should be without any caveats, such as earmarking much of these funds only to central institutions. The Union Ministry should take care of self financing institutions as many of them do not have deep pockets as imagined in some quarters. Private educational institutions do indeed set apart a chunk of their earnings to constantly upgrade their infrastructural facilities that

would include hiring of top notch teachers and adding on to higher tech labs together with providing research scholars with additional facilities. Unlike in the west where private institutions have the facility to fall back on earnings of billions of dollars of endowment funds, private entities in India do not have such luxury. Further, even within the realm of setting apart funding annually, the central government must allocate a large chunk of the money for research.

In the context of finances, policy makers should also come to terms with the structure of the education system in India that follows an inverted model where the fee structure for quality high schools is very high compared to that of quality universities which is reasonable or low. In the teaching learning process should a financial shortfall occur, private institutions must be permitted to raise their fee structure appropriately. In fact, in the new autonomous environment today, IITs and IIMs have been allowed this facility; the same must be granted to self financing colleges who constantly face the resource crunch.

Education indeed has come a very long way, and this is the time to look forward to ensure that the children of India have a future that goes beyond our shores as well. It is one thing for a young mind to learn from the past, but a totally different one to be pegged or anchored on to an old-fashioned way of thinking that will see the world pass by. In the last seventy years or so, India has had the misfortune of seeing thousands of its young minds leaving the country for a better place to study. This brain drain, contrary to the political rhetoric that is being spewed occasionally, has not been reversed. The flow of Indian youth to the West may have slowed especially to the United States, not because of diminishing standards in that country but for many different reasons like other institutions in the Asia Pacific offering alternatives, established Western institutions setting up campuses in our neighborhood and fluctuations in foreign exchange, to mention just a few.

But, thanks to the NEP, the internationalisation of education is slowly going to catch up in India and in different ways. The pockets of excellence by way of teaching and research, extension publications and patents is gradually picking up in Indian campuses. The NEP-

2020 is permitting, in the name of globalisation, the setting up of foreign universities paving the way for domestic institutions to compete with foreign universities for rankings and ratings. Knowledge and learning has come to be no longer an exclusive preserve of the West with South Korea, Taiwan, China and Israel emerging as hot spots with institutions of excellence; India is also making headway overseas with possibilities of joint doctoral programs.

Internationalising education has come to mean different things to different institutions over and beyond just keeping the focus on foreign degrees. An institution like SRMIST which is multi-disciplinary in nature has more than 160 MoUs with foreign universities and throws open its education to students and faculty by way of the semesters abroad and faculty exchange programmes while keeping itself open to receiving foreign students for a range of programmes like the post-doctoral fellow to short-term programs as well. Integrated and twinning programmes are also on the unveil, keeping the doors open for free credit transfers. And slowly but steadily Indian institutions are being invited to set up campuses abroad even if for the time being prime specialisation areas are Medicine and Engineering. For now, India's interest is in the immediate neighborhood of South Asia and the Middle East, while keeping our eyes open for distance/online/virtual modes especially for the African continent.

CONCLUSION

The regulatory framework for foreign campuses in India may have to be better fine-tuned and the NEP-2020 will have to evolve itself to see how the new models are going to be developed that are going to be for mutual benefit, keeping in mind the need to maintain the social fabric of our country. For the present, a lot of uncertainty exists by way of the pandemic where academics both in India and the overseas face challenging times, especially on the monetary front. If the West is seeing colleges and smaller universities shuttering because of lack of foreign students in some states, in India, institutions face the financial crunch of students being unable to pay fee because of economic compulsions.

There is one thing about life that also holds good for education: the inevitability of change as nothing is permanent. Knowledge does not have a shelf life, but at the same time knowledge has to adapt with the changing times. It is often said that broader objectives are achieved only when goal posts are present, seen or understood; at the same time, goals are difficult to achieve when the goal posts of knowledge keep changing. There is nothing wrong in dreaming; great nations come into place only because there were “Big Dreamers”, but in this fast changing globalised world, passionate dreamers are becoming difficult to identify. Hopefully, the NEP–2020 will set in motion a pattern of ideas and thinking that is qualitatively different from that of the yester years.

Just as how nothing is permanent in life; nothing is perfect either. Seen in this perspective, the third Education Policy since Independence that has been crafted by the present government is something that has to evolve and take shape keeping in mind that it is a serious attempt to develop the thinking of a young mind from a toddler to that of a grown-up young adult. In between all the differences that individuals and the governance might have, hopefully the focus will be on bettering the education of the country to make it on a par with the top two or three in the world, making it more relevant and impactful.