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## NEW EDUCATION POLICY AND THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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### ABSTRACT:

*The New Education Policy passed in the year 2020 promises to overhaul the entire education system in India aligning it with the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. The policy proposes some major changes in school education in order to meet the needs of the time. But overall, the policy doesn't seem to come up with anything strikingly different from the past policies. As far as school education is concerned, like previous policies, it also promises an increase in public funding of education, equitable quality education with lifelong learning opportunities for all among other things. Provision for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the policy is although being hailed as something path breaking but there have been schemes like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) which caters to the ECCE needs. Moreover, the performance of the same government at centre in this direction which has come up with the new education policy doesn't seem to be encouraging at all. Whether it is the public funding of education, or the ICDS, or the condition of Aganwadi system, or the penetration and even distribution of digital technology in the country is concerned, the performance of the current government has not been better than the previous ones in any respect. In such a scenario, it is very difficult to convince oneself that this policy is a panacea for all the ills of the education system. Unless and until the problems as discussed in the paper are fixed before hand, the policy is bound to fall short of its promises.*



**KEYWORDS:** National Education Policy (NEP), School education, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Aganwadi centres (AWCs), Digital Technology, Samagra Shiksha.

### INTRODUCTION

After more than three decades, the government of India has once again come up with a new National Education Policy to revise and revamp the whole education system with new rules of its regulation, governance, and management. The policy claims to have a goal of creating a new education system very much aligned with the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. It claims to target the Goal 4 (SDG4) of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development which India adopted in 2015 and which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030” (NEP, 2020, p.3). The policy proposes to reconfigure the entire educational scenario in India so as

to create an atmosphere which supports and foster learning for all without any discrimination on socio-economic grounds. No doubt, the policy proposes some major changes in the educational setup of the country which is bound to have far-reaching consequences for all the sections of society. This paper tries to evaluate the policy on different parameters by looking into the details of the policy, trying to read between the lines of the document so that an accurate picture of the government's aims and objectives regarding school education can be put forth.

### **MAJOR CHANGES PROPOSED BY THE POLICY:**

The new policy for education proposes some major changes in the School Education which are as follows:

1. The policy proposes to change the existing 10+2 structure in school education to a new curricular and pedagogical structure of 5+3+3+4 design which consists of the Foundational Stage (in two parts, that is, 3 years of Anganwadi/pre-school + 2 years in primary school in Grades 1-2 (both together covering ages 3-8), Preparatory Stage (Grades 3-5, covering ages 8-11), Middle Stage (Grades 6-8, covering ages 11-14), and Secondary Stage (Grades 9-12 in two phases, i.e., 9 and 10 in the first and 11 and 12 in the second, covering ages 14-18)" (NEP, 2020; p.12). The option of exiting after Grade 10 and enrolling in vocational or any other courses available in Grades 11-12 with a chance to study and learn at a more specialized school will continue. Presently, the 10+2 structure does not cover the children in the age group of 3-6 as class 1 begins at age of 6. But, now the policy proposes to include children in the age group of 3-6 so as to lay a strong base of early childhood care and Education of the children of this age group, the importance of which is very much evident everywhere now. The provision for ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) is the focal point of this policy document for which government has proposed several steps in the document.
2. The policy also has a flexible approach providing learners the freedom to choose their learning trajectories and programmes with no hard separations between arts and sciences, between curricular and extra-curricular activities, between vocational and academic streams, etc. The reason as stated in the policy is to eliminate harmful hierarchies between different areas of learning. Students are free to shape their lives according to their talents and interests. The policy promotes multidisciplinary holistic education across the different areas of learning i.e. sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts, and sports for a multidisciplinary world thus ensuring the unity and integrity of all knowledge.
3. One of the significant changes the policy proposes is to accord the highest priority to achieving foundational literacy and numeracy by all students by Grade 3. The abysmal learning status of children in government primary schools and only slightly better in the Private schools, as reported by various National and International surveys including those conducted by non-governmental organizations, have raised alarms for all the concerned stake holders compelling the government to take every possible step in the direction of improving the current status. The government has proposed several steps in this direction like filling the teacher vacancies with significantly low pupil to teacher ratio (PTR); to ensure that all students are school ready, an interim 3-month play-based 'school preparation module' for all Grade 1 students; building a national repository of high-quality resources on foundational literacy and numeracy to be made available on the Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA); Peer tutoring and other volunteer activities to support learners in developing basic foundational and numeracy skills; expansion of public and school libraries along with the establishment of Digital libraries; provision for nutrition and health of the children (including mental health) on a priority basis with the idea of providing a simple but energizing breakfast in addition to midday meals; involving trained social workers, counselors and the community at large in the school education system are some of the steps proposed in this direction.
4. The policy also emphasizes upon reducing the dropout rate at all levels with greater emphasis at secondary level. The cooperation of civil society groups has also been sought by the government in this direction. The government has made many promises like provision of adequate and effective infrastructure in all schools from pre-primary to Grade 12; Alternative and innovative education

centres as well as conveyance and hostel arrangements so as to prevent dropout among children of disadvantaged groups and pull them back into the mainstream education; facilitating learning for all students with special emphasis on Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) through multiple pathways to learning involving both formal and non-formal education modes within the school education; expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Programmes offered by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and State Open Schools to meet the learning requirements of those who are not able to attend a physical school; introduction of vocational education courses/programmes, other adult literacy and life-enrichment programmes for those who dropped out or could not study to give them one more opportunity to educate themselves and enhance various skills.

5. One of the contentious proposals of the policy is to lower down the establishment norms for schools so that it becomes easy for both governments as well as non-governmental philanthropic organizations to build & run schools with greater emphasis on output potential concerning desired learning outcomes rather than the inputs. Other models for schools such as schools under public-philanthropic partnerships will also be promoted according to the policy. It also urges state/UT governments to adopt innovative formats like school complexes, rationalization of schools for effective governance of schools, community building, and optimal use of resources without reducing the accessibility. The policy has a greater emphasis upon the idea of creating 'School complexes' which, according to the document, would help in more effective management of limited men and material resources so that an effective learning environment could be created.
6. The policy proposes a change in the highly contentious three language formula giving greater flexibility to choose languages with no imposition of any language on any State. The States, regions as well as students will be free to choose any three languages as long as at least two of them are native to India. As far as medium of instruction is concerned, the policy proposes to make until at least Grade 5 but preferably till grade 8 and beyond, the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language as the medium of instruction for both public as well as private schools.
7. It recommends setting up of a National Assessment centre PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) which would be a standard-setting body under MHRD entrusted with the task of setting norms, standards, and guidelines for the assessment of students and evaluation of all recognized school boards of India, guiding the State Achievement Survey (SAS) along with undertaking the National Achievement Survey (NAS); monitoring the learning outcomes in the country; and encouraging and assisting the school boards to shift their assessment patterns so as to meet the skill requirements of the 21st century as emphasized in the policy.

These are some of the major changes that this policy document recommends. Apart from these, replacing the summative assessment system with regular formative one in order to reduce the dependence of students on coaching classes; extensive use of digital technology in teaching and learning; reduction in curriculum content to its core essentials making space for more holistic learning; not engaging teachers in non-teaching activities and in strenuous administrative tasks that are not directly related to teaching; more emphasis on the education and training of teachers are some of the proposed changes this policy envisages.

### CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE NEP 2020

On comparing the new National Education Policy, 2020 passed in the current regime with the previous ones, nothing much significant comes out as strikingly different. Though some provisions which were not formally a part of the previous policies like Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) are now made an important part of the new policy, nevertheless the concept was, more or less, already prevalent with an another name and scheme. Some other changes like emphasis on digital technology for teaching and learning are the need of present times which has been accorded due importance in the

document. A critical evaluation of the major changes proposed in the policy has been done in the following sections-

**Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE):** The provision of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in the new education policy has drawn attention of many and has brought laurels for the government too. There is no doubt about it that ECCE is very important in the trajectory of a child's growth and development. But neither the concept is new nor is this the first time that any government has recognized its significance. Moreover, the policy also does not explicitly propose making education from pre-primary to class 12, a fundamental right of every children of the nation through an amendment in the RTE Act, 2009 in the near future. So, the status of ECCE is almost same as before as there have been policies in the past too which had been addressing the issue and is continuing till today. One such scheme is the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), launched in 1975 under the Indira Gandhi government. It is a flagship programme of the Government of India and represents one of the world's largest programmes for early childhood care and education catering to the nutritional, health and educational needs of the children in the age group of 0-6 years, pregnant women and lactating mothers. This scheme offers a package of six services which includes Supplementary Nutrition; Pre-school non-formal education; Nutrition & health education; Immunization; Health check-up; and Referral services.

Further, the new policy aims to deliver ECCE through the same Anganwadis (stand-alone Anganwadis and Anganwadis co-located with primary schools) which are already providing the similar services to the targeted population under the ICDS scheme. Only the new additions are the two other proposed institutions for ECCE services which are stand-alone pre-schools and pre-primary schools/sections covering at least age 5 to 6 years co-located with existing primary schools. The policy also envisages a "Preparatory class" or "Balvatika" before class 1 with an ECCE-qualified teacher to make children school-ready with developed cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities and early literacy and numeracy (NEP 2020). While the fate of the proposed institutions are still in the garb of future, it is the Anganwadis only which can be relied upon for the early educational and care related needs of today's children of 0-6 years of age. Thus, it becomes imperative to assess the performance of these Anganwadis and more so, the performance of the current government at the centre in this direction to gauge the extent of seriousness the government holds for ECCE as it promises in the policy document.

As said earlier, ICDS, a programme meant to provide basic education, health and nutrition services for early childhood development is currently functioning in all over India with some new sub-programmes added to it by the new government at centre, the pattern of allocations made by the Government of India (GOI) towards this programme seems to be hardly encouraging. For example, it was reported that for Financial Year (FY) 2019-20, according to the estimations (at full coverage), 40,423 crore were required to fund the Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP), a main component of ICDS. But total approvals (using both GOI and state shares) stood at just Rs 17,648 crore, only 44% of the required amount (Kapur & Shukla, 2020). Moreover, though the releases by GOI from its approved share has been significantly high (more than 90% between FY 2016-17 and FY 2018-19), our state governments have failed to utilize all the funds released from centre with high variations across states. In FY 2018-19, only 44 per cent of the total funds released from GOI was utilized (Kapur & Shukla, 2020).

Similarly, low coverage is also a challenge for the government. The ICDS Management Information System (MIS) data shows that the number of children receiving SNP and PSE (Non-formal Pre-School Education) is declining over the years. Between March 2014 and June 2019, the number of children (6 months – 6 years) receiving SNP fell by 20 per cent and those aged 3-6 years receiving PSE declined by 18% (Kapur & Shukla, 2020). The slow progress by many States on reducing malnutrition was also recorded by the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) in 2019-20 which found that stunting among children under five years of age increased in 13 out of 22 states and Union Territories (UTs) for which data were available and wasting increased in 12 states and UTs compared to the previous round in 2015-16 (Kapur et al., 2021).

Moreover, the Aganwadi system is facing a crunch of both human and physical resources. Various sanctioned posts for Child Development Project Officers (CDPOs) and Lady Supervisors (LSs) remain vacant with huge variations across states. There is a shortage of mini AWCs in many states despite high populations which are meant for small habitations with population between 150 and 400 in rural and urban projects, and between 150 and 300 for Adivasi/Riverine/Desert, hilly, and other difficult projects. As on 30 June 2019, only 74 per cent AWCs had toilets across India with Himachal Pradesh reported to have toilets for all AWCs while Odisha, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan reported to have toilets in slightly more than 50% of AWCs (Kapur & Shukla, 2020). Many of the AWCs still operate in Kutcha buildings with some states like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar having very high proportion of such AWCs. The remuneration paid to them is also very low which leads them to go on strike time and again. These are bound to have a negative effect on their performance and morale as front line workers providing the important services of ECCE. Even during the covid-19 pandemic, they were not paid their meager salaries on time due to which they were compelled to go on a nation-wide strike in the month of August together with Asha workers demanding better pay, health Insurance and other needful facilities (Bhandare, 2020).

The policy also recommends shifting of AWCs to schools but if we look at the status as on June 2019, only 18% AWCs are in schools with Uttar Pradesh having the highest proportion (60%) while States and UTs like Gujarat, Delhi and Arunachal Pradesh having no AWCs in schools (Kapur & Shukla, 2020). It means a lot of funds will be needed before this could become a reality and it is very well known that the government primary schools are already functioning with meager resources with many schools operating through a single room only.

**Digital Technology in Teaching & Learning:** One of the major steps which the policy proposes is the extensive use of Digital Technology in teaching and learning. Apart from this, the policy also proposes training of teachers and further, of AWWs largely through distance mode by the use of ICT tools. The proposal sounds very nice and has significance in the wake of covid-19 pandemic with its limitations already being discussed and debated in the public and academic circles. But, in the long run this idea does not look feasible till the penetration of the facilities required for its operation goes deeper into the remote areas. A report on the 75<sup>th</sup> round survey by National Statistical Organisation (NSO) conducted from July 2017 to June 2018 showcases the stark digital divide that exists across States, cities and villages, and income groups. If there is Himachal Pradesh with 70% of households having access to internet, only 6% of households have access to internet in rural Odisha (Special Correspondents, 2020). Affordability of the various gadgets along with other facilities required for it is also a big issue as still poverty is rampant in India with uneven distribution across states. Only one in ten households have a computer in the form of a desktop, laptop or tablet across India with 42% of households in cities having internet access while it is only 15% in rural India (Special Correspondents, 2020). E-learning relies heavily on the accessibility and availability of technology. In such a case, little or no availability of electricity in large part of country is enough to shatter the dreams of educating children online through gadgets. In a 2017-18 survey by the Ministry of Rural Development, it was found that only 47% of households in India receive more than 12 hours of electricity and more than 36% of schools in India do not have the facility of electricity (Modi & Postaria, 2020).

Digital divide is a reality in today's India and without tackling this challenge, going ahead with the ideas of digitalization of teaching, learning and training processes seems to exacerbate the already prevalent inequality, inequity and low quality in school education system in India. It may lead to more children from disadvantaged background to drop out of the schools or their silent exclusion as they will be discouraged further not getting the level playing field thus making a ripe ground for an increase in child labour force or child marriages. According to a report based on the 2017-18 NSSO, a mere 13% of surveyed people (aged above 5) in rural areas with just 8.5% of females were able to use internet at the time of survey (Modi & Postaria, 2020). This is enough to show the vulnerability of the girls who are often loaded with lots of domestic chores having hardly any time to spend on education at home. Thus,



going for the digitization of education system without handling first the challenges it involves will only create more problems than solving the current ones.

**Budgetary Promises and current trends in spending:** Like previous National policies on Education, this new policy also reiterates the same promise of investing 6% of GDP as an urgent requirement if the goal of affordable and quality education to all is to be achieved. The document itself admits that the current rate of public investment in education is not adequate. But, it is also true that, so far, no government has been able to achieve the target of investing 6% of GDP in the India's public education system and so the question arises whether this government would be able to create a history or like previous governments it will also fall short of its promise. The current trends, so far, do not seem to toe the line of today's Government of India.

Jyotsna Jha & Madhusudan Rao (2019) reports that since 2015, analysis of state and central education finances, over the years reveals that public spending on school education has actually decreased if corrected for inflation. They also report a decline in the share of the union budget allocated to education from 4.14% in 2014-15 to 3.4% in 2019-20 and a decline in budget for school education in absolute terms also from Rs 38,600 crores in 2014-15 to Rs 37,100 crore in 2018-19 (based on the budget revised estimates). Whereas the policy urges for more funding on the part of states, the trends indicate opposite of that. The spending on education by the states has also seen a reduction in several states in the recent years, especially after the 14th Finance Commission period of 2015-16 to 2018-19 (Jha & Rao, 2019). Several states like Kerala have also reduced the share of funds spent on school education even as their revenue has increased in the period (Jha & Rao, 2019).

In April, 2018, the Government of India launched an integrated scheme for school education-Samagra Shiksha to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education from pre-school to senior secondary classes, a step ahead towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Education. Three existing schemes at that point of time were integrated into Samagra Shiksha scheme namely, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education (TE). The pattern of allocations made by the GOI in previous three financial years i.e. from 2018-2021 doesn't seem encouraging and the final expenditure by different States out of the released amount also paints a dismal picture of the whole scenario. There is a slight increment in the budgetary allocation for the scheme year by year but it is still far away from those projected by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) or even the MoE. The CCEA had approved an outlay of Rs 34,000 crore for FY 2018-19, but the revised allocations (REs) stood at Rs 30,781 crore. Similarly, in FY 2019-20, the revised allocations were Rs 4,726 crore less than the projected amount. In FY 2020-21, the revised allocations were 39 per cent lower than those projected by MoE (Bordoloi & Kapur, 2021). Further, GOI's release of its allocated fund to States under Samagra Shiksha was also declining even when there was no Covid-19 pandemic. In FY 2018-19, GOI released 95 per cent of its allocations. It came down to 89 percent in FY 2019-20, and only 40 percent of the revised allocations by GoI had been released till October 2020 in FY 2020-21 (Bordoloi & Kapur, 2021).

Expenditures as a proportion of total approved budgets have also been low and declining. In FY 2018-19, 64 per cent of the total approved budget for Samagra Shiksha was spent. This decline continued in FY 2019-20 with only 59 percent spent. Even the pace of spending has been slow as in FY 2019-20, States spent only 22 per cent of the total approved budget under Samagra Shiksha (including state share) during the first seven months of FY 2019-20 even when there was no pandemic in the scene (Bordoloi & Kapur, 2021).

The NEP also thrust upon the philanthropic efforts in the education system including the funding through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but the figures for the past years in this regard does not promise something significant. Despite 37% of all money through CSR being spent on education in 2016-17, it amounted to only about Rs 24,00 crore which is less than 0.1% of the total public funding on education by the Union and State governments. These figures are enough to show just how much a nation like India with huge population could depend upon such sources and it has also been witnessed that they are not spent where they are needed the most (Jha & Rao, 2021).

One more thing that is quite evident in the funding pattern is that whereas the total budgetary allocations for education has declined, the cess, which was revamped in 2018-19 into a health and education cess at 4% subsuming the 2% education cess in 2004 introduced to fund the universal mid-day meals in primary schools and 1% secondary and higher education, has contributed to 70% of the total public expenditure since 2015. This shows how the cess which was meant to cushion the government's expenditure on education has become a regular tool to fund education expenditure rather than its provisioning through the annual budget (Jha & Rao, 2021).

Further, it seems that the experts involved in the formulation of policy had turned a blind eye to the mistakes done in the past. The proposed Alternative education centres is one such mistake as it has been seen that the previous attempts like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) failed to provide quality education to the children and was marred with many problems due to which it was subsequently stopped. Similarly, proposals like Online Distance Learning (ODL), Peer-tutoring, and volunteering as well as involving civil society in the teaching learning process can be an add-on to the regular quality education in a regular school which is the right of each and every child. But, if the government intends to abdicate its responsibility in the garb of these methods, the goals set by the policy will never be achieved in its entirety. Some provisions like ODL and Alternative Education Centres are done in the policy so that the poor children can work and study together but these provisions are bound to increase the problem of child labour as well as child marriages and the provided education would be of far lower quality than the education they will receive in a regular school.

Similarly, the policy talks about reducing the minimum requirements for setting up a school either government or private. Minimum requirements are generally set so as to maintain the minimum quality of education being provided to the children. Relaxing the minimum norms as provided in the RTE Act may also have a detrimental effect on the quality of education being provided by the different kinds of schools. Further, rationalization of schools which means closing of the schools having less children which has been witnessed in the recent past or merging them with some bigger schools to make school complexes without proper arrangement before hand for the affected children can have a negative impact on their access to educational opportunities.

### CONCLUSION:

The new policy on education like the previous ones makes many promises but whether it will succeed in its goals or would remain just a pious document like the previous education policies is yet to be seen. But one thing is sure that the challenges ahead are manifold and without tackling them properly, the promises made in the document cannot be fulfilled. So far, the current trends in the education system do not seem to go well with the promises. Whether it is early childhood care and education (ECCE), digitalization of education, the financing of education, infrastructural improvement, Teacher training, or promotion of equitable, inclusive and quality education, a lot more is needed to be done to set things in the right direction.

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