

Note on Education Policy in India

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Abstract

A state intervenes in the education space of a country largely through policies. In the context of a capitalistic democracy as the economic and political system like the case in India, a challenge between preparation of 'human capital' for the capitalists and creation of good citizens of its democracy may exist. There are two main challenges the note recognizes as impediments to a substantive shift to a holistic education. One is the broader discourse of measurement and tracking of students and schools. Many components of what can be interpreted as components of a holistic education, do not lend themselves to measurement easily (taking examples of building character, co-curricular activities). Second is implementation of formulated policy documents. While policy documents may exude objectivity in terms of its aims and the steps it takes, implementation of these formulated policies is often marred with conflicting values. This is keeping aside the notion that much of what gets written in policy documents does not find their way to the ground (at least substantively). For example, spirituality have marked their presence in Indian policy documents from Kothari commission's 1966 report onwards, 'yoga' since 1992, but did not make a mark as a primary focus of the government, until very recently in 2016, when the focus on yoga has been overly emphasized in both the policy documents (New Education policy) and in the political discourse in India. Much of the worry around these, do not stem from the exercise itself, but from those advocating it - what one can clearly see as passing off a politically driven ideology under a seemingly innocuous exercise.

I. Background

Education policies in India have evolved post-independence from 1948-2016 – University Education Commission 1948, Secondary Education Commission (1952), Kothari Commission 1964-66, Draft National Policy on Education (1979), New education National Policy of Education, 1992, the Right to Education Act in 2009, followed by the recent New Education Policy based on T S R Subramanian's recommendations (in the draft stage), in 2016. Each of these exemplifies the focus of the period in which in they were formed and implemented. The broad trend can be understood as a shift from the initial focus on university and higher education, to primary schooling (Kothari Commission and Right to Education) to primary education, more recently on skill development (New Education Policy, 2016).

The focus is largely on polices made post-independence. The challenges have been seen through the lens of their implementation and on the extensive focus on measurement. Some challenges of education policy gets reflected in the policy documents, some in more explicit indicators like in the case of Result Framework Documents (RFDs), reports in newspapers and government reports that highlight

what the government thinks they have achieved. Given that morals, values and spirituality, do not lend themselves to measurability, featuring in the policy documents do not ensure their implementation or importance in policy circles.

2. Challenges

a. Aims and objectives of the India education systems

In the hierarchy of -isms, our policies are still at and vigorously propagating nationalism. Education policies are yet to recognize the importance (at least explicitly) of humanism and universalism.

b. Building secular spaces

School can be understood as a secular space and is publicized as one. But, a visit to a government school will highlight insidious ways through which certain sections of the country are trying to establish their monopoly in the school space. For example, there are photos of Saraswati and freedom fighters (the construction of who gets identified a freedom fighter is also marred with debate). Some notable factors are, there is no representation of female fighters, the selection of the photographs is also highly politicised. With a change in political party in power, quite a few things change for a government school. For example, quotes of Jawaharlal Nehru being replaced. This is not to point to any one political party, the phenomenon continues with every switch in government.

c. Education as a means of social equity

'Education is often seen as a socially equalizing force, but does it really contribute in reducing social inequality is a question often asked (Raudenbush & Eschmann, 2015). (Hallinan, 1988) points out that there are various processes in an educational environment that increase/decrease societal inequalities. Lewin & Caillods (2001) highlight that if access to quality education is restricted, participation is skewed in favour of the advantaged. Some aspects of education, like demand in education can be generated by, passing laws on compulsory schooling, or emphasizing the benefits of education (Fuller & Rubinson 1992), but in the long run, this demand will depend on improving school quality and real benefits of education. Government mandated free and compulsory education also has had varying impacts in different countries. In rapidly industrializing states, like Hong Kong and Malaysia, the educational attainment was complemented by increased opportunities for children of all backgrounds (Post, 1994). Educational policies in Malaysia (Lillard & Willis 1994) and the Philippines (King & Lillard 1987) have had similar effects. But, Smith & Cheung (1986) find that, despite educational attainment, the class differentiations remained stable. Educational policies in South Africa also led to greater opportunities for blacks (Seidman 1999, Treiman et al 1996).

J.P. Naik highlighted the elitist nature of education and the nature of its exploitation. Instead of its popular perception as an equalizer, education systems

have not lived up this, and serve as a reproducer of inequalities that exist in the society. While policy documents highlight that the purpose of education to to “Addressing equity aspects” through increased schooling reach, and residential facilities for teachers in remote and hilly areas” (NUEPA, 2014), “improving teacher quality and performance” has been recognised as one of the educational development priorities by (NUEPA, 2014) there are no direct indicators measure the impact of these on economic or social inequality.

d. Inclusivity

A common space where children, irrespective of their background study together has been in policy books since independence, and was codified in the form of a common school system, proposed by the Kothari commission in 1966. Ever since, schooling systems have become increasingly segregated. Schools for the poor have become poor schools. The nature of the education system is still catering to the needs of the elite. The enrolment rates in India have increased dramatically, and parents from most communities and areas wish to send their children to school. Reports from Annual Status Of Education Report (ASER) consistently show poor learning in mathematics and language. For example, their 2012 study shows that, around 50% of the children in class 5 cannot read a class 2 textbook and so on. If this learning is considered important, not only are schools not meeting their expectations, the situation can easily be understood as a betrayal of parents who could have otherwise provided their children with skills that may provide employment to them.

The Right to Free and Compulsory Education, 2009, as mandated private schools to fill 25% of their seats at entry level class from children from economically weaker sections and disadvantaged backgrounds. Although coming with its shortcomings, the policy is a step towards more inclusive schooling.

e. On morals, spirituality

Spirituality have marked their presence in Indian policy documents from Kothari commission’s 1966 report onwards, ‘yoga’ since 1992, but did not make a mark as a primary focus of the government, until very recently in 2016, when the focus on yoga has been overly emphasized in both the policy documents (New Education policy) and in the political discourse in India. Recently there have been measures, for example, introduction of Vedic mathematics as a part of moral education that was proposed by the Madhya Pradesh government recently. We can see tow things here, in the name of moral values, Vedic learning are being introduced into the curriculum. To re-iterate, the challenge is not against the exercise per se, but the identity of the people who are trying to push for these changes. The steps taken to introduce measures in the name of morals and values are accompanied with a sense of realigning values and morals to be inculcated in children. But there is an uncanny silence on what these values and morals are, how are they to be implemented and measured to its purported aim.

f. Language

Being a highly multi-lingual country and the history of English playing a rather divisive role in political circles, language has been a challenge, ever since our country got independence. Although a three language formula, and its variants have been propagated ever since the first policies on education.

Although there is a consensus that mother tongue is the language in which children learn initially, and is accepted in all policy documents post independence. The demand for education in English has not been overcome. There are a number of low-budget private schools (NUMBERS) that have mushroomed to address this growing demand. This is only one example of a policy on paper differs starkly from its intended impact on the education system. Further there are challenges of Hindi being forced down the throat of some states and the resistance, elucidate that language being used as a tool for power is more than just a learning tool. These challenges and political clashes in the name of language to be used, makes us wonder if language as knowledge itself, or a means of accessing knowledge?

g. What is education for? Learning levels

Even though India has been doing well in increasing in the enrolment rates, the learning levels are dismal (ASER). Recent studies also show that the private schools work no better than public schools. These low learning levels are accompanied with shifting focus to employable skills. Other measurements that get understood as learning are 'basic literacy and mathematics', without a larger focus on what a child learning (in a broader sense of the term).

h. In higher education

While the note's primary focus is not higher education, we would like to make a quick note of the recent political interference and decisions that affect higher educational institutions. There has been political interference in appointment of important positions like chancellors, vice chancellors in higher education institutes. There has also been an attempt to curtail freedom of students to take part in politics, as highlighted by the recent. The recent imposition of a specific height of a flag to be hoisted in every institute at a time when the actions of the government in different parts of the country were being questioned, may indicate towards a desperate political system, trying to sway its youth away from critically thinking about the actions of the government in the name of nationalism.

3. Discussion and conclusion

The issues highlighted above can be seen through two broad lenses:

a. Implementation of formulated policies:

The implementation of already formulated policy documents, has, both rhetorically and academically, been identified as posing a major challenge in most areas, including education. Having enforced the Right to Free and Compulsory Education in 2009 (implemented in 2010), one may say was a long struggle, but the

underlying motivations and aims of education with some variations have remained broadly the same. Much of the challenges discussed above can be attributed to challenges in implementation.

b. Measurement and tracking: One is the broader discourse of measurement and tracking of students and schools. Many components of what can be interpreted as components of a holistic education, do not lend themselves to measurement easily (taking examples of building character, co-curricular activities). There are several examples that show that there is a focus on more measurable factors. For example, the Draft National Policy on education (1979) highlights the following: "India would have the largest concentration of illiterate population by the year 2000 A.D. The country will have 54.8% of the world's illiterate population in the age group of 15-19." Although, this is a tangible and a valid concern, policy framing taking feedback only in the form that easily enumerated, is a concern. Easily measurable factors give a limited view of the identification of issues faced by the education system. Let us take another example of examination that is an important feature of modern education. There has been overemphasis on examinations as the single most important measure of merit. As identified as early as 1953 by the Mudaliar committee, leading to a lack of focus on those areas, that cannot be easily examined, for example "formation of character and inculcate ideals which make for personal integrity and social efficiency."

Recent development of School Education quality index by Niti Ayog (in November 2016) are also an example of standardization and attempt to capture the performance of a school in quantitative terms. The chances of losing the larger picture are higher.

Appendix:

The education commissions setup in India

1. The Indian Education Commission, or Hunter Commission, 1882
2. The Indian Universities Commission, 1902.
3. The Calcutta University Commission, 1917-19.
4. The Hartog Committee, 1928-29.
5. Abbot-Wood Committee, 1936-37.
6. Zakir Hussain/Wardha Committee on Basic Education, 1938.
7. The Sergeant Report, 1944.
8. The University Education Commission/ Radhakrishnan Commission, 1948-49.
9. B. G. Kher Committee on Primary Education, 1951.
10. The Secondary Education Commission, 1952-53.
11. Official Language Commission, 1956.
12. The university Grants Commission/ Kunzuru Committee Report.
13. The Education Commission/ Kothari Commission, 1964-66.
14. Dr. Trigun Sen/ Higher

Education Committee Report, 1967. 15. The Study Group Reports on the Teaching of English, 1967-71. 16. National Policy on Education, 1986.
17. Archarya Ramamurti Commission, 1990.
(Choudhary. S, 2009, p. 518)

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Commission reports

1. Secondary education commission Dr. L.S. Mudiliar
2. Education Commission (D.S. Kothari) 1964-66
3. 1968 education policy formulated.
4. Draft National Policy on Education (1979)
5. Right to Free and Compulsory Act (2009)
6. Draft of New Education Policy (2016)