Draft education policy leaves a lot to be desired

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THE draft National Education Policy (NEP) document, released soon after the new government was formed, has been a matter of discussion and debate across the country. The document is an amalgamation of disjoint ideas which are neither concretised nor fleshed out, and the policy comes across as 'hanging in the air' and not grounded in Indian reality. The main thrust of the policy is towards centralisation, major restructuring of the school and higher educational systems, and drawing upon ancient Indian traditions to provide directions for the future. If one reads between the lines, one realises that the NEP document is actually geared towards facilitating the acceleration and legitimisation of the process of privatisation of education. This will further marginalise the weaker sections of society and delink them from mainstream educational processes. Not engaging seriously with the existing educational structures and not paying attention to previous educational policies are the other lacunae in this policy. The policy attempts to invent a new educational system without setting out to reform the existing one, projected to be a positive aspect of it, but is in fact its most problematic feature.

The policy advocates beginning of formal schooling at the age of three. This is exactly what is happening in the private school system today, where students are being taught the alphabet and counting at the age of three. Several studies indicate that burdening children at the primary school level actually encourages rote learning and suppresses their creativity. The document advocates a three-language scheme where children will simultaneously learn three languages with equal ease. In theory, it may be possible to learn three languages simultaneously. However, in a country where children struggle to learn even one language properly, how will introducing of two more languages in the very beginning help? On another note, the NEP document proposes introducing the semester system in schools, while we are still facing difficulties with the semester system in colleges, where its management has become a major challenge.

There is a great deal of emphasis in the NEP document on teaching the classical Indian languages, namely, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali and Persian in schools. Currently, the major problem that we are facing is in developing the regional languages and in generating educational material for technical subjects in the regional languages: a momentum that we lost about 20 years ago. Instead of bringing that process back on track, the policy talks about teaching classical Indian languages which are rarely used

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or spoken by the people. The NEP document also talks of reviving the glorious traditions of the ancient Indian educational system (specifically with reference to the universities of Takshshila and Nalanda), but only talks about their certain aspects.

The need of the hour is to introspect and embark upon a critical appraisal of these traditions. However, the NEP document does not go beyond their glorification and it is not clear how these ideas will guide us into the future.

The NEP envisages a major restructuring of higher educational systems. It talks about setting up new institutions and universities with a large number of on-campus students, dismantling the mechanism of affiliation of colleges with universities and instead making them autonomous bodies, winding up of technical training institutions such as medical and engineering colleges and integrating them with these large enrolment-based universities. All these ideas do not seem to have a clearly thought-out implementation plan. Currently, these motifs are represented in the private sector universities and this policy document seems to be encouraging these trends in a subtle fashion. It is interesting that the policy talks about treating the public and private sectors on a par — we have seen the disastrous effect of the government's enfranchisement of the private sector in public health, and the same disaster seems to be hinted at in this policy about education.

The policy advocates encouraging religious organisations to patronise education in the manner they deem fit. The document also goes into what the structure of the Board of Governors for private institutions should be, and promotes the view that private owners should be free to appoint the governing body, giving them an unwarranted free hand. Education has been deliberately placed in the Concurrent, Central and State lists to accommodate specific regional needs. The centralised control of all aspects by the proposed Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog headed by the Prime Minister, is therefore, impractical.

On the positive side, entry and exit at different levels and in different ways in the school as well as in the higher education system will help students remain engaged with the education process. For the first time, a policy document explicitly states that primary school teachers' salaries should be on a par with teachers at the middle and senior school levels and there is emphasis on a broad-based liberal arts undergraduate education, where technical subject streams are not completely separated from the humanities and social science. The setting up of a National Research Foundation is a welcome move. Effectively using technology for education, a much-needed reform, is in the policy. However, how to implement these is not spelt out clearly.

Integrating education with development and models of development is very important. The earlier policies were closely linked with these issues. However, in this document, the connection with development is missing. The policy outlines a simplistic measure of increasing enrolment in higher education institutes to 50 per cent by 2035! Given the already high rate of educated unemployed, where will these graduates get absorbed? Indian society is divided into vertical segments in income groups, castes, urban and rural communities, and horizontally, we have a variety of languages and culture. We need to address these societal divisions and contextualise education. The required emphasis on fostering critical and analytical aspects is missing.

The government should spend time and engage with educationists and groups of citizens and hold wide-ranging discussions to undertake a critical appraisal of the policy document.