

The National Education Policy – Little Hope for Change

Medical education is dealt with very briefly in the new National Education Policy. The key change suggested is to do away with medical universities and make medical education a part of the general university system. Higher education is visualized as a broad-based system in which the student is exposed to many disciplines in the early stages before focusing on a specific subject or area. The medical student will have exposure to the humanities and the arts so as to develop not only as a professional but as a human being.

The document starts with school education, moves on to higher education, then to areas like professional education and ends with some recommendations for implementing the policies suggested. Some themes are repeatedly stressed – equity, scientific temper, holistic development not only of individuals but of the country. Simultaneously, there is a reference to “Sanskrit knowledge systems” and “Indian Knowledge systems”. Unless these terms are defined and it is clear that they are included merely as a part of epistemology, there is a definite possibility that it will be used by groups who argue for the exceptionalism of ancient knowledge from the Indian subcontinent and more specifically, consider knowledge from India exclusively as knowledge from the Vedas.

This is extremely worrying as this is an unscientific mode of thinking about knowledge, ignores the contributions of non-Vedic knowledge for example from Dravidian languages, considers those who are not from the Vedic tradition as not really “Indian” and creates a conflict between the diverse streams of thought in India. It is true that the document stresses the need for protecting all languages and cultures, but this overemphasis on Sanskrit is a cause for worry, especially because of the wide scope and ambition of the

changes proposed. It is very likely that the government will pick and choose the aspects of the policy it seeks to foreground.

A great emphasis on equity and on inclusiveness in education, thereby allowing people of every social class access to higher education is a welcome feature. Education is not to be restricted only to the public sector, but the possibility of commercialization by the private sector is sought to be eliminated through numerous policy initiatives; allowing only not-for-profit entities to start educational institutions and regulatory oversight of finance and policies. It is interesting that the NITI- Aayog, on the other hand, initially suggested the sale of 50 per cent of seats in medical colleges to the highest bidder. It will be interesting to watch how this ideological difference between the two arms of the same government will play out. Will those who believe in collective effort and cooperation win over those who believe that everything should be sold?

The uneasy coexistence of the need to modernize with a need to valorize Vedic knowledge leads to an incoherent document. It appears as though there are two conflicting lines of thought among those who prepared these policies – one group for modern, scientific, inclusive, equitable policies and another group for returning to a mythical past of the supremacy of “Indian knowledge systems” whatever they may be. While one can understand the need to document, study and build on the knowledge in ancient India, it is difficult not to be uneasy about the repeated emphasis on Sanskrit and “Sanskrit knowledge systems” as though it is the only ancient knowledge available in the Indian subcontinent. The scanty references to other languages like Persian, Pali, Prakrit and the even scantier references to Tamil, which is widely accepted to be the oldest living language are causes for concern.

It will be widely interpreted as an attempt at the hegemony of Sanskrit. The idea of “Sanskrit knowledge systems” is

regressive. How can a language be a system of knowledge? Why not then, a Tamil knowledge system? Instead of learning from the past to move towards a better future, such ideas perpetuate and entrench divisions. A whole school of “scholars” will be created whose only purpose is to perpetuate themselves by claiming exclusivity in one form or the other. It is quite against other sections of the document which call for education to be used as a means to develop human abilities as a citizen of the world.

National Education Policy Inclusions for Medical Education



Image

Source:

<https://www.statnews.com/2019/08/29/medical-education-stop-burrowing-out-students/>

In a return to medical education, the document states that the purpose of medical education is to educate doctors for primary and secondary care. It is amazing that so many committees have suggested the same outcome repeatedly, yet policies are made

contrary to this objective. In a strange move, the responsibility for drafting the aims and purposes of the National Medical Commission which replaced the Medical Council of India was given to the NITI- Aayog, a body which is supposed to be concerned with the economy and which has become infamous for its ineptitude in its core function. It will be interesting to watch if the high principles and generally humane outlook of the educationists who drafted the National Education Policy will override the prosaic outlook of the bean counters.

A notable lacuna is that the document does not say how much these proposals will cost. Except for an exhortation to raise the spending on education to 6 per cent of the GDP from the present 4.5 per cent, there is no financial plan. It would have been wise to have had experts on the committee to advise on the resources required. This would have led to a far better document with clear objectives. At present, it reads like a grandiose vision with little hope of being realized in the timelines suggested. Experience has shown that even when clear financial plans are provided, governments are unwilling to commit the resources required. With the present government showing more interest in statues, temples and grand buildings, there is little hope that anything useful comes out of this document.

In summary, the document has presented comprehensive goals to completely revamp school and university education. However, medical education gets only a brief mention. There are contradictory threads with much emphasis on modernization and cooperation juxtaposed with regressive ideas on what knowledge is. A complete absence of financial planning is a major lacuna. One fears that the best of these policies may never be implemented, and the worst may be cherry-picked and showcased as the recommendations of the experts.

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