

A long road: On National Education Policy 2020

The Centre will have to convince States that the National Education Policy benefits all

The National Education Policy 2020 announced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development sets for itself the goal of transforming the system to meet the needs of 21st Century India. In a federal system, any educational reform can be implemented only with support from the States, and the Centre has the giant task of building a consensus on the many ambitious plans. The policy, inter alia, aims to eliminate problems of pedagogy, structural inequities, access asymmetries and rampant commercialisation. The NEP 2020 is the first omnibus policy after the one issued in 1986, and it has to contend with multiple crises in the system. It is no secret that primary schools record shockingly poor literacy and numeracy outcomes, dropout levels in middle and secondary schools are significant, and the higher education system has generally failed to meet the aspirations for multi-disciplinary programmes. In structural terms, the NEP's measures to introduce early childhood education from age 3, offer school board examinations twice a year to help improve performance, move away from rote learning, raise mathematical skills for everyone, shift to a four-year undergraduate college degree system, and create a Higher Education Commission of India represent major changes. Progress on these crucially depends on the will to spend the promised 6% of GDP as public expenditure on education. The policy also says that wherever possible, the medium of instruction in schools until at least Class 5, but preferably until Class 8 and beyond, will be the home language or mother tongue or regional language. This is a long-held view, and has its merits, although in a large and diverse country where mobility is high, the student should have the option to study in the language that enables a transfer nationally. English has performed that role due to historical factors.

There are some good elements to the NEP 2020 that will generate little friction, and need only adequate resourcing. Provision of an energy-filled breakfast, in addition to the nutritious mid-day meal, to help children achieve better learning outcomes, is one. Creation of 'inclusion funds' to help socially and educationally disadvantaged children pursue education is another. Where the policy fails to show rigour, however, is on universalisation of access, both in schools and higher education; the Right to Education needs specific measures to succeed. Moreover, fee regulations exist in some States even now, but the regulatory process is unable to rein in profiteering in the form of unaccounted donations. The idea of a National Higher Education Regulatory Council as an apex control organisation is bound to be resented by States. Similarly, a national body for aptitude tests would have to convince the States of its merits. Among the many imperatives, the deadline to achieve universal literacy and numeracy by 2025 should be a top priority as a goal that will crucially determine progress at higher levels.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **federalism/federal framework/system** (noun) – a system of government in which establishments such as states or provinces share power with a national government.
- ❖ **consensus** (noun) – an idea or opinion that is shared by all the people in a group, agreement, concurrence.
- ❖ **ambitious** (adjective) – aspiring, purposeful, desirous; difficult, demanding, formidable.
- ❖ **inter alia** (adverb) – Latin for “among other things”.
- ❖ **pedagogy** (noun) – teaching, tutoring, coaching/training.
- ❖ **inequity** (noun) – unfairness, partiality, favouritism, bias, prejudice, discrimination.
- ❖ **asymmetry** (noun) – lack of equality, non-uniformity, unevenness, lack of symmetry.
- ❖ **rampant** (adjective) – widespread, present everywhere/pervasive, unrestrained/out of control.
- ❖ **commercialisation** (noun) – the process of doing something to get financial benefit.

- ❖ **omnibus** (adjective) – the Latin word literally meaning “for all”; consisting several parts/items.
- ❖ **contend with** (phrasal verb) – cope with, face, grapple with, deal with.
- ❖ **literacy** (noun) – the ability to read and write.
- ❖ **numeracy** (noun) – the ability to understand numbers and quantitative basics.
- ❖ **aspiration** (noun) – desire, hope, wish, ambition, goal.
- ❖ **multi-disciplinary** (adjective) – combining & involving several disciplines/subjects; comprehensive, thorough, complete, exhaustive.
- ❖ **measure** (noun) – step, action, course of action, plan of action, procedure.
- ❖ **move away from** (phrasal verb) – change/alter one’s ideas/beliefs and so.
- ❖ **rote learning** (noun) – the process of memorizing information based on repetition instead of understanding it.
- ❖ **will** (noun) – wish/desire, intention, decision, choice, disposition.
- ❖ **promised** (adjective) – guaranteed, assured, committed.
- ❖ **Gross domestic product (GDP)** (noun) – a measure of economic activity in a country. It is the total value of a country’s annual output of goods and service.
- ❖ **long-held** (adjective) – held (believed) for a long time.
- ❖ **merit** (noun) – goodness, standard/quality, worthiness.
- ❖ **diverse** (adjective) – having many different types of people.
- ❖ **mobility** (noun) – the movement/transfer of people from place to place for education/employment.
- ❖ **enable** (verb) – allow, permit, give permission to.
- ❖ **friction** (noun) – conflict, dispute, argument.
- ❖ **resource** (noun) – support, aid, assistance (in terms of money/funds).
- ❖ **provision** (noun) – supplying, providing, giving, distribution.
- ❖ **inclusion funds** (noun) – funds/resources provided to help support socially and educationally disadvantaged students to access, both in schools and higher education equally, otherwise they might be excluded or marginalized.
- ❖ **disadvantaged** (adjective) – poor, poverty-stricken, underprivileged, deprived, needy.
- ❖ **pursue** (verb) – engage in, take part in, participate in, apply oneself to.
- ❖ **rigour** (noun) – attention to detail, diligence, accuracy/precision.
- ❖ **universalisation** (noun) – the process of making something available for all.
- ❖ **Right to Education (RTE) Act** (noun) – the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE) is an Act, of the Parliament of India enacted on 4 August 2009 under Article 21-A in the Constitution of India, which provides free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right.
- ❖ **rein in** (phrasal verb) – restrict, control, limit, restrain.
- ❖ **profiteering** (noun) – an act of making an excessive/illegal profit.
- ❖ **unaccounted** (adjective) – not included in an account.
- ❖ **bound to** (adjective) – certain/sure, very likely, guaranteed.
- ❖ **resent** (verb) – feel aggrieved about, feel bitter about, be annoyed about, dislike.
- ❖ **imperative** (noun) – necessary condition, precondition, essential requirement.

Banking on serology: On seroprevalence studies

The virus isn’t as lethal as originally feared, but is more infectious than previously believed

A recent serology survey that scientists used to estimate the spread of COVID-19 in Mumbai has found that nearly three in five, or 57% of those tested in slums had been exposed to the virus and had developed antibodies against it as compared to only 16% of those tested in residential societies. Results from Delhi's seroprevalence study, earlier this month, found that nearly a quarter of the 21,000-odd samples tested had been exposed to the virus and some of the densest districts had over 20% prevalence. Of the nearly 7,000 tested in Mumbai, nearly 61% were slum-dwellers and the higher prevalence of the virus there showed that — as expected — those living in the densest urban agglomerations were most likely to have been infected by it. A large proportion of those in whom antibodies were detected — the numbers aren't known — were asymptomatic and this pointed to the fact that the fatality rate in Mumbai may be “as low as 0.05-0.10 per cent, instead of the existing 5.5 per cent,” as per an estimate accompanying the results of the survey. Such serological surveys are increasingly being used by States. Ahmedabad's civic body conducted one to conclude that only 17% of the city had been likely exposed to the virus and Tamil Nadu too is in the midst of conducting such a survey. A dominant theme driving State bodies that commission such surveys is to check for levels of 'herd immunity', or if 60%-70% of the population have encountered the infection. The argument is that this degree of exposure will, akin to a vaccine, also protect the rest of those uninfected. But given the absence of knowledge about how long antibodies last and the extent to which they protect from fresh infections, herd immunity isn't a precise science and not something that ought to be pursued by a state as a matter of policy.

It is four months since India got its first 100 cases and very early in May, the Indian Council of Medical Research's survey had shown that the number of those infected by the virus were many multiples of those that were being reflected in official confirmed-case statistics. The unrelenting advance of the virus shows that while it is much less of a killer, in aggregate, than expected, it spares few from infection. Therefore, in the absence of a reliable vaccine, the vast majority of people everywhere — irrespective of peaks and ebbs in daily caseloads — continue to be vulnerable. Serology surveys can at best be crude pointers to chronicle the progress of the pandemic and not a psychological palliative.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **bank on** (phrasal verb) – rely on, depend on; anticipate, expect.
- ❖ **serology** (noun) – a method of diagnostic examination of blood serum concerning immune system's response to pathogens (pathogen is something, like bacteria/virus, that causes disease). (serum is an amber (yellowish-orange), watery fluid, rich in proteins, obtained from blood that has coagulated whereas plasma is a clear yellowish fluid part of the blood, contains blood clotting agents-Fibrinogen).
- ❖ **seroprevalence** (noun) – the number of persons in a population who test positive for a specific disease based on serology (blood serum) specimens.
- ❖ **lethal** (adjective) – fatal, deadly, life-threatening.
- ❖ **infectious** (adjective) – communicable, transmittable, spreadable.
- ❖ **expose** (verb) – be subjected to something (infectious agents & others).
- ❖ **antibody** (noun) – it is also called 'immunoglobulin'; a protective protein produced mainly by plasma (a part of blood) cells in the immune system in response to the presence of antigens (disease causing organisms (bacteria & viruses) and other harmful/toxic foreign substances like insect venom).
- ❖ **prevalence** (noun) – it refers to the number of cases of a disease that are present in a particular population at a given time whereas “incidence” refers to the number of new cases that develop in a given period of time.
- ❖ **slum-dweller** (noun) – a person who lives in a slum.

- ❖ **agglomeration** (noun) – assemblage, cluster.
- ❖ **asymptomatic** (adjective) – relating to a condition/person with no symptoms.
- ❖ **symptomatic** (adjective) – relating to a condition/person with symptoms.
- ❖ **pre-symptomatic** (adjective) – relating to a condition/person with mild illness/symptoms.
- ❖ **point to** (verb) – indicate, suggest, signal/signify.
- ❖ **fatality** (noun) – death, casualty, mortality/loss.
- ❖ **accompany** (verb) – be present with, appear with, be connected with, be linked with.
- ❖ **in the midst of** (phrase) – in the middle of.
- ❖ **dominant** (adjective) – most influential/powerful.
- ❖ **theme** (noun) – idea, message, concept.
- ❖ **drive** (verb) – force, prompt, impel (someone to act in a particular way).
- ❖ **commission** (verb) – engage, employ, order (someone to do something).
- ❖ **herd immunity** (noun) – it refers to a means (ways) of protecting a whole community from disease by immunizing a critical mass of its populace (population). It is also defined as a form of indirect protection from infectious disease that occurs when a large percentage of a population are immune to an infection, thereby providing a measure of protection for individuals who are not immune.
- ❖ **encounter** (verb) – come into contact with.
- ❖ **degree** (noun) – amount, level, extent.
- ❖ **exposure** (noun) – In medicine, the condition of being subjected to something (infectious agents & others).
- ❖ **akin** (adjective) – similar, related, equivalent.
- ❖ **vaccine** (noun) – a biological preparation that improves immunity to a particular disease.
- ❖ **given** (preposition) – considering, taking into account, bearing in mind.
- ❖ **last** (verb) – survive, endure, exist, keep going.
- ❖ **ought to** (modal verb) – must, should.
- ❖ **pursue** (verb) – engage in, conduct, follow, carry on.
- ❖ **reflect** (verb) – indicate, show, reveal, exhibit.
- ❖ **unrelenting** (adjective) – continuous, persistent, unceasing/unabating, unstoppable.
- ❖ **advance** (noun) – progress, improvement, development, advancement.
- ❖ **in aggregate** (phrase) – as a whole, in total.
- ❖ **spare** (verb) – refrain from (infecting); not harm, leave uninfected.
- ❖ **few** (adjective) – not many, hardly/scarcely any.
- ❖ **irrespective of** (adjective) – notwithstanding, without regard for, regardless of.
- ❖ **peaks and ebbs** (phrase) – increase & decrease.
- ❖ **caseload** (noun) – the number of cases to be handled by a doctor at one time.
- ❖ **vulnerable** (adjective) – relating to a weak/neglected person who is in need of special care/support; at risk, unsafe, unprotected.
- ❖ **at best** (phrase) – simply, merely, only.
- ❖ **crude** (adjective) – imprecise, not accurate, approximate, rough.
- ❖ **pointer** (noun) – indication, hint, signal.
- ❖ **chronicle** (verb) – record, write down, document, register (a series of events).
- ❖ **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
- ❖ **palliative** (noun) – an action aimed to mitigate/lessen a problem (without addressing the basic reason).