

## **PERILS OF PREMATURELY IMPARTED LITERACY**

**By making foundational literacy and numeracy a target of early schooling,  
we will stress further an embattled childhood**

Overhaul has a nice connotation. The smooth first run of one's childhood bicycle after it got overhauled is a lasting memory. When people say that a system has become so bad that it needs an overhaul, they actually believe that such a thing is possible, that someone can do it. In popular imagination, an overhaul also carries an association with radical improvement. Machines improve quite radically after an overhaul, but social systems like education behave more like living beings as they carry legacies and tendencies rooted in the wider social ethos. These tendencies need to be studied and recognised before radical remedies are administered for improvement.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers to revise and revamp the system of education. Such a promise carries great public appeal because a lot of people feel quite fed up with the system. Any doubt about the need for an overhaul in education today is likely to be stigmatised as a sign of conservatism. Disruptors and out-of-the-box solutions have been in the air for some time.

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC-2008) had set the stage for this kind of popular radicalism. We now have a fuller script. At times, it falls back on older, tired ideas, such as the three-language formula. It evinces approval for the recent trajectory of ideas like quantifiable basis for seeking credit ratings and rankings, outcome-based assessment, technology-driven governance, and so on. They are treated as pointers to a bolder agenda. Little room is available for doubting, let alone debating, the impact such measures have had so far.

### **New break-up**

One significant shift NEP proposes is in the re-organisation of elementary education. As of now, it comprises eight years of schooling starting with Grade 1 at age six as Article 45 of the Constitution envisaged. The Right to Education (RTE) act promulgated a decade ago treats these eight years as a composite stage, consisting of five years of primary and three years of upper-primary education. NEP offers a surgical procedure which will graft the first two primary grades on to three years of preschool education. On the face of it, this idea looks great as it starts a child's educational journey from age three instead of six.

The plan also implies a historic break from the system as envisaged in the Kothari report (1964-1966) which recommended the present 10+2 system. NEP proposes a new structure. Instead of 10+2, we will now have a 5+3+4 system, in which the first five years include three years of preschool education (starting at age three), followed by Grades 1 and 2 of the primary school. Although a wide spectrum of goals is mentioned for the preschool years, the overarching focus is on making children 'school-ready' in the context of reading, writing and arithmetic. The term used in NEP is 'foundational literacy and numeracy'. A separate section is devoted to it, underlining its importance as a 'prerequisite to learning'. It sounds great, but let us stop to study its implications.

Visit a nursery in any part of the country and you will inevitably find three- to four-year olds reciting the English alphabet and numbers. The idea that learning begins with the alphabet and numbers is very popular indeed. Many people believe that there is nothing wrong in introducing a child of three to reading and writing. If you express some doubt about such an idea, some people might agree to delay this plan by a year or so, but that is the limit. The reasoning behind this belief is that if reading and writing are the two fundamental skills a child will need to do well at school, what is the harm in cultivating these skills from the earliest possible age?

Indeed, the faith in early acquisition of literacy and numeracy extends to the feeling that any delay on this front will harm the child's development. Nothing could be more contrary to truth although we must acknowledge that the matter is still regarded by many as a subject of debate. The key issue in the debate is our concept of reading itself. There is a sharp division among perspectives on what constitutes reading; more specifically: how is reading learnt?

The older perspective is that reading starts with familiarity with the alphabet. According to this view, the child must learn to recognise individual letters and their sounds first, and then move towards recognising simple words by recognising the letters that comprise it. This view has prevailed in human history for so long that scientific research on how our eyes and mind process a written text has made no

decisive difference in countries like ours. This body of research has demonstrated that a child's search for meaning is a far sounder basis for learning to read than mechanical practices like letter recognition and associating letters with their names and sound values. Prematurely acquired literacy can be harmful in that it creates a habit, difficult to remedy later, of ignoring the message.

In daily life, we see plenty of evidence of such a habit. Reading without relating to the text or to its author is far more common than using one's ability to read in order to make sense of a text. Despite education, many literates develop no interest in reading. An introduction to the alphabet and being drilled for letter recognition at a very young age is a major source of reading without deriving any meaning or showing any interest.

Similar harm is done to writing when it is acquired before one needs it. Writing is basically a means of conveying one's ideas to someone else. It becomes a meaningful activity when an intended audience begins to matter for the small child. If no need is felt for an audience, acquisition of writing becomes merely the attainment of a mechanical skill.

What applies to reading and writing is equally true of prematurely acquired numeracy. Mathematics offers to the child a means to make sense of the world, but the desire to relate to different objects arises with the widening of experience and engagement. Prolonged drills to habituate the child to chant numbers aloud, and then to learn how to manipulate them damages the bridge that connects numbers with real things or matters of interest and curiosity. By starting too early, the need for such a bridge is precluded. This has long-term consequences for learning mathematics and for perceiving it as an attractive subject.

### **Culture of speed**

A culture of speed pervades all spheres of school life. Middle-class parents set the norm for this culture by pushing their infants to consume the various products sold in the pedagogy market. Digital equipment is the latest addition to the educational toys that have long been favoured over cottage toys which quietly represent the wider world and serve as a symbolic bridge to what all lies outside the home.

The school's long shadow now extends to the home, and parents sigh with relief when they secure their children's admission to a nursery in the third year of their life, if not earlier. Changing family norms and social conditions make the transfer of the young child from home to a nursery inevitable. Although nurseries routinely use the rhetoric of play-way, their programmes are mostly a downward extension of the school. This social reality makes early childhood education in its present form a mixed blessing. By promoting foundational literacy and numeracy as a key educational target of early schooling, we are likely to stress further an already embattled childhood.

### **Meanings of Difficult Words**

- ❖ **perils** (noun) – dangers, difficulties, risks.
- ❖ **prematurely** (adverb) – too soon, too early, before the usual time.
- ❖ **impart** (verb) – communicate, pass on, convey, transmit (information/knowledge to someone).
- ❖ **literacy** (noun) – the ability to read and write.
- ❖ **numeracy** (noun) – the ability to understand numbers and quantitative basics.
- ❖ **stress** (verb) – pressurize, burden, overtax, strain.
- ❖ **embattled** (adjective) – (relating to something/ someone) troubled by problems or difficulties.
- ❖ **overhaul** (noun) – reorganization, restructuring, rearrangement.
- ❖ **connotation** (noun) – meaning, understanding, reading, explanation.
- ❖ **overhaul** (verb) – rebuild, remodel, rework, restructure, revamp.
- ❖ **lasting** (adjective) – long-lasting, long-term, permanent.
- ❖ **radical** (adjective) – thoroughgoing, thorough, comprehensive, complete/total.
- ❖ **radically** (adverb) – completely, thoroughly, totally, entirely.
- ❖ **legacy** (noun) – something received from a predecessor or from the past.
- ❖ **(be) root in** (verb) – establish firmly.
- ❖ **ethos** (noun) – ethics/beliefs, principles, standards.
- ❖ **remedy** (noun) – treatment, cure; solution.
- ❖ **administer** (verb) – give, provide, deliver, apply.
- ❖ **revamp** (verb) – improve, upgrade, reorganize, overhaul.

- ❖ **National Education Policy (NEP)** (noun) – The National Education Policy, 2020 is meant to provide an overarching vision and comprehensive framework for both school and higher education across the country. It is only a policy, not a law; implementation of its proposals depends on further regulations by both States and the Centre as education is a concurrent subject.
- ❖ **fed up** (adjective) – annoyed, irritated, angry.
- ❖ **stigmatise** (verb) – condemn, denounce, criticize; discredit, dishonour, disgrace.
- ❖ **conservatism** (noun) – conservatism in a broad sense, as a social attitude, has always existed. It expresses the instinctive human fear of sudden change, and tendency to habitual action.
- ❖ **disruptor** (noun) – a person/thing that effects the shift of fundamental expectations and behaviours.
- ❖ **out-of-the-box** (adjective) – creative, innovative, unconventional, out of the ordinary, unusual.
- ❖ **in the air** (phrase) – going on, happening .
- ❖ **National Knowledge Commission (NKC)** (noun) – the NKC was constituted on 13th June 2005 with a time-frame of three years, from 2nd October 2005 to 2nd October 2008. As a high-level advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, the National Knowledge Commission has been given a mandate to guide policy and direct reforms, focusing on certain key areas such as education, science and technology, agriculture, industry, e-governance etc. Easy access to knowledge, creation and preservation of knowledge systems, dissemination of knowledge and better knowledge services are core concerns of the commission.
- ❖ **set the stage for** (phrase) – prepare the circumstances for beginning of something.
- ❖ **radicalism** (noun) – actions/beliefs that support thorough political or social reform.
- ❖ **fall back on** (phrasal verb) – have recourse to, rely on, make use of, utilize.
- ❖ **evince** (verb) – reveal, indicate, show, make clear.
- ❖ **trajectory** (noun) – course, track, direction, route.
- ❖ **quantifiable** (adjective) – measurable (as quantity).
- ❖ **outcome based assessment** (noun) – means that the assessment process must be aligned with the learning outcomes. This means that it should support the learners in their progress (formative assessment) and validate the achievement of the intended learning outcomes at the end of the process (summative assessment).
- ❖ **technology-driven** (adjective) – controlled by technology.
- ❖ **pointer** (noun) – indication, hint, signal.
- ❖ **bolder** comparative adjective of **bold** (adjective) – spirited, confident, positive; valiant, courageous.
- ❖ **room** (noun) – scope, opportunity, chance (for something to happen).
- ❖ **let alone** (phrase) – to say nothing of; not to mention.
- ❖ **so far** (phrase) – until now, up to the present, up to this point.
- ❖ **break-up** (noun) – the division of something (e.g. expenditure) into separate parts.
- ❖ **envisage** (verb) – foresee, predict, forecast.
- ❖ **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.
- ❖ **promulgate** (verb) – enact, implement, enforce, put into effect.
- ❖ **decade** (noun) – a period of ten years.
- ❖ **composite class** (noun) – a composite class is a class organisation where children of two or more stages are grouped together (e.g. five years of primary and three years of upper-primary education).
- ❖ **surgical** (adjective) – relating to a procedure that is done with great precision.
- ❖ **graft** (verb) – combine, integrate, join.
- ❖ **on the face of it** (phrase) – apparently, seemingly, evidently/ostensibly; at first glance.
- ❖ **imply** (verb) – say indirectly, suggest, indicate.
- ❖ **break** (noun) – change.
- ❖ **overarching** (adjective) – all-inclusive, complete, all-embracing, comprehensive.

- ❖ **Kothari report (noun)** – one of the main recommendations of the National Education Commission popularly known as Kothari Commission (1964-1966) was the standardization of educational system on 10+2+3 pattern, across the country.
- ❖ **spectrum (noun)** – wide range, gamut, ambit.
- ❖ **school-readiness (noun)** – a term often used to describe how ready children are socially, physically, and intellectually, to start formal schooling – usually kindergarten.
- ❖ **context (noun)** – circumstances, conditions.
- ❖ **arithmetic (noun)** – the use of numbers in counting and calculation.
- ❖ **underline (verb)** – emphasize, underscore, highlight.
- ❖ **prerequisite (noun)** – necessary condition, essential, requirement.
- ❖ **sound (verb)** – appear, look, seem.
- ❖ **implications (noun)** – consequence/outcome, ramification, repercussion.
- ❖ **inevitably (adverb)** – unavoidably, certainly, definitely.
- ❖ **recite (verb)** – repeat (from memory), say aloud.
- ❖ **indeed (adverb)** – in fact, actually.
- ❖ **reasoning (noun)** – (logical & sensible) thinking, thought, contemplation, pondering.
- ❖ **cultivate (verb)** – improve, develop, acquire (a skill).
- ❖ **acquisition (noun)** – learning, developing (a skill).
- ❖ **front (noun)** – a particular situation.
- ❖ **contrary to (phrase)** – conflicting with, opposed to.
- ❖ **perspective (noun)** – outlook, viewpoint, approach.
- ❖ **familiarity (noun)** – awareness, knowledge, acquaintance.
- ❖ **prevail (verb)** – exist, be in existence, be present, be prevalent.
- ❖ **decisive (adjective)** – deciding, conclusive, determining, key.
- ❖ **mechanical (adjective)** – automatic, machine-like, unthinking, habitual.
- ❖ **far more (phrase)** – a lot more, much more.
- ❖ **literate (noun)** – educated person.
- ❖ **drill (verb)** – train, instruct, teach, inculcate.
- ❖ **attainment (noun)** – achievement, proficiency, competence, mastery.
- ❖ **make sense of (phrase)** – understand, comprehend, fathom out.
- ❖ **prolonged (adjective)** – lengthy, extended, protracted, unending, unrelenting.
- ❖ **habituate (verb)** – accustom, adapt/adjust, make used.
- ❖ **chant (verb)** – say, shout repeatedly.
- ❖ **aloud (adverb)** – loudly; clearly, distinctly, audibly.
- ❖ **manipulate (verb)** – use, employ, utilize.
- ❖ **bridge (noun)** – link, connection.
- ❖ **curiosity (noun)** – strong desire, interest.
- ❖ **preclude (verb)** – prevent, prohibit, block/exclude.
- ❖ **pervade (verb)** – fill, spread through; be present.
- ❖ **sphere (noun)** – an area of activity; a field of activity; domain, realm.
- ❖ **pedagogy (noun)** – teaching, tutoring, coaching/training.
- ❖ **lie (verb)** – be present, exist.
- ❖ **sigh (noun)** – breathe out, exhale.
- ❖ **inevitable (adjective)** – unavoidable, sure to happen, unpreventable.
- ❖ **rhetoric (noun)** – power of speech, command of language, expression.
- ❖ **play-way (noun)** – a method of learning in which children learn concepts through games and play.
- ❖ **downward (adjective)** – descending, sliding, slipping, falling.
- ❖ **blessing (noun)** – advantage, benefit, boon, favour