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(In)Equality In Education: A Sociological Analysis Of New Education Policy 2020

Dr. Udit Mitra

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology

Shri Shikshayatan College, Kolkata, India

Abstract: The current paper tries to locate the possible areas where the New Education Policy 2020 in India reflects the hidden issue of social inequality and disparity in Higher Education. This is significant because the policy makers have intended to make education a tool to level the different social inequalities in our country. A sociological reading into and an analysis of the NEP 2020 shows the possibility of disparities hidden in the policy initiatives not only among the students but also in the institutional frameworks. An understanding of the same would help not only in overcoming the same but also create a just and equal society which the policy makers have as one of their stated objectives.

Index Terms - NEP 2020, higher education, social inequalities, social disparities, caste, class, gender, capitalist market.

INTRODUCTION

The paper has tried to understand and reflect upon critically the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 formulated by the Government of India. It aims to do this by analyzing some of the prominent features which the policy states with specific reference to higher education. According to the policy makers, the NEP must provide to all students, irrespective of their place of residence, a quality education system, with particular focus on historically marginalized, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Education is a great leveler and is the best tool for achieving economic and social mobility, inclusion and equality. Initiatives must be in place to ensure that all students from such groups, despite inherent obstacles, are provided various targeted opportunities to enter and excel in the educational system (NEP 2020: 4). It is in the light of this aim of the policy makers that the present paper wants to draw attention to the possible social inequalities which might be inherent in the policy. Modern education is not only an equalizer but has implications for inequality as well (Giddens 2001: 510). The present paper has tried to examine the implications of the policy directives specifically at the level of Higher education, the reason being that the researcher herself comes from such a back ground.

The process of industrialization and the expansion of cities greatly influenced the development of the education system (ibid 2001: 491). As the industrial economy rapidly expanded, there was a great demand for specialized schooling that could produce an educated, capable workforce. In the modern age, education and qualifications became an important stepping stone into job opportunities and careers. Schools and universities not only broaden people's minds and perspectives, but are expected to prepare new generations of citizens for participation in economic life. The right balance between a generalist education and specific work skills is a difficult one to arrive at. Specialized forms of technical, vocational and professional training often supplement pupils' 'liberal' education and facilitate the transition from school to work. While many teachers in schools and universities seek above all to provide a well-rounded education, policy makers and employers are concerned to ensure that training programs coincide with a country's economic profile and employment demands (ibid 2001: 492). The path of education leading to different and specific job opportunities leads inevitably to a stratified society where people are differentiated on the basis of occupation, income, power and status. But ideally education very often is taken to be a tool to bridge the wide gap between different classes, caste, ethnic groups, gender and any other social differences known to exist in mankind. Bridging the gap between the ideal and the practice is the most challenging aspect of any educational policy of any country.

It is apparent that the New Education Policy 2020 has been formulated keeping in mind the above two so called conflicting interests namely, the need to cater to the demands of capitalist market economy and the equal (if not more) need of building up human qualities based on Indian tradition and value system. The NEP 2020 lays particular emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual. It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities – both the 'foundational capacities' of higher order literacy and numeracy and 'higher order' cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving – but also social, ethical and emotional capacities and dispositions (NEP 2020: 3-4).

The current paper has been based on an interpretation and understanding of the National Education Policy 2020 and not on actual data collection. This is because the policy has just become operative at the empirical level in the near future its impact on society can be more fully felt, understood and gauged. The content analysis of the write ups by prominent educationists of Bengal in Bengali magazine like *Desh* (Nation) has been made while penning down the thoughts. The policy has been referred to time and again to interpret its implications. The features of the policy have been stated and examined critically. Needless to say the policy has provided a large scope for field study on its various aspects. In this paper certain features of the policy with respect to higher education have been abstracted and analyzed. Of course the research for newer dimensions will continue.

HIGHER EDUCATION

The National Education Policy 2020 formulated by the Government of India proposes a multi-disciplinary bachelor's degree in an undergraduate program with multiple exit options. These will include professional and vocational areas and will be implemented as follows:

- A certificate after completing one year of study
- A diploma after completing two years of study
- A Bachelor's degree after completion of a 3-year program
- A degree with research after 4-year Bachelor's program

The policy further states that M.phil courses are to be discontinued to align degree education after western models. After 4-year Bachelor's program, a student can directly enter into the process of doing Ph.D.

Apparently it seems that the policy has tried to cater to the students with various capabilities and aspirations. But the question remains would this not create disparity between the students especially with respect to employment? In India with such a high rate of unemployment specially educated unemployment, is it not likely that this multiple exit and entry system will create a greater hierarchy and inequality among students while applying for jobs? The same system will breed different categories of students and it is more likely that there would be higher chances of drop out. The reason being that meritorious students from poor financial background might not opt for four-

year degree course, hence might not venture into the realm of research. There remains a possibility of losing meritorious students from entering into the field of research and teaching profession (Das 2020: 21). The M.phil course has also been proposed to be discontinued as per the new policy. According to Prof. Suranjan Das, honourable ex - Vice Chancellor of Jadavpur University, the M.phil course should have been retained and re-organized in a planned manner so as to aid students to smoothen their path of pursuing doctoral thesis. Further a re-modelled M.phil course would have benefitted students (those who are either unwilling/cannot afford to pursue the doctoral work) in their quest for higher knowledge (ibid: 22). Prof. Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay, ex-Principal of Presidency College and an eminent educationist had added that to initiate four-year degree course all over the country, an overhauling is needed in the college infrastructure and number of teachers. He advocates a greater degree of financial involvement on the part of the state to implement the above measures (Mukhopadhyay 2020: 18). At the same time, he points out that the NEP 2020 is incomplete as it does not provide a specific direction for generating additional finance (ibid).

The NEP thrusts on ending the fragmentation of higher education and plans to do this by transforming higher education institutions into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges and Higher Education Institution clusters/knowledge hubs, each of which will aim to have three thousand or more students. These, the policy states will help in building a multi disciplinary approach in higher education and create a community of inter disciplinary researchers. With respect to this, it needs to be stated that the policy lays down the definition of a university. Universities have been stratified into Research intensive, Teaching intensive with significant emphasis on research and an Autonomous degree granting college primarily focused on undergraduate teaching. Another important milestone of the policy is its proposal for granting autonomy to colleges through a transparent system of graded accreditation. The policy states that within a stipulated time period every college would develop into either an Autonomous degree-granting college or a constituent college of a university (ibid: 33-34). The above steps will definitely be a welcome change in the scenario of higher education. It will help to generate a bridge between subjects like science and humanities and help to build up holistic personalities of students who can easily navigate and balance between critical thinking and emotional dispositions. At the same time the policy also indicates a decentralization of higher education. If we look into the policy critically, elements of inequality seem to persist in it. For instance, though higher education can be analytically divided into two realms of research and teaching, yet, can they be done so in actual practice? When the universities have been graded as research intensive and teaching intensive, is there not an element of hierarchy (hence inequality) involved in the two processes? Does the policy not imply a fragmentation of education when research and teaching are separated? According to Prof. Suranjan Das, if such divisions between institutions exist, the inequality would be extended to imparting of quality education to students. He states that since most of the educational institutions in our country are situated in the backward areas, there is a chance that they will be restricted to low technological facilities and teaching methodologies as contrasted to their counterparts in the cities (Das 2020: 21).

Granting of autonomy to colleges will be a major step in privatization of education. Autonomy can be of two types – academic autonomy and administrative and financial autonomy. Whereas the former would enable the colleges to frame their own syllabi keeping in parity with the demands of international markets, the latter can prove to be detrimental to students especially from backward classes who might not be able to afford the fees of such institutions, thereby generating social inequalities. Moreover, a more important issue which can be raised for discussion is the standardization procedure for the award of degrees by different colleges. An index needs to be developed centrally so that disparities and hierarchy do not appear between the degrees awarded by the different ‘Autonomous’ colleges all over the country.

The NEP 2020 formulates that a Higher Education Council of India (HECI) will be set up to regulate higher education. The Council’s goal will be to increase gross enrollment ratio. The HECI will have four verticals.

- National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) to regulate higher education, including teacher education while excluding medical and legal education
- National Accreditation Council (NAC) “a meta-accrediting body”
- Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC), for funding and financing of universities and colleges. This will replace the existing National Council for Teacher Education, All India Council for Technical Education and the University Grants Commission

- General Education Council (GEC) to frame “graduate attributes”, namely the learning outcomes expected. It will also be responsible in framing a National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEFQ)

The National Testing Agency will now be given the additional responsibility of conducting Entrance examinations for admission to universities across the country, in addition to the JEE Main and NEET (wikipedia.org).

From the above steps taken, it is evident that the NEP 2020 proposes to centralize the higher education bodies and bring it under a single umbrella. This is quite a paradox. On the one hand by trying to specify the separate research and teaching bodies in the policy document and allowing the colleges to be Autonomous by the next few years, there seems to be an effort by the government to decentralize the higher education system. But on the other hand, through the creation of the above Higher Education Council in India and the consolidation of power in it, it is likely that it would bring a greater degree of centralization of power. Moreover, the National Testing Agency has also been allotted additional responsibilities of conducting admissions to universities. On the one hand this would not only enable to bring a uniformity, standardization and transparency in the admission process but also synchronize the beginning and end of session across all the colleges in the country. But on the other hand it definitely raises an apprehension and that is, will the academic autonomy in colleges bring uniformity in the syllabi across the country and enable the students to compete at an equal level? In this context, Prof. Das points out that admission to American universities and colleges is based on SAT and GRE scores more than on regulated centralized examinations. Research has proved that in the centralized examination system in USA, the low class, minorities and women are discriminated against in admission. Therefore Prof. Das states that since our NEP is based on the USA model and when such a model is under scrutiny, how can we implement such a model in a vast country like India with so many diversities of caste, class, race, gender linguistic and religious groups? (Das 2020: 21). There is a probability and apprehension that a centralized admission test would multiply chances of generating social inequality among the students of various categories.

The policy proposes to internationalize education in India. Foreign universities can now set up campuses in India. The fees of both private and public universities will be fixed (wikipedia.org). This has been done to keep parity with the changing global demands of jobs. The initiative is welcome but there are certain points worth taking note of. For instance, besides opening the doors of international education to India, there must be scope for the Indian universities to expand their campuses abroad. Unless this is done there would be an unequal cultural exchange as far as education is concerned. Again there would be chances of imposition of an alien education system on our students without taking note of their cultural and social specificities and contexts. Moreover, there remains a fear that students from backward classes and castes might not be able to afford to study in foreign universities due to their exorbitant fee structure. Though the policy assures that fees will be fixed, yet there remains a possibility that the fees will be fixed at a higher rate which can only be afforded by the upper class students. These policy initiatives would inevitably lead to the larger goal of privatization of education.

The NEP 2020 aims to take the gross enrolment ratio in higher education in India to fifty percent by 2030. Therefore, it has emphasized on expanding digital education platform. The initiative is appreciable and far reaching in a country like India with a huge number of students living in interior villages. But it has to be remembered that online education cannot substitute face to face interactive teaching. Online lectures are usually one sided, the knowledge flowing usually from the teacher to the students. It inhibits an interactive flow between the two parties and hence hampers a healthy if not equal exchange of ideas between teachers and students. The pandemic situation in near future had provided a challenge to the educational system and that online teaching had kept the education system functional in our country. At the same time it had also created a digital divide between different categories of students. In a country where 26% of population still does not have equal access to internet, introducing online education would more likely enhance the digital divide, hence inequality among students (Das 2020: 23).

Last, though not the least, the NEP 2020 states that the Centre and the States will work together to increase the public investment in Education sector to reach 6% of GDP at the earliest. The current public expenditure on education in India has been around 4.43% of GDP (NEP 2020: 60-61). If this can be achieved, there is a likelihood that it will impact the education scenario positively in India, but unless and until it is implemented at the empirical

level, the state's intention will always be under scrutiny. This has been echoed in the voices of prominent educationists like Prof. Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Prof. Suranjan Das and Prof. Abhirup Sarkar (Professor at Indian Statistical Institute) (Desh 2020).

After a brief examination of some of the prominent characteristics of higher education in the National Education Policy 2020, it has been noted that the policy has severe implications of social inequality inherent within it. The inequality is located not only between the different social categories of students in the country but within and between different institutional structures. In the present paper not all the features of the policy could be discussed at length. It requires continuous research on the various aspects of the policy to show its impact upon all sections of the Indian society at large. Most importantly it should be noted by the policy makers and educationists alike that education does not and should not become a tool of exclusion in our society. Rather it should act as an equalizer bridging the gap between different classes, castes, gender and ethnic groups in a diversified country like India.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has tried to analyze the National Education Policy 2020 with specific reference to higher education. It has aimed to look at the existing inequalities that the policy inheres in itself. This is significant because the policy aims at taking education of India to newer heights overcoming the limitations of narrowness and fragmentation in approach and trying to develop a multi-disciplinary perspective bridging the gap between different subjects like humanities, science and social science. The policy makers believe that this will broaden the horizon of the students which will not only lead to the development of critical thinking but also develop social, ethical, emotional and sensitive beings. The policy makers also believe that the new policy will address issues of social exclusion and do away with them and make education a great leveler. A sociological insight into the NEP 2020 has not only aided in debunking the features of the policy but has also shown how the seeds of inequality have already been sown in the same, thereby defeating the very grounds which the government and its policy makers have been fighting for. Addressing such vital issues would definitely make the policy more inclusive of all sections of people in a diverse country like India and also prepare the Indian youth to face the challenges of an ever changing capitalist world market. Here in lies the significance and inevitability of sociological analysis in understanding and interpreting the New Education Policy 2020.

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