

MY VIEW | VOX HETERODOX

National education policy 2020: The devil lies in implementation

The proposed undergrad changes could make designing curricula difficult while stifling student mobility across universities



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The recently announced new National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) sets out a vision for 2040 with a plan for transforming school and higher education across India. This was not presented in or approved by Parliament. And its implementation will depend largely on state governments, since education is a concurrent subject under the Constitution. The experience of earlier national education policies (1968 and 1986) suggests that in a federal system, implementation and coordination form a complex process, which can take as long as two decades.

More than 70 years after Independence, India's crisis in education runs deep. It has grown with the passage of time and stares us in the face. The NEP recognizes the symptoms of the malaise and jumps to definitive prescriptions, without any analysis of why things went wrong or any diagnosis of what ails education in India. This failing is attributable to its focus on education, which abstracts from or ignores the economic, social and political contexts that have shaped outcomes.

The other limitation is just as important. The NEP is clear on the destination but silent about the journey. It does not address the question of how we would get there. The expected transformation cannot materialize unless we can create more equal socio-economic opportunities in terms of access to education, change the culture of institutions in education, regulators and governments, and end the political intrusions that are so common in every sphere of education. This is a distant dream.

In most government schools, a significant proportion of teachers are absent, while an even higher proportion among those present do not teach, but receive salaries because they are not accountable and matter as constituencies in electoral politics. It raises dropout rates among students. Learning outcomes are notoriously poor. Consequently, almost 50% of students, whose parents can barely afford the fees, are enrolled in private schools where the quality of teaching-learning is also mostly sub-standard. Good private schools are simply unaffordable for ordinary people. Class 12 board exams have witnessed phenomenal grade inflation at the top. Thus, a tiny slip in performance closes the door on a large number of students, sealing their fates.

The NEP's emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy is laudable. So is its object of creating a milieu conducive to learning and curbing the tyranny of exams by using standardized assessment in Classes 3, 5 and 8 combined with less demanding board exams for Classes 10 and 12. This will need revolutionary changes in mindsets and political realities. The proposed national aptitude test will become the new last-chance for school-leavers. Markets and competition will ensure that



the coaching-syndrome and exam-tyranny return in a new incarnation. The public provision of quality school education, a failure so far, is essential. Good government schools will also improve the quality of private schools.

In higher education, opportunities for school-leavers who make the grades are simply not enough and what exists is not good enough. The pockets of excellence in Indian Institutes of Technology or Indian Institutes of Management are outcomes of the enormous reservoir of talent and Darwinian selection processes. But these are no consolation because it is universities providing educational opportunities for people at large that are the lifeblood of higher education. Most public universities have witnessed a steady decline in standards over the past three decades. Private universities are few and those that are good are even fewer.

Higher education is caught in a pincer movement. For one, there is a belief that markets can solve the problem through private players, which is leading to education as business, shutting the doors on those who cannot finance themselves, without regulation that would ensure quality. For another, governments—Centre and states—that believe in the magic of markets are virtual control freaks with respect to public universities, for patronage, ideology, or vested interests. This growing politicization of universities has strangled autonomy and stifled creativity without creating any accountability. The quality of education is collateral damage.

The flexibility in length and structure of undergraduate degrees proposed by the NEP is problem-

atic. If Bachelor's and Master's programmes can be either 3+2 or 4+1, the incompatibility will stop the mobility of students between universities. If there is an exit option at the end of every year, in every institution, it will be almost impossible to design curricula that are suitable both for students who exit and who stay for completion. The end of MPhil programmes could stifle research capabilities and motivation in universities where research is already at a discount. The emphasis on the multi-disciplinary approach is worrisome because, for undergraduates, learning is embedded in disciplines. The flexibility must lie in their choice of courses.

The NEP proposes a "light but tight" regulatory framework embedded in a single institution, the Higher Education Commission of India, with four separate verticals for regulation, accreditation, funding and standards. These four functions are not performed by one institution in any country where higher education has attained excellence. Given the bureaucratic culture of intervention and control in government, such centralization is bound to make regulation "tight" rather than "light". The NEP hopes to make higher education institutions autonomous through an empowered Board of Governors by 2035, but there could be many a slip in the interim. Thus, autonomy for public universities in India might remain an elusive quest even 88 years after Independence.

The NEP 2020 is an eloquent statement of hopes and aspirations. Its road to heaven is paved with good intentions. Alas, economic, social and political realities might play the serpent to this paradise.

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While our higher education institutions are to be granted autonomy over time, there could be many a slip in the interim and this could remain an elusive quest even 15 years ahead.

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MINT CURATOR



Golden eagles can be highly sensitive to disturbances. ISTOCKPHOTO

Where golden eagles dare: A handmade nest

A nest of arm-sized sticks built on a precipitous crag by an octogenarian conservationist dangling from a rope has enticed a pair of golden eagles back to the Highlands of Scotland. The eyrie handmade by Roy Dennis, a renowned conservationist who has masterminded the revival of endangered species across Britain, helped the eagles successfully fledge the first chick on Trees for Life's Dundreggan estate in 40 years... Golden eagles are very sensitive to disturbance, so the conservationists knew it might take some time. Five years on, when Trees for Life's Dundreggan manager, Doug Gilbert, checked the artificial nest this spring, he found it had been extended by the eagles, who had built "a vast structure" on top. The eagles' first chick successfully fledged last week.

The Guardian

A distant galaxy that looks eerily like our own

Astronomers have found a galaxy "surprisingly" like our own Milky Way—further away than any before. The galaxy is 12 billion light-years away, meaning that our image of it comes from when the universe was relatively young, at just 1.4 billion years old. As such, it offers a way of looking back at galaxy formation in the early universe, when it was only 10% of its current age. But scientists were puzzled to find that it was far more similar than expected. Galaxies from so early in the universe were expected to be turbulent and unstable, in line with existing theories about galaxy formation. But the newly-discovered one was not nearly as chaotic as predicted. That surprising discover could, in turn, lead to a new understanding of how galaxies form and what processes could have been happening...

The Independent

Why crooks are betting so heavily on beige gold

Getting all your cardboard recycled may often seem like a pain, but there is big money to be made from all this so-called "beige gold". And sadly this is attracting criminals around the world. Thieves are making a fortune from stealing used cardboard that's been left out to be recycled, and selling it on. This means that legitimate recycling firms, and the city and other local authorities who take a cut from their sales, are missing out on tens of millions. "To be honest, most of us don't care who takes it away, as long as it goes," says a shopkeeper in the bustling Chamartin district of central Madrid. Behind him stand two of the Spanish capital's well-known blue municipal recycling bins, which until February of this year had been raided daily by one of the city's numerous recycled cardboard trafficking gangs.

BBC

An ethical dilemma over testing a covid vaccine

Would you put your head in the jaws of a lion...and by doing so you could help save the world? This, essentially, is the conundrum faced by Oxford scientists pursuing a covid-19 vaccine. With just 1 in every 1,900 people infected, it's impossible to be sure if those who have been given a trial vaccine are not getting the disease because they are protected, or because they just haven't run into the virus. You can try to get around this with trials in countries, like Brazil, where infection rates are higher. But the way to be really sure is with a human challenge, which is a nice way of saying: "Deliberately infect people". Adrian Hill, director of the Jenner Institute at Oxford University, wants to go down this route with fit, youthful volunteers. Sarah Gilbert, leading the vaccine hunt at the same institute, doesn't.

The New Zealand Herald

How stranded tourists struck Olympic success

Japanese couple Rikiya and Ayumi Kataoka had their honeymoon wrecked by the coronavirus pandemic, but their resourcefulness in enforced exile in Cape Verde has won them appointments as ambassadors for its Olympic team. The Kataokas had completed a third of their round-the-world trip when a suspension in long-haul flights stranded them for five months in the archipelago of 10 tiny islands off the coast of West Africa. Unable to resume their journey to Europe and then home to Japan... they had to trade their skills with domestic businesses to earn funds in the absence of work visas. But Cape Verde's Olympics officials were so intrigued by the ties the couple had built with locals that they decided to include the Kataokas in their team heading to the rearranged games in Tokyo next July.

Reuters

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Why we should celebrate 2020 as the year of the ear

VATSALA MAMGAIN



is a glutton, cook, runner, tree lover and storyteller

Ears are having quite a year. Suddenly designated the essential-service workers of our bodies, they are everywhere. Masks hang off them, earphones for the Zoom calls that keep our world spinning on its axis are jammed into them, spectacles are propped up on them—in short, they are doing amazing stuff. I possess notoriously underachieving body parts, so I cannot verify this personally, but reports of ears answering the door and making *anda bhuuji* are now fairly common. I bet William Shakespeare of the, "Two little eyes to look around, look around, look around, two little eyes to look around" fame is feeling super silly that while he wrote at least ten thousands of poems on eyes, he didn't include a single one on ears.

The other essential in the covid kit has been an Instagram account. You've had to have especially bogus pandemic pursuits for any other platform to have done them justice. While I cannot recommend lying in

bed eating tender coconut ice-cream and watching Netflix highly enough, making it worthy of the 'gram has been beyond my abilities. But for those of us who have bravely overcome our gluten intolerance just in time to bake the most perfect sourdough bread and gotten rid of priceless Persian carpets to grow quinoa and avocados in the living room, would any of it have been worthwhile if the output had just been a lousy Whatsapp broadcast? Essentially, it comes down to this: those who haven't shared their lockdown achievements with flattering filters and inspirational hashtags on platforms that have made other people weep with envy can hardly claim to have lived through this period in our history.

Cycles are also having their 15 minutes of fame. In the pre-covid era, when civilization hadn't yet crumbled, body-confident men who had the nerve to wear clothes that outlined the exact shape and size of their spleen, pancreas, and every muscle. This worked very well, because having to render every internal (and some external) organs to full view of every punter on the road was a natural entry-barrier to this activity. But that was in the good old days. Surely, this is a new definition

of *kalyug*, the final aeon—that being mowed down by a group of recreational cyclists performing their very own version of the social-distanced Serengeti stampede is now the leading cause of death for people venturing down the neighbourhood lane.

Nothing has done more to keep families together in covid times than high-speed broadband. Earlier, families could just look up without the distraction of a screen and say anything they felt like to each other. Which, let's be honest, unless your family's whatever-they-feel-like utterances are far removed from the norm, would lead to some disagreements, swiftly followed by bloody warfare where actual limbs were dismembered. Now, covid has mandated high-speed broadband and individual devices for every family member. That means that no one looks up at each other and nobody speaks—except to say, "Is the internet suddenly

slow for you too?"—and a long, prosperous, peaceful era has descended upon the kingdom of families.

Another covid staple for intellectuals who have more than two brain cells to rub together has been TikTok. Its name seems derived from two Chinese characters: *tik*, which means dance for 30 seconds, and *tok*, which means especially if you have zero natural ability to do so. Bob Hope said that growing up with his six brothers taught him to dance—he had to wait for his turn to use the bathroom. Thankfully,

India's population-to-toilets ratio doesn't seem to have improved our skill levels, which means that there is hours and hours of mesmerizing, if slightly retina burning, content available. My own TikTok addiction has been one of the highlights of my lockdown. I have spent entire months slack-jawed in admiration of the swaying hips and overall courage of the brave souls on the app. Tragically, Tik-

Tok is now banned in India, and the government will probably be sorry once the overall IQ, fitness and flexibility of our population plummets as a result.

As per a scientific survey that involved polling seven random people, these are the other things that people have found critical during this time—vacuum cleaners, vacuum cleaners that run themselves, vacuum cleaners that have bags, vacuum cleaners that don't have bags but carry totes instead, and other assorted vacuum cleaners that perform major household tasks. Some people have confessed a renewed attachment to their ovens, their home gyms, and Nutella.

The most amazing finding, however, is that a significant number of people have proclaimed their No.1 lockdown essential to be baking soda. Apparently, these deviants baked with it, make deodorant with it, and even keep it in their fridges. What they are baking in their underarms and drinking with ice-cold baking soda from their refrigerator will be a mystery to me forever. But not as big as the biggest covid mystery of all: While in every economy, manufacturing seems to have ground to a halt, or turned sclerotic, our production line of crazies still appears to be going strong.

QUICK READ

Whether it's masks hanging off them, earphones jammed into them for the Zoom calls that keep our world spinning, or the support they offer spectacles, ears are doing amazing stuff.

As per a scientific survey involving a keen ear to the ground, there are other things people have found critical during covid times, such as vacuum cleaners and baking soda.