

Editorial

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The National Education Policy 2020 is the effort of a decentralized participatory process which took into account feedback and suggestions from stakeholders at all levels - Gram Panchayats, Blocks and Districts in a bid to make education accessible, equitable, holistic, inclusive, flexible and multidisciplinary. It sought to bring in long overdue reforms and plug the gaps that had plagued the education sector since 1986. This is an attempt to keep pace with the fast-changing needs of industries and technology and innovative shifts in pedagogy world over, but at the same time this policy also harks back to ancient wisdom and knowledge by focusing on Indigenous knowledge systems and languages. When the world is looking east wards for alternative medicines and mental health, for yogic practices and Sanskrit, it is all the more imperative that we strengthen, preserve and propagate what is quintessentially ours.

Furthermore, NEP 2020 targets raising the gross enrolment ratio to 50% by 2035 and sets an academic bank of credits which will allow more flexibility and diversity. Student driven research is being encouraged and fostered by the setting up of the National Research Foundation. It also takes into account the need for a skilled workforce by setting up vocational streams to boost employment and productivity. The NEP is governed by the principle of inclusivity as is evident in the setting up of Special Education Zones for hitherto marginalized zones and a special fund for gender inclusion. Apart from greater flexibility in entry and exit options with transfer of credits, and a holistic approach to mentoring and mental growth, what is of special interest is

the multilingual framework of this policy which marks a significant departure from the hitherto imposition of English as the dominant language.

Pedagogy in early education will now be in the regional or local language till grade 5 with a greater focus on students acquiring a minimum of three languages, of which two will be native. Though there is no denying the importance of English as the unifying language at the workplace given how the virtual space has transgressed geographical and linguistic limitations, but the importance of native and mother tongues along with other regional languages will add a boost to socio-cultural and economic mobility and assimilation. India is unique in its cultural and linguistic diversity and the benefits of encouraging the same in a structured way in organised education will lead to greater understanding and healthy appreciation of each other's cultural milieu. And though English is the common language at the workplace and is seen as the language of empowerment and a key propellor to socio-economic prosperity and there is no denying that it is the language of trade, commerce, technology and industry, but it cannot be the language at the cost of our own linguistic wealth.

Introducing multilingualism is not new in the educational framework in India, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 had also envisioned primary education in the local language as did the National Policy of Education 1986. Both had argued for linguistic rights of minorities citing Articles 29 (1) and 350 (A), in which the former states that citizens of India with a distinct language or script shall be entitled to its conservation and the latter states that states should make provisions for the same by providing primary education in the desired language. It has been argued that multilingualism augments cognitive development as well as broadens world views as children will have access to other cultures besides their own. Not only will this aid in professional mobility but also be an important resource in learning. The three-language policy of the NCF 2005 sought to promote centrality of languages, inclusiveness and increased cross-cultural interface.

In a sharp contrast to the swing towards liberalization and globalization in the nineties, the world is looking inwards. The microcosm holding greater sway over the macro and the global. Regionality and local elements hold the fort even for multinational giants like Google and Facebook, paving the way for content in regional languages with a stronger localized cultural ethos. Be it the publishing industry, where translations are gaining currency, or digital media

which is increasingly becoming more local, the world of advertisement or OTT, the multilingual flavour is much in demand. The key though is not to teach these languages in isolation as any other subject but to be taught within its socio-cultural milieu with a greater focus on its evolution and usage. Innovative technology and digital content interface will make the propagation and conservation of languages more engaging and enriching. The NEP 2020 has also envisaged setting up of the Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI) as well as a National Institute for Pali, Prakrit and Sanskrit. The move is not only geared towards promotion of languages but also through localized linguistic mediums, encourage interest in 'Lok Vidya', indigenous crafts and art forms. This move towards multilingualism at an early age will also necessitate preparation of both pedagogical resources and trained teachers in languages hitherto not brought to the fore and will also make teaching more interactive and experiential.

NEP 2020 takes cognizance of the fact that 220 Indian languages are fossilized and nearly 197 in danger of becoming extinct with shifts occasioned by the increasing migration to urban milieus. With loss of language, an entire knowledge system gendered by its ecosystem is lost along with its literature and performing arts. In a bid to conserve the linguistic community, digital documentation is being promulgated through online portals and web interfaces which will include not only online dictionaries and translation tools but also audio visuals of performing arts of that language with field recordings of native speakers, all of which will be governed by the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) under the larger umbrella of Higher Education Commission of India (HECI).

While on paper, the multipronged approach and initiatives to encourage India's linguistic diversity is commendable, ground reality will be challenging. Given the large-scale migrations, a child's mother tongue may not always be the same as the local language which will be the medium of instruction at the primary level. And how will the lofty declaration of not imposing teaching in a specific language be met given the poor student teacher ratio in our education system. While learning in one's mother tongue will ensure a low dropout rate, which of the multiple dialects in a particular area will be considered the local language of education? Furthermore, challenges in the implementation of this policy are not spelt out clearly and left rather vague in usage of terms such as 'wherever possible' and 'efforts be made' etc. What will perhaps be more

daunting is to change the mindset of people who continue to hold on to the primacy of English as the language of empowerment and commercial success. It is pertinent to first create job opportunities in the local language, to encourage its usage at the workplace and to project it as a language of multifarious opportunities.

Having spelt out the gaps in the policy, one still commends the spirit behind its conception and there is hope that the policy makers and grass root educators work in tandem to ensure that what was envisaged and encouraged in the National Policy of Education 1986, NCF 2005, Right to Education Act, 2009 and NEP2020 finally bears fruit and hegemonies in languages are reduced and no language is driven to extinction because of lack of effort in the right direction.