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New edu policy: Opening the system to the market?

By Niranjana Radhya V P, July 31, 2015, DHNS

“Education is a system of imposed ignorance,” says Noam Chomsky. This is true in the case of Central government as part of formulating the New Education Policy (NEP). The documents uploaded by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) as part of formulating the NEP is not in the form of a ‘discussion paper’.

The website of the MHRD contains a document titled “New Education Policy” which includes Annexure-I on “Themes and Questions for Policy Consultation on School Education” (http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/Themes_questions_SE.pdf). A careful scrutiny of this document reveals that there is no theoretical basis for the formulation of a new policy based on the constitutional values nor the document analysed the previous policies of 1968, 1986 and 1992 (Revised Policy) to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the implementation since then to plan the future.

The earlier policies were formulated on the basis of the constitutional values affirming to build a National System of Education based on the Common School System rooted in the neighbourhood school principle. This was based on the recommendations of the renowned Education Commission (Kothari Commission) and further referred in the Review Committee to Review NEP (NEPRC).

The themes and the questions identified by documents fail to provide a vision statement for the NEP. The documents neither recognise the existing disparities, discriminations and inequalities in the area of education nor address the issues of privatisation, commercialisation and commodification of education.

The present themes and questions lack the vision on the core question of “What kind of national education system need to be built” to address the fundamental problems faced by the current education system. This, in terms of access, retention, quality on the one hand and the contents of education, parameters of teacher education, equality in opportunities and above all, social justice in order to achieve the core constitutional values embodied in its preamble to create an egalitarian society in the long run.

The themes and questions for Policy Consultation on School Education contain 13 themes for school education along with questions seeking an anticipated answer. A careful observation of the themes and questions indicates that the questions are designed in a way to elicit a specific response to implement the larger agenda of privatisation and Public Private Partnership (PPP). This is popularly known as “manufacturing consent” with vested interests as advocated by Noam Chomsky to advance the agenda of neo-liberalism.

For instance, there is a question in the first thematic (ensuring learning outcomes in elementary education) “What in your view are the reasons for the poor performance of your children in the schools?” The question starts with the premises that there is poor performance in government schools so that they see a specific response from the parents and larger community to say that the public schools are not performing well and basically targeting the teachers.

‘Perform or perish’

In the second thematic (extending outreach of secondary and senior secondary education), it directly proposes the PPP model and asks a particular question “Is a PPP model to expand schooling at these levels feasible?” The more worrisome factor is that in many places, the document repeatedly asks about the performance assessment of teachers and pushes the agenda of the World Bank and the corporate sector to introduce ‘perform or perish’ theory to bring in para-teachers and contract teachers back to the system by bulldozing the social security concept which is an inbuilt principle in the constitution.

Overall, a very careful scrutiny of this document indicates that the Central government is making this exercise with a deliberate attempt to open the system of education to the market and also to bring in big corporates in the management of schools. It lacks vision, fails to build the foundation for a debate on the NPE based on the core values of the constitution like equality, social justice and equity. One could smell the larger agenda of the Central government to introduce an education system based on conservative values and principles in place of progressive, secular, scientific and democratic values as embodied in the preamble of the constitution.

There is an urgent need to raise the following questions and debate on the same in the context of formulating new education policy:

1. What should be the foundation of building a national system of education based on the principles of neighbourhood common school system to ensure equitable quality education to all children?
2. How do we address the ongoing privatisation, commercialisation and commodification as against recognising education as a social good?
3. How can the system of education help build a more humanitarian and egalitarian society based on the core values of constitution ensuring social justice to all its citizens?
4. What kind of content needs to be taught in schools to promote religious harmony, national integrity and unity among its citizens in the context of pluralism, multi-linguist, multi-religious and multi-culturalism?
5. How best can education contribute to ensure social, economic and political justice to all its citizens and also to build a socialist, secular, democratic, sovereign republic as envisaged from the constitution which was the product of freedom struggle reflecting the aspirations of the nation?
6. How do we use education as tool for larger social transformation instead of equating it to learning 3Rs; Reading, writing and numeracy?

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