COMMENTARY

NEP 2020: POLICY ASSEMBLAGE AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE

- **Mousumi Mukherjee**

Policymaking in the Euro-American context has been historically bound within the framework of sovereign nation-states until the neoliberalisation of western liberal democracies back in the 1980s. However, I have argued elsewhere that global and local congeries have historically shaped policies (including educational policies) in the colonial and postcolonial contexts such as India (Mukherjee & Suresh, 2018).

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a good example of policy assemblage, whereby the policy text draws on global education policy mandates in the twenty-first century while still being committed to the needs of the postcolonial political economy and social imaginary of nation building through education as a sovereign postcolonial Indian nation-state. In fact, nation building is still the primary agenda of NEP 2020, though it also emphasises the need to educate for global citizenship.

> 'The Policy envisages that the curriculum and pedagogy of our institutions must develop among the students a deep sense of respect towards the Fundamental Duties and Constitutional values, bonding with one's country, and a conscious awareness of one's roles and responsibilities in a changing world... [supporting] responsible commitment to human rights, sustainable development and living, and global well-being, thereby reflecting a truly global citizen.'
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> GOI, 2020, p. 6

As the quote above suggests, the 'conscious awareness' about an Indian citizen's 'roles and responsibilities in a changing world' in the context of the global sustainable development goals has led to the emphasis on educating to nurture 'global citizens' in the NEP 2020. However, the policy text is not clear on a roadmap to achieving this lofty ideal.

One the one hand, the NEP 2020 talks about the indigenisation of education through the teaching and learning of Indian languages, promoting localised curricular content and research

on Indian knowledge systems. On the other hand, NEP 2020 also seeks to internationalise educational aims and objectives. Hence, many scholars and education experts have already raised concerns about the challenges of implementing policy guidelines without clear roadmaps for implementation and without adequate financial investment.

Some have even raised questions about prioritising any national or international agenda in education as it runs the risk of undermining the Indian constitutional agenda, since education is a joint responsibility of the central and local state governments. The state governments have equal power to set their own educational agendas to meet local needs (Menon, 2020; Govinda, 2020; Batra, 2020). Hence, NEP 2020 might once again remain a noble philosophical vision with grand promises that could not be delivered on the ground.

In the five years since the policy has come into force, many enthusiastic proponents of the policy have been raising concerns about the slow implementation of the policy guidelines and the inherent contradictions of NEP 2020. This is because NEP 2020 not only sought to reorient educational aims and objectives to educate citizens of India to also become global citizens but it also sought to restructure the entire education system from K-12 to the higher education level.

Implementing system-wide changes in the large and complex Indian educational system is far from easy. Transforming the existing 10+2 school structure to a 5+3+3+4 structure, along with radically altering the university system from a 3-year undergraduate format to a 4-year format that comprises multiple points of entry and exit is a chaotic endeavour. It is also not possible to develop any clear roadmap to facilitate this transition as India does not have a common schooling system and even the higher education landscape comprises different kinds of institutions.

NEP 2020 also made grand promises to overhaul the ineffective teacher education system to improve the quality of school education. It also sought to completely overhaul the higher education governance structure by dismantling the apex governing body, the University Grants Commission (UGC), and replacing it with a new body—the Higher Education Council of India (HECI). Under HECI, the policy mandated the establishment of a National Higher Education Regulation Council, National Accreditation Council (NAC), Higher Education Grants Council, and a General Education Council to regulate, accredit, fund, and set academic and skill standards.

We know that all these grand promises have yet to be fulfilled. Of course, we must consider the fact that the policy came into force during the COVID-19 pandemic and taking into

consideration the complexity of the Indian federal structure and the constitutional mandate of education being in the concurrent list as the joint responsibility of the centre and the state obviously slows down the process of implementation.However, one very important question we need to ask is how feasible is it to implement these lofty ideals on the ground?

During my recent travels through Indian states and university/HEI campuses conducting a national survey funded by the Indian Council for Social Science Research on a specific aspect of higher education internationalisation (international students' motivations and experiences in India), I gained some insights into some of the implementation challenges.

Quite early on in my fieldwork, one of the internationalisation administrators at a new private elite university raised this question: 'Are we really ready for internationalisation? I am not just talking about infrastructure facilities. You see we have it all here at our campus. But what about the mindset of the people? How ready are we to receive a diversity of people in our campuses and our community?'

In fact, as I am about to wrap up my fieldwork for the national survey this month, this early interaction and question raised by the administrator is surfacing repeatedly through successive interactions with administrators as well as with students across the whole country.

There have been a few research studies related to student diversity and challenges of inclusion on Indian campuses. However, these studies have been mostly focused on the socioeconomic diversity of the domestic Indian population (Sabharwal & Malish, 2017). Nonetheless, the studies expose the real need for making classrooms and campus environments inclusive.

My own interactions with students and administrators over the past several months have also highlighted this issue. Here I would like to state one case to illustrate the ground reality of student experience, caught as it is in the crossfire of national and international agendas of education. Here is a quote from my interview with one student at an elite new private higher education campus in India. The specific names of the student and of the university have been kept anonymous to comply with the research ethics protocol.

Question: Could you please share with me a little about your background? I mean where are you coming from? What are you studying at this university?

Answer: I was born in France, and I am a French citizen. I am studying Finance and Marketing.

Question: Undergrad or Masters?

Answer: Undergraduate.

Question: So, why did you decide to come to India for college from France?

Answer: Actually, it was not my decision. My father is Indian. My grandfather was getting old and sick. He called my father to come back to look after the family business. That is how we came here a couple of years ago and I am studying here.

Question: Ok, so it is for family reasons. I understand. Could you now tell me a little about your academic experience here coming from France?

Answer: Well, it has been challenging.

Question: How?

Answer: You see I am used to the European metric system because of my schooling in France, which is different from the Indian system. So, I struggled a lot initially. Now I am fine.

Question: Was the faculty helpful and did you get support from your university to make the transition?

Answer: Actually, no. There was no foundation course or orientation for students like us. When I raised my hand and asked questions, the professor asked me to check with my classmates.

Question: Oh, did you face any other challenges?

Answer: Sometimes I feel at a loss in class as I keep guessing what the professor is saying.

Question: But why?

Answer: Because I don't understand the language

Question: Language? But you are fluent in English though your mother tongue is French, and you did school in France.

Answer: Yes, but I don't understand Gujarati. The professors here keep switching from English to Gujarati and Hindi during class lectures. When I raise my hand and ask questions, they say, 'ask your friends'.

Questions: But don't you know Hindi or Gujarati? Isn't your father Indian?

Answer: Yes, he is Indian. But he is from a South Indian Parsi background. So, apart from French, we speak in English at home. Anyway, I am now learning Hindi and can understand

> class lectures better. My classmates are also helping. But I really did not like the professor's attitude of not helping me each time I raised my hand to ask questions.

The above case might appear to be demonstrating the unique challenges of a higher education system that is opening, after being closed and inward looking over the past 78 years. However, if we reflect on the background of this student and the background of many Indian students, who are more mobile across Indian states these days in search of better educational opportunities either in the private or the public sectors, it would appear that we have not been doing a good job to make our classroom and campus environments more inclusive of the multicultural diversity that postcolonial India herself exhibits.

We need to preserve and promote indigenous languages, cultures and heritage. However, we need to be mindful of socioeconomic as well as cultural diversity. My interactions with several students and administrators across India reveal a serious need for intercultural sensitivity development among students, faculty and administrative staff within Indian HEIs.

If India would like to fulfil the 'Study in India' mission to internationalise our home campuses and provide our domestic students with international and intercultural experiences through interactions with diverse bodies of students from around the world, then we need to seriously think about designing faculty development programs geared towards diversity and inclusion. We need to also sensitise our domestic students about building respectful relationships with diverse communities of students across the caste, class, linguistic, cultural, racial, and national divides.

Though it appears from the above case that there has been a healthy interaction between the student from France with the domestic campus students, during my fieldwork interviews I found more cases where there have been little interactions between domestic and international students. Rather, some interactions have been really difficult experiences for international students. The quote below from an undergraduate from Namibia is significant in this context.

> Yes, yes, now I know there are many different Indians. You see we have different student groups on campus—the Bengali group, the Mallu Group, the Telegu group, the Marathi group, the Tamil group…I know. They don't talk to each other. They also don't talk to me. I interact with a few other African students on campus. Frankly, I was a fan of Shahrukh Khan and Akshay Kumar seeing Bollywood movies in my own country before coming here. I had no idea about these divisions. The worst experience was when a group of Indian boys approached me

one day and asked me if they can call me the "N" word and asked me to straighten my hair. So, I also don't talk to them.

The above quote demonstrates that even after 78 years of independence the nation-building agenda through education is still incomplete. It also demonstrates that the 'Study in India' mission will probably fail. This is not because of the COVID-19 pandemic or global uncertainties such as the recent Indo-Pak war situation following Operation Sindoor but because of our inability to establish inclusive campus environments.

There have been many newspaper reports and research studies about the ragging and bullying of students from historically-disadvantaged backgrounds in our campuses. If the purpose of higher education internationalisation according to NEP 2020 and the 'Study in India' mission is to internationalise our home campuses to provide our domestic students (who do not have the opportunity to study abroad) with international exposure, then we need to seriously think about intercultural sensitivity development of our campus communities—students, faculty and administrative staff. We need to promote more campus activities to first bring our domestic students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds together, and to then encourage them to also interact with international students respectfully. We need to design workshops and training programmes for intercultural sensitivity development to promote respectful relationship building.

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