

How India's National Education Policy evolved over the yrs

As a controversy rages around recommendations for the third education policy, RITIKA CHOPRA tracks the history of governments' instrument to leave an imprint on the country's education system

THE GOVERNMENT began the process of drafting a new National Education Policy last year with extensive grassroots consultations. The effort culminated in an expert committee assimilating the feedback and submitting about 90 inputs for the policy document. But the initiative was marred by controversy after committee head TSR Subramanian, unhappy over the government's secrecy about its suggestions, asked HRD Minister Smriti Irani to make the report public — or, he said, he would. The government did not relent, and Subramanian recently released the report's highlights. Some of these can be controversial — and have generated a lot of debate over the potential shape of the new policy.

What purpose does a National Education Policy serve? Why is the government so invested in drafting one?

It serves as a comprehensive framework to guide the development of education in the country. A new policy has come along every few decades and has been a milestone — comparable, say, to the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution in 1976 through which education was moved from the State to the Concurrent List, or the 86th Amendment in 2002 under which education became an enforceable right. It offers the government of the day an opportunity to leave its imprint on the country's education system. The Janata Party, of which the Jana Sangh — precursor to the BJP — was part, had attempted to draw up a policy in 1979, but it was not approved by the Central Advisory Board for Education (CABE), the most important advisory body to the government in the field of education. So, in a way, this is the BJP's second attempt at drafting the National Education Policy.

Are the states bound to follow it?

The policy provides a broad direction and state governments are expected to follow it. It's not mandatory. Tamil Nadu, even today, does not follow the three-language formula prescribed by the first education policy in 1968.

How many such policies have we had?

Two — in 1968 and 1986, under Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. The National Education Policy (NEP) of 1986 was revised in 1992 when PV Narasimha Rao was PM. The NDA II government is currently drafting a new one "to meet the changing dynamics of the population's requirement with regards to quality education, innovation and research".

Under what circumstances was the first NEP announced in 1968?

It started with a resolution Congress MP Siddheshwar Prasad moved in Lok Sabha on May 1, 1964. Prasad, who went on to be Governor of Tripura from 1995 to 2000, criticised the government for not paying enough attention to education. The Centre lacked a uniform vision and definite philosophy for education, he said, and suggested that a Committee of MPs should look into the formulation of a national education policy. Education Minister M C Chagla agreed there should be a national and coordinated policy on education, and announced the government would set up a national commission comprising outstanding educationists for this purpose. He then requested Prasad to withdraw the resolution, which the MP did. That same year, a 17-member Education Commission headed by UGC Chairperson DS Kothari was set up. Based on the suggestions of this Commission, Parliament passed the first NEP in 1968.

How did NEP II differ from NEP I?

The 1968 policy had called for a national

school system, which meant all students, irrespective of caste, creed and sex, would have access to education of a comparable quality up to a given level. It envisaged a common educational structure (10+2+3) which has been accepted across the country. It also advocated the use of mother tongue as the medium of teaching in the early school years. Strengthening of research in the university system was another major recommendation.

The 1986 policy reflected Rajiv's modernisation project, and focussed on the role of Information Technology in education. It paid more attention to restructuring of teacher education, early childhood care, women's empowerment and adult literacy. It also accepted some ideas that had met resistance in the past, such as selective development of educational institutions and autonomy of universities and colleges. But emphasis on equality in educational opportunity and relationship between education and development remained the backbone of both NEP I & II.

How has the implementation been?

NEP 1986 was implemented better. For the first policy, the government failed to bring out a proper Programme of Action, and implementation was hamstrung by the shortage of funds. Education in 1968 was a State subject, and the Centre had little role in how the policy would be implemented. The second NEP came after the Constitutional Amendment of 1976 — and the Centre accepted wider responsibility and introduced a number of programmes in line with the policy.

What are the key legacies of NEP I and II?

The 10+2+3 (10 yrs secondary school + 2 years high school + 3 yrs of undergraduate education) structure of education as we know it today, and the three-language formula followed by a majority of schools are among the most enduring legacies of the first national education policy. The prioritisation of science and mathematics in education is another.

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid Day Meal Scheme, Navodaya Vidyalayas (NVS schools), Kendriya Vidyalayas (KV schools) and use of IT in education are a result of the NEP of 1986.

How long before the next NEP?

A committee headed by former Cabinet Secretary TSR Subramanian was asked by HRD Minister Smriti Irani to collate public feedback and give inputs for the policy. The five-member panel submitted its report to the government in May. The central government will now draw up a draft policy document based on the recommendations, and share it with state governments to seek their views. The government will also put it in the public domain for feedback. The policy is expected to be finalised in a year's time.

What has the TSR Subramanian panel recommended?

The report is in two volumes. The first, in 230 pages, contains nearly 90 suggestions; the second has over 100 pages of annexures. The panel has recommended significant interventions such as amending the Right to Education (RTE) Act to bring back detention of students after Class V, and making minority schools reserve 25% seats for candidates of economically weaker sections (EWS). It has called for restrictions on campus politics, and recommended extending the scope of RTE to cover pre-school education, and of the Mid Day Meal Scheme to secondary education. The report has criticised governments for interference in important appointments, especially that of Vice-Chancellors.

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