

# Building an Indian education paradigm

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The National Education Policy 2020 marks its second anniversary this month. As educational institutions across the country gear up to implement NEP 2020, it is worthwhile to recognise that this moment provides an enormous opportunity to teachers, researchers and learners across the board to engage with the idea of an ‘Indian’ education. How is this significant, we may ask?

Perhaps because, for the first time in independent India, a policy document provides a serious nudge towards the construction of an indigenous epistemology that could radically alter our imagination of education itself. In a foundational sense, epistemology is concerned with the question of ‘how do we know what we know?’ If one unpacks this further, we realise that our ideas of social, cultural and political realities are based on our understandings of how we understand knowledge itself. Is knowledge an entity that exists externally, waiting to be captured by a set of tools or is it actively constructed through everyday meanings, beliefs and rituals? This is an important political question because our knowledge production systems define our sense of the ‘fair’ and the ‘unfair’, the ‘just’ and the ‘unjust’.

For the longest period of time, the dominant story of our civilisation, our culture, religion, politics, education -- essentially everything that entails India, has been written by Europeans and later Indians too, with Euro-centric frameworks. It becomes necessary to

ask how our own subjectivities fit in within this larger knowledge production space? Why are we constantly grappling for modern liberal frameworks to explicate our own realities?

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Indigenous epistemologies become the foundation to challenge dominant paradigms of knowledge production and the NEP provides an interesting frame for this discourse to germinate. While there have been debates galore about the pros and cons of the NEP 2020, there has been little reflection on its potentially emancipatory dimensions from the point of view of decolonialisation. One of the most stringent criticisms has been on the ground that the invocation of non-Constitutional values is potentially dangerous as it could pave the way for Hindu majoritarianism to thrive and uncritically eulogise the past without recognising the disadvantages faced by underprivileged sections of the society. While this is an important criticism that needs to be considered, it should be noted that the liberal secular framework is fairly dominant in the NEP and the policy constantly alludes to questions of 'access', 'equity', 'inclusion' and 'social justice'.

One could also argue that contrary to popular understanding, religious and culture-based value systems are heterogenous, ever evolving and potentially capable of negotiating with modern imaginations of equality, justice and freedom. The incredible work of several religious and cultural organisations in India and elsewhere, especially in the realm of education and health has made this amply clear. In fact, many such organisations have deployed indigenous institutions such as dana, seva, zakat and dasvandh amongst others to make robust contributions to the social sector.

There is no one idea of what an 'Indian' education could mean. The NEP provides some broad guidelines on this dimension and expands the spectrum of values provided in our Constitution to include Indian ideas of seva, ahimsa and shanti amongst others. This needn't be an exhaustive list; depending on one's context, educationists could invoke similar other indigenous categories that draw upon India's rich religious, ethnic, tribal, linguistic and cultural heritage. When seen in conjunction with the push towards mother-tongue education, this could be truly liberating especially for the marginalised sections of our society for whom a 'liberal-secular' mainstream education has sometimes seemed insipid and far removed from their immediate realities and worlds. It could also rekindle pride among a growing generation of urban-educated youth in their Indianness.

Constructing an indigenous framework of knowledge however, is an uphill task. It always entails the risk of uncritical, populist and even hagiographic discourses to thrive. Educationists would have to acknowledge that building an alternative paradigm of education would require the development of rigorous tools and analytical frameworks that are able to contribute substantially to the existing debates. For instance, how would a critical engagement with the idea of seva or zakat help us build a more complex understanding of the philanthropic sector? How would a serious examination of shanti or ahimsa offer a novel entry point towards understanding peace education or conflict resolution? How would an engagement with the idea of sarkar build a more complex and nuanced understanding of governance in India?

The NEP offers an opportunity to re-animate an innate vocabulary that a large section of Indian people connects with. It is important that educational and research institutions take cognisance of this opportunity to develop a robust framework for an Indian education system for a truly transformative discourse to emerge.

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