

Educational Policy Shifts in Neo-Liberal Times: Core Concerns and Critical Issues

There is a discernible policy shift which has unequivocally established the domination of neo-liberal capital in the socio-political context of elementary education. The state, irrespective of political dispensation continues to be a facilitator of this shift which is accentuating in contemporary times. This has led to exacerbation of existing status quo and has increased the graded inequality in our socio- economic polity. The politics of knowledge production under this overzealous neo-liberal regime aides an uncritical citizenry. There has been a convergence of discourse through the past two decades establishing the dominance of neo-liberalism. Indeed this presents a challenge for Indian society that cannot ignore the demographic trend towards younger citizens.

To contextualize the discourse of neo-liberal state and education, one needs to unfold the mystery to its core. The roots of current policy changes at national level lies in the international policy decisions to which India committed in 1990 *viz* The Structural Adjustment Programme. The programme came with the hidden agenda of privatization and abdication of state responsibility from Education. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) came into effect in 1995 and considers education as a tradable service, because of which there has been increasing privatization which greater thrust on profit motive. The economic reforms which India had opted and have continued since 1990 has brought more and more commodification of education and reduced the idea of education merely to development of a knowledge based economic-society. The NPE' 86 in itself marked a shift about the role of state and the commitment to public education. While it spoke of community involvement, decentralized of educational planning and administration (which by itself is not undemocratic) and greater involvement of non- state actors in public education yet overall it marked the withdrawal of state from elementary education. It also spoke of delinking jobs and degrees and taking India to 21st century with the help of technology. This was the beginning of replacing education by skill based training. The POA 1992, which was aimed at assessing the implementation of NPE 86; pointed towards the regional imbalances, inequities and caste & gendered inequalities in schooling. The development of Minimum Levels of Learning aimed at squeezing knowledge and education process to the skill based approach to learning. The Right to Education Act (2009) itself succumbed to neo-liberal trap by shift of focus from qualitative improvement in the government school system of schooling to quantitative expansion, enrolling each child in the system, establishment of norms and making space for children belonging to EWS(Economically Weaker Section) of society in the private school society. This provided an escape route to the state and indirectly supported the withdrawal of the state governments in ensuring public education for all. It did not even abide to the constitutional framework of providing education for all children from 0-14 years of all the sections of society. The draft NPE 2016 even speaks of government's inability to educate such a large number of citizenry leading to the downsizing of public funded education. It is perpetuating the vision of dynamic, globalising and knowledge based economy and society, limiting education to a functional role and ignoring social purpose in the new genres of policies.

There is an unapologetic shift in educational policy in contemporary times on restricting education by reducing it to mere skill development. The policies developed in the neo-liberal era, undermine knowledge systems especially local and indigenous epistemologies. Instead competency based knowledge that prepares students to take their place in the existing corporate hierarchy and serve as servile human capital legitimizing the neo-liberal socio-economic order. This kind of shifts have implications for the future society as with these policy shifts we are operationalizing the process of developing such education systems which

will not only reproduce the social inequalities but also perpetuates another set of graded inequalities in our society. Hierarchies of schooling system have become densely multi-layered which is irreparably shaping the aspirations and aims of its learners. The emergence of Low fee Private Schooling and stratification among government schooling has exacerbated the situation for learners and teachers. These schools with their minimum facilities, infrastructure, academics resources and utilitarian aims of education have been marked as substitutes of government school for providing education in the name of 'English medium' school.

SAP aligned educational reforms like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan funded by World Bank have created a big dent in public education system by the development of parallel systems. These parallel systems have an adversely impacted public institutional teaching and learning. Many educationists have argued how these World Bank funded reforms have changed the definition of learning to achieving measurable standards and targets. The idea of decentralization lost its meaning by providing mere signatory authority to the community for the purpose of bureaucratic auditing paper work. These kinds of educational reforms and policies has been 'blowing its own trumpet' of Quality, Governance and Accountability. The deviated road of market principles in the name of improvement of Quality, Governance and Accountability has neglected classroom discourse, curriculum issues and relevance of teachers' training or development of critical educators. This has created a flawed misconception of a re-definition of the meaning of quality of education. The Quality of education has been reduced to completing targets in the name of achieving learning outcomes and proxy indicators that 'show off' learning have become the focus within this redefined discourse. Clearly, it reflects the 'objectification' of child and undermining the capabilities of learner to be able to construct knowledge using his/her intellectual faculties. In these pedagogies there is a focus on standardization for all instead of recognizing diversity required to cater the various needs of learner. It is being done by measuring outcomes with the parameter of expected and fixed behavior in the child. Unfortunately the measurement of these outcomes has been used to create divisive school system through large scale assessment by the quantification of so called learning. These kind of large scale assessments has resulted in a binary between public and private school performances instead of taking a school as unit of analysis in the discourse has always shown public schools as failures. This further aggravated the multifaceted attack on the public education system which is now known as colony of our 'underprivileged' section of our society.

This kind of assault on public education system has its own implications on the employees working in the system. Instead of examining the systemic problems and nature of working conditions often employees have been blamed for being irresponsible. Teachers have particularly been the target of this attack which has brought the 'deprofessionalization' of teaching. This process of 'deprofessionalization' is not only restricted to contractual appointments or reduced salary for their work it has also extended to degrading their role to 'implementers' where all thinking and so called curriculum related work is not viewed as responsibility of teacher. There is a lot of micro- management of teaching by the introduction of defined and restrictive pedagogies. Hence teachers are not understood as responsible intellectuals, but there is shift of focus on developing newer ways of extrapolating for finding solutions through monitoring. This is how the discourse of Governance is brought to the fore where monitoring becomes the essential part of industry to bring efficiency as per the techno-managerial approach. The focus has shifted to creating 'proofs' of performances. The idiosyncratic turbulence here is that the parameters of monitoring which has been reduced to measurement of teaching- learning process by defining certain fixed proxy indicators which

are aimed at converting teaching learning performance into numbers or even simply multiple choices/Yes or No measures. This also excludes any professional development support to the teacher which could nurture a culture of teaching and learning. This creates a kind of culture where teachers are expected to be uncritical implementers of educational administration and communicate the same to students without aiming at critical thinking.

Against this backdrop it is imperative to critically examine and debate on the policy changes which have aggravated the structures of injustice, inequality and exclusion. This conference aims at deliberating on the issues of changes brought about by these educational policy shifts. It would be insightful to contextualize what we intend to make of our society by these policy shifts.