

Base NPE on credible data

The Asian Age, July 09, 2015

By Pradeep S. Mehta & Abhishek Kumar

There's no comprehensive and systematic data on the education system in India, and where it exists the government does not seem too serious about it... HRD minister Smriti Irani said the ministry would favour its own surveys over those conducted by ASER

India has unleashed a spate of new initiatives to re-craft its destiny. Some of these initiatives include "Make in India", "Digital India" and the new education policy. Education remains the core of these initiatives and of national development. Participation in the formulation of a new national policy on education (NPE) is an opportunity that must be taken in all its seriousness. That it has knocked at our doors after over two decades of growth is another compelling reason to accord an unprecedented focus. The changes that have happened in the interim necessitate revisiting our education system and most notable amongst them is the shift from socialist framework to a more market-based economy.

But before we tackle the issues that the new policy must provide answers to, the question that needs consideration is if we have enough evidence to justify the need for a new policy? Do we even know what our previous policies envisaged and where have we failed?

While the previous policies did lay stress on quality education, we, as a country, seemed to have been over-occupied in chasing numerical targets like universalisation of elementary education. Quality has suffered because no one took ownership. After all, what gets measured gets done in India. Affordable private schools in rural areas, delivering better quality in spite of fewer resources, compared to government schools and success of schemes like midday meal are testimonies to this fact.

So the question is, what kind of ownership does the government have towards education? What kind of efforts is it ready to put in so that there is implementation of the stated objectives? The answer is somewhat confusing.

First, we have completely forgotten about our pre-primary schooling. It remains largely unregulated with poorly defined targets and poor infrastructure. Worse, it comes under the ministry of women and child development and is not handled by the ministry of human resources and development, which is the custodian of the country's education agenda.

Second, the government has not abandoned the 12th Five-Year Plan but has pulled out substantial funding from Centrally-sponsored schemes to meet the plan targets on education. The buck has been partly passed on to the states. States are differently placed to implement the objectives under these schemes and some of them have little ownership towards these relics of erstwhile Planning

Commission. What this seems to signal is that crucial education schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, mid-day meal, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan have been orphaned midway.

Third, five years of Right to Education Act have revealed both design and implementation faults with the Act. It is now common knowledge that the Act is soft on fixing accountability on government schools. With majority of the schools in India being government schools, this only seems to encourage unaccountable behaviour.

Fourth, there is no comprehensive and systematic data on the education system in India, and where it exists the government does not seem too serious about it. For instance, data collected for over a decade by Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) on learning levels in elementary education is an eye-opener, but HRD minister Smriti Irani was recently quoted as saying that the ministry would rather lean more in favour of its own surveys than those conducted by ASER.

The list above can be expanded but that won't solve the purpose. What is worrisome is that while on one hand the process of consultation on new policy is advancing full throttle right from the panchayat level, questions such as the ones raised above remain unanswered. What also remains unanswered is the value the grassroots inputs will add given inadequate capacity at that level. Government's think tank National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) has already flagged this issue.

What becomes incumbent is a more proactive role of the civil society to provide relevant inputs to the government. A detailed analysis needs to be done of what are the objectives of previous policies that are still relevant and where and how we have failed in implementing those objectives. We need to stress on the use of independent and credible data wherever it exists. The policy must also be framed in context of the government's priorities such as encouraging states to take up a more proactive role. Therefore, representatives of bodies like NITI Aayog must be crucial stakeholders in discussions on education policy.

It must also be considered that the year 2015 will be a crucial year as the global community would finalise the sustainable development goals (SDG). Quality education is integral to SDGs and so will it be to a country like India, which is one-fifth of humanity. In light of the new economic initiatives, principles of sustainability must become core to India's own future too, an element that meaningful education will be able to effect in a big way.

The writers work for CUTS International

This news can also be viewed at: <http://www.asianage.com/>