Furore Over Languages

National Education Policy is an excellent document which needs encouragement, not politics

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Literally hundreds of articles have been written about what is wrong with the Indian education system. There are books, movies, TV shows and web series on the same theme, all of which have resonated with Indians. We all agree – the education system needs fixing. However, when someone actually makes an attempt to fix the problem we love to badger, find faults, express cynicism and become sceptical.

For this is exactly what happened a few weeks ago. A government constituted committee released a new draft National Education Policy document. The draft was 484 pages, long for sure. However, it was an excellent document. It acknowledged the problems in the system, tried to break it down by various categories of students and grades, and offered a road map for the solutions in order to fix some of the problems. It wasn’t a perfect document, but that was exactly the point. The draft was released so citizens could share their views on improving it further.

However, what did we do? We selectively picked a few lines from the draft document about the three language policy. We turned it into an age-old, beaten-to-death Hindi-imposition issue for the southern states. It caused a furore. The south-north divide in India is real, and if played well, can reap great political dividends (a lot of the politics of southern states originated in that). As a result, we forgot about the bulk of the NEP document and all its ideas. Rather than encourage people who are actually trying to solve the problem of education in the country, we turned them into Hindi/ Hindu/ Hindutva/ BJP agenda imposing monsters. It’s nonsense.

Let us first realise a few good things about NEP. One, the committee that drafted NEP was chaired by K Kasturirangan, former chairman of ISRO. Can you think of a better person to decide how our future kids will be educated? The 10 other members were also distinguished academics.

The report starts with a wonderful preamble and vision – which is the goal of education for Indians. To quote from the report, “The vision of India’s new education system has accordingly been crafted to ensure that it touches the life of each and every citizen, consistent with their ability to contribute to many growing developmental imperatives of this country on the one hand, and towards creating a just and equitable society on the other.”

Can you express the above in a more elegant manner? It says that education will (a) be for all; (b) will help India develop; and (c) create a more just and equitable society. Why can’t we sometimes praise something when it deserves it? Do we have to be negative, criticise and in the process, kill an attempt to solve a big problem?

I am not here to gush about a government report. However, after having seen many government releases in the past, this is one document that was lucid and addresses the problems head on. Extra points for the document being nicely formatted, having simple English and a certain design aesthetic often missing in other sarkari releases.

Let us now address the criticism that turned into a political storm. The report suggests a formula where a student learns three languages. These languages would be English, the regional language of where the school is located and a third, different Indian language. The idea is to promote Indian languages, increase national integration and perhaps even give another language as a skill to a person that may help them in their job in case they migrate.
As an example, a student in Delhi will learn English, Hindi and say Tamil. It seems almost unthinkable now, but wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a north Indian boy learn Tamil, or a Gujarati girl learn Bengali? They can use this in their job perhaps, if they were to be hired there – or can even present it as a skill to their future employers.

Where NEP did falter a bit was in suggesting that in the south, the three language formula should mean English plus their own regional language plus Hindi. Hence, while in the north the third language was not fixed and could range from Assamese to Gujarati to Tamil, in the south it would be Hindi. It wasn’t necessary to mention it this way (because in reality many would choose Hindi anyway). Of course, NEP is not the law, so the question of imposition doesn’t arise. However, to even suggest that people in the south must learn Hindi isn’t required. In fact it does a disservice to Hindi, to the south and of course to NEP.

The three language formula is not new. It has been suggested in education policy documents for decades. However, it has not been implemented well. If we design it properly now, and let people choose the third language based on where they find the most value – it could benefit the student and the country.

Others may disagree, but I think a north Indian learning a bit of Tamil is arguably more useful than rote learning Sanskrit for two years (as that is what actually happens, people cram up Sanskrit to get marks and that’s it). There’s no need to indulge in extensive politics over education or language. NEP can, should and will be modified. But in doing so we must put the Indian student and his or her education first, politics later.