

## 1. Treating Education as a Public Good

### Context:

- The near-final NEP, despite its lacunae, is a vast improvement over its earlier, proposed policy. The report focussing on school education; higher education; other key areas like adult education, technology and promotion of arts and culture; and a section on making it happen by establishing an apex body and the financial aspects to make quality education affordable for all.

### Education as a Public Good:

- Education, for most of us, is a necessary public good central to the task of nation building and, like fresh air, is necessary to make our communities come alive.
- It should not be driven solely by market demand for certain skills, or be distracted by the admittedly disruptive impact, for instance, of Artificial Intelligence.
- This form of education should be unshackled from the chains of deprivation, and “affordable” education.
- Education policy, in essence, must aim to produce sensitive, creative and upright citizens who are willing to take the less-travelled path and whose professional “skills” will endure revolutions in thinking and technology.

### Education is not a Commodity:

- A menu of choices provided by the private sector, which reduces education to the status of a commodity and views our youthful demography as human capital. This is a fallacy.
- We have to be conscious and deeply aware that there is no developed country where the public sector was not in the vanguard of school and higher education expansion, in ensuring its inclusiveness, and in setting standards
- It was, therefore, essential for the government to produce a blueprint for reforms after widespread consultation;

### New Education Policy:

- NEP’s stated goal is to **“reinstate” teachers as the “most respected members of our society.”** Empowerment of teachers remains a key mantra of the policy, and it is understood that this can only be achieved by ensuring their “livelihood, respect, dignity and autonomy”, while ensuring quality and accountability.
- Equally laudable is the **emphasis on early childhood care and schooling** more generally.

- **The anganwadis remain the backbone of an early childhood care system** but have suffered on multiple grounds, including lack of facilities and proper training. This, as the report recognises, needs to change;
- But the incremental and rather ad hoc changes proposed (in stand-alone anganwadis, or anganwadis co-located with primary schools, etc.) may not deliver.
- The idea of **volunteer teachers, peer tutoring, rationalisation of the system** of schools and sharing of resources does sound ominous.
- The NEP wisely recognises that a **comprehensive liberal arts education will help to “develop all capacities of human beings** – intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral – in an integrated manner.”
- The proposal to **establish a National Research Foundation**, with an “overarching goal... to enable a culture of research to permeate through our universities” needs to be applauded and widely supported.
- But the creation of a **National Testing Agency (NTA)** has understandably generated scepticism. While, on paper, the NTA “will serve as a premier, expert, autonomous testing organisation to conduct entrance examinations for admissions and fellowships in higher educational institutions,” **in reality, universities and departments may lose autonomy over admissions**, even of research students.

### Concerns in the NEP:

- It is not clear what strategies will be adopted, nor what resources will be committed, to strengthen the public sector, including the Kendriya Vidyalayas, the State government-run institutions and the municipal schools.
- Equally serious is the **concern about the division between research-intensive ‘premier’ universities; teaching universities; and colleges.**
- The NEP suggests, “three ‘types’ of institutions are not in any natural way a sharp, exclusionary categorisation, but are along a continuum”. But the advantage of these divisions, per se, is neither intuitively nor analytically clear, given that high quality teaching and cutting-edge research comfortably coexist in most universities of excellence.
- **The commitment to double the government expenditure on education from about 10% to 20% over a 10-year period is still insufficient**, given the enormity of the challenge; it is an unprecedented commitment to the sector.

**Conclusion:**

- An Academic University is a global sanctuary of ideas which we can never be reduced to a space for narrow bigotry. We have to uphold the highest principles here, not let academic positions or programmes be traded or let education become yet another business.”

