

By AMITA KANEKAR



The Union Education Minister is expressly charged – so we are told – with the fast-tracking of the New Education Policy (NEP). A new approach to education is actually something that this country needs desperately, given the huge failings of India's Brahmanical education system, like the continuing lack of universal access to education, and the stratified system of education quality, which ensures that a child from a disadvantaged background remains disadvantaged in education too. But will this NEP make any difference? As has been discussed in this column earlier, this NEP is actually hardly new at all, for, like earlier such policies, it ignores or brushes over all the fundamental problems of the education system. All of which have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as we shall see below.

The new school term has begun in Goa and already we have reports of children struggling to cope. According to newspapers, children in Canacona and Sanguem are again trekking through forests and up hills in the rain, to reach internet connectivity for their online classes. Sattari too has poor connectivity across the entire taluka. One Canacona teacher revealed that there are more than ten students in her school who are struggling to connect to the classes.

What are the authorities doing about this? We have now finished more than one year of Covid-impacted education in Goa. One might excuse the chaos at the start, in March 2020, given the unexpectedness of the pandemic – though governments are supposed to be prepared for disasters. But three months later, when the schools and colleges were to re-open in June/July 2020, was there any improvement? No, just the announcement that online education would continue. No plan to ensure that this would work, not even to ensure the basic and universal availability of internet connectivity and smart phones.

The academic year limped by, with media reporting how some students had dropped out of education, how teachers found many students not showing up online, how parents of younger students had to do the actual teaching themselves, and how older students felt unmotivated or depressed. We heard of families who could not afford smart phones for their children, or not for all their children, which meant the heartbreaking choice of which child to keep in school, with younger kids and especially girls usually losing out. And of families who, after managing to get a smart phone for their child's education, couldn't afford the recurring recharge costs. And those who somehow managed both, only to find no internet connectivity where they lived. We even heard of some student suicides.

Now, after one whole year of this gigantic upheaval in the education process, impacting a vast number of Goan families, are things going to be different?



Clearly not on the government side. The year has seen almost complete government silence on education, except for when examination season comes around, when there is a scramble among the authorities for ideas on how to pass students. The problem of education is apparently only that of students failing. If they can be shown to pass, by hook or crook, by online exams, by simplifying assessments to almost nothing, by using the previous year's marks, that's enough. Because, once they pass, the question of the quality of the education does not arise. The issue of whether they actually learnt anything remains a non-issue.

The flaws of online education are not unique to Goa, of course. According to media reports, lack of smartphones and internet connectivity has been reported across the country, especially with students of government schools, i.e. of mostly Bahujan communities. Even in Kerala, despite classes being shown on television too and midday meals reached to children's homes, students were badly hit. The Kerala chief minister, though, has at least admitted his government's failings, and promised internet connectivity and free or cheap smartphones for all students, this year.

Goa's government, though, has admitted nothing and promised nothing. We haven't heard of any official attempts to even assess the past year of online education. Do the authorities know, for example, how many students have dropped out? Have they asked students or teachers or parents about their experience, and for suggestions? Have they considered some out-of-the-box solutions for live education, especially for younger students, like open or partially-open spaces?

On the contrary, it seems like they want to ignore whatever they already know. According to the Headmasters' Association, the government is well-aware of the internet connectivity problem, but has done nothing. In Sattari, schools say that repeated complaints to their MLA, Health Minister Vishwajeet Rane, as well as local panchayats, have made no difference. Some Sattari schools are now breaking the curfew and sending teachers to teach small groups of students in their villages, either in homes or in the village temples. But the problems here are obvious, including the possibility of infection, with protocols difficult to maintain in informal settings, and also the question of whether all children, or all teachers, will be welcome in venues like temples or private homes, given the casteist ideas that prevail in our society.

But who cares, anyway? Especially when most of the students with difficulties, and those dropping out, are from relatively poor and discriminated-against sections, like tribal communities, castes considered low, and migrant labour. Students from privileged backgrounds, with parents who can finance online education and also help in studies, have few problems re education except for the loss of its social life. So, when a government blithely sends education online, and does nothing more, it's basically saying it doesn't care

about anybody but the privileged.



But are those behind the New Education Policy even interested in this? The NEP vision document, released during the pandemic last year, does not even mention COVID-19. Its focus is on issues that mainly affect university-going elites, not those who struggle for a decent school education. Beyond that, its only agenda is the textual glorification of Brahminism, whether in language, history, diet, or other fields, by an already Brahmanical education system which has always treated Bahujan students as outsiders. This kind of NEP will hardly make a difference to what is happening on the ground, under the excuse of the pandemic, viz. the quiet NO education policy for the majority.

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